
Pheonix

by Ken Rand

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The sled transformed into an incandescent white flash of light. The explosion seemed to come from inside her brain. The ground heaved, lifting her into the dust and rock-filled air, throwing her backward. She flew, spinning, propelled by the shock wave. Sharp, flying rock chips stung her face and hands, ripping at her. Pain knifed her legs, arms and back. And abdomen.

She landed against a rock spur, knocking the wind from her. Vision blurred, breathing agony, she forced herself to look back down the canyon.

Through the flying rock and tumult, Anna saw an orange-and-yellow fireball climb the walls like a thing alive. Atop the fireball, suspended as though afloat on water, an object burned and twisting. A man.

She knew it was Martin, not one of the gang, although they must have also been incinerated. She didn't know how she knew it was Martin, but she knew.

A sudden sharp pain stabbed through her belly, and Anna knew something else had died, too; but she didn't know what it was. For a fraction of a second, she understood that if she thought about it she might identify the source of the pain. Something—no, someone—other than her, other than Martin, had been hurt in the fire. Not one of the Familia. Someone else.

With deliberate cunning, as though erasing a slate or computer file, Anna shut down the part of her mind she knew could identify the—the what?

Something—something bad—has happened. I don't know what it is.

She slammed another door shut in her mind, and forgot that there had been anything to forget.

Then she forgot that.

2003

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entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my children—Molly, Michael and Missy.

Lisan Navarroclan

Lisan Navarroclan had just filled the water pouch from the well a few meters outside Holy Mother Anna Devlin's alcove when she heard the old woman cry in pain, a sharp-edged groan piercing the night. Lisan set the pouch beside the well and ran the few short steps back to the alcove.

“Holy Mother Anna, are you—”

As she pushed through the woven-whipgrass gate in the alcove's low mud-brick wall—high enough to keep the goats out—she saw the old woman on hands and knees in front of the stone bench where they'd sat together a moment ago. The Holy Mother's sabbalm pouch lay on the ground, an indistinct black splotch in the dim starlight, like a dead hedge chicken. A few yellow thumb-sized balls of waxy sabbalm lay where they'd fallen from the open bag mouth, glowing. The Holy Mother's long blond hair hung like a curtain over her face, so scarred on one side that many of the children had been terrified when they first saw her.

“Holy Mother,” Lisan muttered—a prayer, in part—as she ran to the woman's side, knelt and clutched her bony ribs. The narrow ribcage rose and fell in spastic arrhythmia. Lisan could feel the old woman's body heat. One stick-like hand groped for the nearest sabbalm ball. Just out of reach. The Holy Mother

groaned in frustration.

Lisan grabbed the errant ball and put it into the old woman's hand. She popped it into her mouth and gulped it down. In a moment, Anna nodded thanks, head still bent low, hair still curtaining her face; and Lisan heard her raspy breathing become less erratic and tense, felt her sides loosen. The sabbalm did its magic, as usual, and Lisan marveled.

"What happened? Are you all right now?"

Anna nodded and tried to stand. Her knees quivered. Lisan let the gnarled old woman lean on her as she eased Anna back onto the bench. Not for the first time, Lisan was astonished at how little Anna weighed. Her bones must be hollow, like a sawk's.

"Please..." Anna gestured at the sabbalm balls scattered on the ground. "Please..."

"I'll gather them."

Lisan knelt and gathered the waxy balls, counting them as she did so. She placed each one back into the pouch, secured the drawstring and handed it back to Anna. She sat at the old woman's side.

"I counted three hands and two fingers of sabbalm, Mother—"

"Seventeen."

"I beg your—"

"You counted seventeen, not three hands and—"

"I-I'm sorry, Mother, I..."

"Don't apologize, Lisan Navarroclan." The Holy Mother took Lisan's youthful, smooth hand in her bony, aged one and pressed gently. Lisan liked it when she touched her—it felt like her own mother's touch.

She fought back that memory; her mother had been dead only two hands and—no—twelve—nights.

"Seventeen," she said, and returned the handclasp, warm skin against warm skin.

Lisan wanted to ask the Holy Mother what had prompted this sudden bout of illness. A memory would surface, or somebody would say something, or she'd find something left over from the rebellion in the dirt in a collapsed corridor. Or something. Always something preceded each attack.

The last one had been one hand—five—nights ago. The Holy Mother had visited Cousin Michael Riosclan's alcove. Her unannounced visit, no reason given, surprised Michael as he tended his tomato plant. When she saw the plant, the Holy Mother had collapsed in pain. Lisan tended to her, popped a sabbalm into her quivering mouth, and the episode passed. The Holy Mother left Michael's alcove, left him stunned, speechless, left without explanation.

It was as if the Holy Mother had never seen a tomato plant, and Lisan realized maybe she never had. If she had, it had been so long ago, was buried so deep in her memory that it hurt her physically to recall it.

She had tried to ask about the tomato plant, as gently as possible, but the Holy Mother seemed not to

hear. She sat for hours after the incident, silent, on the bench where they now rested, gazing out at the empty desert grassland to the west, where her memories, Lisan knew, were not really buried.

The next night, Holy Mother had asked for a cutting. She had her own tomato plant now, in its pot by the door.

What if nothing now causes the attacks? What if—

Lisan scowled at the shadowy thought like she would at a furtive bist gnawing a mealsack— *What if the Holy Mother Anna Devlin is...dying?*—and pushed it away. She imagined, as she did so, that this must be like the way the Holy Mother controlled her memories. Or, too often, didn't.

She put her arm around Anna and squeezed those warm, bony shoulders, as she would have done with any Cousin. Lisan gazed out, too, gazed in companionable silence into the night. The flat plain of whipgrass below, a star-filled bowl of the sky above.

No questions, not now. Just her with me, just us, like Cousins. Together.

The Holy Mother's alcove had been chosen, by popular acclaim, to give her a view of the west. It was the coolest alcove in Tierra Natal, the nearest to a well; and the First Grandfather himself used to occupy it. First Gran was dead, as were all the other adults in Tierra Natal. He had died three nights ago, the last of the adults to go. The children, who numbered double-twice two hands and nine fingers—no, forty-nine—decided to give the alcove to Holy Mother.

So she could look out toward the west, where her memories lay. Or not.

Lisan again wondered about those days. She'd heard too little about them, and then only rumor and story. Fairy tales the adults told before they died, and then with great reluctance, with bitterness, and often anger. Stories about great huts that floated in the skies—spaceships; about villages on the stars so far away you couldn't walk there in a lifetime, about the nanofactured things they used to have, and about the Familia and the Authority and the rebellion that had torn Phoenix, their world, apart. Stories. Fairy tales for children. Nonsense.

Holy Mother said it was true, and who would deny her? So far, Holy Mother had refused to talk in any detail about those days. Lisan or another child would ask, "How did you make walls from thin air and dirt? What was it like when you lived in the sky? Can we make powersleds, too, like you had in the old days? Are there any more fuel cells left?"; and the Holy Mother would start to answer, utter a few words that added to the mystery then shake her head and change the subject. Or walk away to sit alone, looking westward.

Lisan tried to picture in her mind what Holy Mother saw.

Far across the sparse, grassy flat plain surrounding the broken, makeshift town of Tierra Natal lay the Barrens, hilly country barely fit for grazing sheep and goats. Beyond the Barrens lay Goliath, the rock wall rising a kilometer straight up from the floor of the world and extending in an almost straight line from the northern to the southern icecap.

Beyond Goliath, accessible through narrow cracks that split the wall through in some places, lay a broad, hot desolation the Holy Mother called Ghost Basin. Beyond, farther west, lay a vast maze of hills and caves she called the Confusions, where she'd lived most of her exile. Beyond *that*, farther away than Lisan could imagine, lay the eastern fringe of the Great Eastern Sea, which spread its shallow depths

across almost half the world—their world, Phoenix IV—to the foot of Glacier Mountain.

Glacier Mountain rose in the opposite direction from where Lisan sat now with the Holy Mother. The infrequently snowcapped mountain lay to the east, too far away to be seen even in the shimmering daytime but accessible to a provisioned walker.

Lisan looked westward and tried to imagine it—the Plains, the Barrens, Goliath, Ghost Basin, the Confusions, the Great Eastern Sea, Glacier Mountain and Tierra Natal.

Phoenix IV. The world.

Michael Riosclan had crossed Goliath, had crossed Ghost Basin and had been as far away as the Confusions. So he said, and Holy Mother didn't deny it. Only the Holy Mother Anna Devlin had seen it all.

Lisan sighed. No, she couldn't imagine the vastness of their world, details of which the Holy Mother had only hinted at and of which Michael had only seen a fragment. Lisan had never been farther west than the Barrens' eastern fringe, that time she was out tending the Familia goat herd when her brother Gabriel had been too ill to go out. There, just as night ended, she stood on a hill, the highest she could find, and squinted in the rising day-heat to the west. She could barely make it out, the thin dark ribbon that was Goliath.

It looked so small in the distance, a black hair stretching from horizon to horizon as far as she could see.

Boys had been to its foot, she knew. Some had even entered the Witch's Canyon. They told wild tales Lisan knew were lies. The walls weren't as high as they said. Nothing was. Except maybe Glacier Mountain.

Again, Holy Mother didn't deny the stories, even when reminded she had been the witch—The Witch—those boy shepherders had dreaded, taunted, lied about.

Holy Mother Anna Devlin refused to deny the stories about those times. Lisan got occasional hints she'd drop in an unguarded moment. They confirmed, though vaguely, what she remembered the adults had sometimes said before they'd died out.

Lisan wasn't interested in the wonders in those super-heated deserts beyond Goliath. She wanted to know...

"Yes, child?"

Lisan hadn't been aware she'd tensed, cleared her throat.

"I was wondering ... I mean..."

A deep shuddery sigh.

Lisan turned toward the Holy Mother, heedless of her impertinence. "We've asked you before. Me, Michael, Gabriel, and other children. Little Dorothea. You can't deny her, can you? We want to know. To know."

A long silence, and Lisan thought, again, she'd lost the Holy Mother's interest. Or annoyed her.

Finally: "Your father. Your grandfather. Your mothers, and aunts. They told you. What they said—"

"They told us stories. Lies. As if we were children."

"You are."

"But they're gone. You're the only one who can tell us ... tell us..."

"I can tell you that most of what they said—your family—what they said was true. Mostly."

Lisan suddenly became aware that she touched the Holy Mother in the manner her own mother had taught her. The Familia way, a ritual gesture of greeting, blessing, fellowship. She pulled her hand away. Holy Mother seemed to hate the gesture, as she'd hated the sight of the Familia around people's necks, though she wouldn't say why. She'd been the Witch, and it had been Familia who had branded her so. Why?

"I-I'm sorry, Holy Mother. I'm just afraid that ... that..."

The old woman hrumphed and stood. Lisan remained seated, head bowed, hands folded in her lap in respect. She waited.

Silence.

Lisan risked a glance up. Anna stood before her, Lisan's water pouch in her hand. *How did she get the water? I didn't hear her move. And the gate creaks.*

Lisan took the pouch, offered the older woman a sip first. Anna touched the spout to her lips and returned it to Lisan, who repeated the gesture, completing the sharing ritual, and set the pouch on the bench.

"You're afraid?" The Holy Mother spoke so quietly that at first Lisan wasn't sure she'd spoken at all.

She nodded.

Again, a long silence passed before the older woman spoke. If there had been even a whisper of a breeze to cool the night air, Lisan would have heard nothing.

"Will you say what you fear, Lisan Navarroclan?"

Lisan gulped in a dry throat. She reached for the water pouch then pulled away. The Holy Mother stood above her, facing her, one pace away, gaze fixed on her. Lisan tried to look away.

"Look at me," Holy Mother demanded, voice a knife-sharp hiss. She bent down, her scarred face centimeters from Lisan's. "Look at me and tell me what you fear."

Lisan looked up at the Holy Mother Anna Devlin. She took a shuddery breath and tried to speak. She failed. *Etiquette be damned, I need water.* Lisan drank a mouthful from the pouch and set it down without offering it to Anna. The Holy Mother didn't seem to notice the affront.

"I fear ... I fear you will ... I fear you will ... die." The last word choked off.

The Holy Mother grunted, nodded and stood upright. She walked to the wall, four short steps, and leaned against it. Her long blond hair seemed to glow like a halo in the faint starlight. She stood in silence for so long...

Holy Mother spoke, but Lisan didn't hear. She joined Anna at the wall, looking westward.

Anna turned to her, smiled and gripped her soft hand. "I, too, fear. But nobody lives forever, you know."

"I-I know."

"I heard—long ago—that as long as somebody remembers you it will be as if you are still alive."

"I could never forget you, Holy Mother."

Anna nodded, turned to sit on the bench. Lisan followed. "So, in you, I'll live as long as you live. Remembered."

"And the other children. They'll remember, too."

Anna shook her head. "No. Memory is ... so fragile a thing. So fragile."

"What if—"

"There is another way each of us lives forever."

"What do you mean?"

Anna smiled, silent. A brief glance at Lisan's budding breasts was all it took for Lisan to understand.

"Oh," she said, cheeks red. Her mother had told her about the change seven nights before she died. Lisan was still trying to fathom it. "You mean...?"

"It's time I told you."

"Ah. Mother already told—"

"Not that. About those times. You asked. You fear. As do I." She touched her belly, where the pains gnawed from time to time. "Now. I should tell you, shouldn't I? Someone must know."

Lisan nodded, not daring to breathe.

"One day, long, long ago..."

Chapter One

"Affirmative."

Anna Devlin was pregnant.

In her womb, she nurtured a child, now smaller than a needle tip but growing each second. She carried new life; not a clone but one she and Martin had conceived the old-fashioned way.

Anna let out her breath—she hadn't realized she'd been holding it—as she waited for the computer to answer her query. “System pregnant?”

“Affirmative.” The glowing cursor blinked green in the still air before her eyes. Her audio implant confirmed in a soft metallic whisper inside her right ear: “Affirmative.”

She disengaged the hair-thin wire link between the nanomed interface plug behind her right ear and the computer console on the desk. The link retracted back into the console with a faint snaky hiss. Then she turned to look toward Martin's chair, heart pounding.

“Oh, Martin...”

For an instant, panic replaced joy as Anna saw in the dim light from the computer telltale that he wasn't there. Then she remembered.

He'd gotten a call from Security Chief Captain Georg Jakes an hour ago, and he'd left for the admin office. He hadn't turned on the lights as he dressed, a dark shadow against the spacious room's deeper dark, but Anna had stirred. He murmured an apology about admin business, reason for leaving early and skipping their private breakfast together in their alcove, a long-standing ritual.

“I'll call you for lunch,” he'd whispered. “My office, not the Commons.”

He didn't sound agitated or concerned, but he'd long ago mastered the art of keeping his true feelings hidden, even from Anna.

She'd mumbled agreement.

No surprise, the call. Colony administrators kept no fixed office hours wherever they served. A call from Martin's security chief was always an emergency, however calmly he appeared to take it. It had happened several times before since planetfall a year ago. In fact, Anna recalled, it had happened three times in the last month. This was the fourth.

Peculiar, she thought, as she drifted back to sleep. Had there been another argument among the small contingent of police troops under Jakes's command, a brawl, an accident? Anna had heard rumors of theft. Unconfirmed.

She accepted Martin's musky-breath kiss on her cheek with a weak smile, turned over in their soft, warm bed and gave herself back to sleep.

She dreamed.

In the dream, she stood somewhere outdoors, knee-deep in thick whipgrass under the hot Phoenix sun, a little girl in her arms. She cuddled the three or four-year-old as if she were the child's mother, but the girl didn't look much like her or Martin. She had a round face, jet-black hair, large dark eyes, and a broad, flat nose. Her skin was tanned almost black, as if she'd lived all her life under a hot sun. Both Martin and Anna had blond hair, oval faces and blue eyes. Authority features.

The girl looked to be of Familia stock, yet in the dream, Anna thought of the girl as hers, born of her womb. Hers, yet born the Familia way, not the Authority way.

In the dream, the girl touched Anna's face with a finger, a gesture filled with innocent curiosity and childlike tenderness. A golden, honey-like goo clung to the fingertip, which she pressed to Anna's cheek below her right eye.

In the dream, Anna didn't feel the touch, yet even now she remembered the sharp pungency the stuff the girl's fingertip exuded—like cinnamon.

For some reason she couldn't quite understand later as she pondered the dream, it felt as though she'd been separated from the little girl, her own child despite appearances, for a long time—thirty-five years, to be exact. Yet, the girl looked to be a toddler.

Then, Anna sensed she was about to lose the girl again.

With a feeling close to panic, an oddity in an already weird dream, Anna had come full awake. She bolted upright, the dream still vivid. She thought about the dream a while, eyes closed, as she sat on the edge of the bed. She couldn't remember ever having such a disturbing, vivid dream before.

Why thirty-five years? And the smell—do people dream smells?

The dream inspired a hunch. She and Martin had disengaged their contraceptive programs a few days ago. Maybe it was too soon to tell. Still, she decided to check med for pregnancy. She plugged in quietly, in the dark, to avoid waking Martin.

“Query: System pregnant?”

Time froze, turned to molasses. Then med reported: “Affirmative.”

If the odd dream had excited her, the med report had done so even more.

“Oh, Martin...”

But Martin had left earlier, and Anna sat alone in their alcove. The room, though large, seemed to shrink, emphasizing her loneliness. She wasn't alone, knowing Martin's voice and image were an instant away through a tap of her comlink, that he was a few hundred meters away. Some thousand colonists slept in alcoves like hers or ate in the Commons or worked in offices or shops, all within a few hundred meters.

The room had special meaning. Here, she and Martin shared each other's company in privacy, slept together and made love. Here, they had conceived a child.

But she found no comfort in the colony's hive-like nearness, or Martin's lingering musky scent. Not alone, not exactly. Nonetheless, loneliness, a sudden and bitter pang, wrenched her heart and pressed tears to her eyes.

She hated the room, hated its emptiness, its hollowness. She hated the livewall murals designed to hide the real walls behind Earthome scenes. She hated the ever-present hot-plastic odor, the rounded corners, the seamless hardfoam walls, ceiling and floor—featureless, unmarred by blemish or deviation from design specs.

Programmed nanoconstructors had turned Phoenix IV's silicate-rich soil into hundreds of "living rooms," as colonists called the alcoves, all alike, within a few hours after first planetfall. All the rooms measured ten-by-twenty meters, spacious enough for a large bed, four chairs and a table, a large wardrobe, personal hygiene module, computer interface console, food prep unit, air recirculator, light panels, opacable ceiling, a door, plants and whatever else colonists might want to add to help give the illusion they weren't half-buried under an alien planet light-years from Earthome.

The alcoves resembled those on the nullspace transport ship, part of the fleet that brought them from Earthome, and like too many she had seen on Earthome itself. Alike, but larger. The null-transit deepsleep pods on the huge transport were coffin-sized versions of the living room where she now sat with such unease.

The alcoves, half-buried in the hard Phoenix IV ground, were linked by a network of nanoconstructed streets in a helix spiral pattern. The design allowed ready access from any point to any other in the complex, and for efficient colony expansion. Each room in the hive provided perfect insulation against temperature and weather extremes. Lightproof and soundproof, they offered perfect privacy. Self-repairing, they were indestructible. Transparent ceiling panels admitted light from the Phoenix sun in daytime hours but could be opaqued for privacy and temperature control. No windows or other accesses had been programmed though, with little effort, windows could be made.

Hygiene and food prep facilities were lavish, a luxury first-wave colonists enjoyed. Later arrivals might have to do with less. A simple modification of the living room nano-program created larger, smaller or specialized rooms—family housing, offices, commons, labs, hydroponics, meeting and storage rooms.

The living rooms were a universal constant, an Authority engineering triumph, yet they represented a compromise for the people who would most often occupy them. Since Familia had embraced the Authority's colonization program in the last few decades, Authority officials bowed to Familia hierarchy demands for modifications in the nano-programs they'd have to live with wherever in the galaxy they went.

The result, Anna complained to him as often as she thought Martin would tolerate, combined the worst of Authority materialistic regimentation and Familia dogmatic intransigence. Government and the governed worked together to create perfect disharmony, barren and unimaginative. And the Familia exhibited a growing resentment seeded by their restrictive cultural beliefs, most of which were at odds with Anna's education and outlook as a child of the Authority.

Martin agreed but added little, often changing the subject. He didn't talk about some things.

The feeling of being trapped in the alcove, despite its spaciousness and the illusion of even more room the livewalls provided, wasn't new to Anna. It happened. When it arose, she plugged into the entertainment net, the program source that provided a view of the Wind River Mountains of Earthome on the alcove walls, or some other program that met the same goal, and hid in fantasy for hours. Or she went to the Commons to eat. Most people there were Familia, and some shunned her, refused to touch her in Familia ritual greeting; but at least she was among people there. It sometimes helped.

Less often, and when it wasn't deadly hot, she had time to go outdoors to stand under the broad, starry Phoenix night sky.

Teaching provided her best and fondest outlet when she felt trapped. She loved the children, Familia and Authority, loved seeing their bright eyes and their eager young faces.

Now, the trapped feeling arose again.

“Living room,” she muttered. “Ha.”

She gritted her teeth, closed her eyes and balled her fists to fight back a growl of frustration. The alcove's gloomy closeness didn't rankle. That was just a manifestation of the real problem—the constant bickering between Authority bigots and Familia zealots. Or was it the other way around? It put people like her and Martin in the middle—a person not Familia or Authority was suspect by one side as being loyal to the other. Neutrality had become an untenable position. Anna had heard the bickering produced riots back on Earthome and on other colonies. Unconfirmed. She suspected the Authority hid such embarrassing incidents with its usual militant diligence.

Martin administered Authority law fifty light-years from Earthome, doing the best he could. Sometimes, he had to consult by nullwire with Government House advisers back on Earthome, advisers who often monitored discussions in his office in realtime. The miracle of instant trans-null communication the nullwire provided still left Martin alone in administering decisions. Jakes's command provided a token force to back him if a decision met resistance. Sometimes Anna wondered if he wasn't just a bit afraid. Stony-faced, he never showed it.

For all practical purposes, like it or not, Martin was the Authority government on Phoenix IV.

And Anna, with a dozen other teachers, was the Authority education system. Under law, all colonial children had to meet certain educational standards, regardless of religious beliefs, political affiliation, economic condition, birthright heritage or other factors. Earthome children learned from the same text as did children on the farthest colony planet or station. Text revisions arrived by nullwire often.

The alarm in Anna's right ear buzzed, and the chrono flashed under her right eyelid—time to wake up and face the day.

Time to teach her charges, mostly Familia children, things they didn't want to know or couldn't use on Phoenix IV. The First Migration, the Fall, the Second Migration, Authority Heritage, Shipley's Argument, the Code of Citizenship. Politics went hand-in-hand with basics such as computation, nano-technology, life and physical sciences, math, logic and language skills.

After classes, Familia children went to Sanctuary, where they learned Familia doctrine, which often contradicted what had been taught in government class minutes before.

A stupid system, Anna thought as she went to the shower. Stupid and frustrating.

She dressed in a light one-piece pantsuit, the suit standard nanofactured, Authority-designed material and pattern. The suit was a bright yellow, a stark and deliberate contrast with the drab Familia earth tones.

She checked herself in the mirror, brushing her long hair behind her ears. A flush on her high cheekbones, accenting pale, translucent skin, made her face seem narrow, delicate. *This will change, I'm sure.*

She plucked a small ripe tomato from the plant near the door and ate it. She didn't bother to program a full breakfast, since Martin wasn't there to help her enjoy it. She wasn't hungry.

Anna checked her chrono. No hurry.

As she reached to palm the door open, something occurred to her. She hesitated and looked back at the alcove, where a moment before she'd felt claustrophobic. Now, she didn't.

Why?

A crease formed on her brow as she thought about it, and her lips pursed.

Then she smiled.

Because we're not alone anymore, Martin and I. Now we are three.

With one hand pressed against the warmth of her abdomen, she palmed the door open with the other and went on her way.

Chapter Two

A river of bobbing heads and shifting feet flowed along the wide street, the four lanes designated to handle inbound morning commuter traffic crowded, the two outbound lanes empty.

While colonists called their alcoves “living rooms,” they called the public corridors between the rooms with each other and the rest of the colony “streets.” The terms were psychological, a subtle Authority-sponsored ploy designed to make the otherwise-austere colonial environment more hospitable.

In fact, though disguised by livewall murals, transparent ceiling panels and other effects, the rooms and the streets looked, smelled and felt alike—all one continuous piece, all nanofactured in the same manner from the same native soil. The living rooms, however spacious, clean and well-lit, were caves, and the streets were tunnels.

Anna could not for long accept the illusions meant to make the world something it was not, although she, too, called the corridors “streets” out of habit. At times, she attributed to her intelligence her ability to see the blank walls behind the illusions, but it didn't always work. She knew many people, Authority and Familia, as smart as she and a few smarter, some of whom seemed naïve. Now and then, she found herself just as gullible. At those times, she'd shake her head, step back and take mental stock, deliberate and methodical, of the differences between the real and the illusory.

Surely, others did the same. Surely, most intelligent Familia believers must see through Familia dogma, just as she did, just as she saw through Authority propaganda.

The homey names for the tunnels and caves, the murals and light panels all manifested from the same attempt to fool people into accepting the illusions. If Anna could see it, others could.

Maybe they did and, like her, never talked about it. She wished she could discuss it with Martin, but the subject seemed to make him uncomfortable. His job, Anna realized, required him to accept some self-delusion. An Administrator was often an actor, a politician.

Then again, she sighed as she walked alone, maybe she created her own illusion, making—what was the old saying?—making a mountain out of a molehill. The people she passed in the corridor—the street—seemed content if not quite jolly. If it helped to brighten their lives to call their half-buried warren something else, why should Anna object or care? Nor did it matter that colonists had chosen to name many streets, commons, living rooms and other features after Familia saints, martyrs and prophets.

Harmless.

Anna shook off the flood of thoughts as she walked down familiar Madrid Street past the Redwood forest, past the Florida Beach. She barely noticed they'd changed the Yellowstone Park scene to the Savannah, a grassy prairie with antelope and other animals grazing near a waterhole in the distance. The slight flicker in the Gobi Desert depth-of-field didn't annoy her as much today. Her mind wandered.

She walked toward her classroom a half-kilometer inward, a large alcove called Harvard Eighteen. It was one of ten living rooms adapted to classroom use in a cluster called Harvard Square. The government school complex lay inward, toward the colony center from the general residential section. The complex also lay closer to Martin's admin office, another living room adapted to its purpose, called by an irreverent few Little Government House.

Anna felt rebellious and giddy. I'm pregnant, she thought, smiling at passers-by, and you're not. Most didn't notice her radiant happiness. Those who did looked puzzled or indignant. Most just looked somber, with grave eyes and saggy faces. Few smiles.

Despite the large numbers of people who, like her, headed to duties outside their alcoves, all at the same time and most at the colony's core near the Commons, the inward-spiraling street remained quiet. The street walls, floor and ceiling had no sharp corners or edges. Sound soaked without echo into the skin-like, corrugated rubbery surface. A necessity. Without the feature, even the smallest noise—breathing or feet shuffling, let alone talk above a whisper—would be magnified to titanic and harmful proportions, especially during shift commutes. Nano-systems resident in one's inner ear could compensate only so far.

Engineers had made the streets wide enough to allow a powersled to turn around, if need be, though need for a sled inside the city should never occur. They made the streets appear even more spacious by arranging changing livewall murals of Earhome scenes; frequent, open, public side alcoves or “parks” filled with Earhome plants, flowers and trees both real and synthetic and high ceilings with transparent panels. The illusion that each street lay open to the sky failed when it rained, a rarity in Phoenix IV's climate in this hemisphere. Otherwise, the bright Phoenix sun poured in heat and healthy, natural light.

Colonists had voted to call their primary city, through which Anna now walked, Tierra Natal. Familia hierarchy prompted the name. It was said the term declared the colony's nature. The name also had an obscure historical etymology, Anna discovered, relating to the long-ago dawn of Earhome's First Migration. Anna made sure her students knew the name's mundane as well as religious roots.

Three thousand people resided here, though only a thousand were now present. Two dozen lived in orbit, staffing the Fleet. Two thousand lived at several smaller temporary outposts scattered at various sites around the planet, mostly in Brasilia, the continental plate on which Tierra Natal was centered. Those posts, temporary shelters for exploratory purposes, might become towns. The two largest, Calcutta Falls to the north and Rock Springs to the south, each had five or six hundred people. They and smaller posts scattered up and down Brasilia from the northern icecap to the southern icecap, and from Goliath in the west to Glacier Mountain toward the east, were all nanofactured in the same fashion as Tierra Natal. Natal, as a few had already come to call it in what Familia zealots might see as near-blasphemous casualness, would be the capital of a thriving, populous colony when future colonists arrived. So Familia and Authority officials hoped.

Government House on Earhome expected no export from Phoenix IV. The Authority Diplomatic Corps privately called it a “terminal colony.” Not expected to make an economic contribution to Authority-governed planets closer to Earhome, it was meant as a destination, a haven for Familia who

wished to put worldly affairs behind them. A religious haven, yes, but Authority approved, funded and administered.

In fact, the Authority had been quietly approving distant, peripheral and marginal planets for general terminal colony status in greater number in the last few score years. So Martin had told Anna in the privacy of their alcove.

Anna recalled the conversation as she walked toward Harvard Eighteen, nodding to those scholars and adults who glanced her way. The ones who wore bright Authority service uniforms like hers nodded to her. Few of the others, in earth-toned Familia garb, many holding hands, even met her eyes. Fewer still touched her elbow in the ritual Familia greeting.

When Anna learned about terminal colony politics their ensuing conversation soon prompted her and Martin to decide to conceive.

"I don't think we'll ever get off Phoenix IV," he had said. "I've gone as far in the Corps as I'll go." He hesitated and pulled her closer in their bed. "I'm sure of it."

"But you're a Colony Administrator." Anna lay in the warm security of his arms, but she felt insecure, even though their bodies touched from head to toe. "That's rank. It's supposed to be a step forward, upward. Isn't it?"

For a long time, Martin didn't answer. His sigh, the way he chose his words, the way he breathed—she knew he'd been holding back something. Martin's responsibilities as Administrator often prevented him from confiding in her. Anna accepted it, and they made up for it in greater physical intimacy. She listened to Martin, tension knotting her muscles, constricting her throat.

"I've put a few things together," he said. "Gleanings from Government House dispatches, from Jakes's security briefings, his observations and dispatches, from the public net. Rumors. Talk I hear in the streets, the commons. From First Grandfather Riosclan." He shrugged. "Bits and pieces."

Again he hesitated.

"And?" Anna prompted.

"The public perception has been that Authority and Familia are cooperating to open colonization to Familia."

"A spirit of cooperation, yes. It's government policy. Right?"

Martin explained what he'd discovered about the Corps' private terminal colony program. "I looked at some figures. The percentages of Familia colonies classed as terminal. Characteristics of those planets. The ratio of Familia to Authority on Earthome, Alpha, Mbutu's System, Espana and others. Not just general population figures. The economic division between Familia and Authority. Age differences. Birthright grant figures. Educational stats. Crime stats. Other things even more subtle." He paused again.

"And?"

"I'm seeing trends, connections. Vague. I can't prove anything." He snorted. "What good if I could?"

"Martin, you're being obtuse." She gave him a playful punch.

“The point is...” He sighed again. He drew an imaginary circle around her left nipple with a gentle finger. “The point is, I think the Authority is ... exiling Familia. Deliberately. Promoting Familia colonization of undesirable planets while giving better planets to Authority interests. It ... it feels like it stops just short of ... of genocide...”

Anna stiffened. “Genocide?”

“...or something like it. A slow, quiet bleeding of Familia power at the core.”

“But, surely, as an Administrator, you'd be told about such a policy.” An icy chill edged her words. “Wouldn't you?”

Again the sigh. “I knew about the terminal colony policy earlier, in general terms. Just before I got this post, I felt like I'd been declared *persona non grata*. No assignment. People wouldn't talk to me or touch me. You know why. Then, quite suddenly, I got this post.”

Martin sat up in the bed, fidgeted, not meeting Anna's eyes. “Phoenix is a terminal colony, Anna. Far off the beaten path. No further exploration expected in this sector forever. No export planned. And the data we got from the probes about the resources...”

In the silence, Anna said, “False?”

“*Optimistic* would be a kind word. Oh, we'll manage. Barely. But prosper?” He snorted.

The icy edge again. “A covert conspiracy? But, surely—”

Martin continued as if he hadn't heard, as if to himself. “And there's Riosclan. The Familia hierarchy...”

Anna sat up. “Never mind the old rabble-rouser. What about us? What about...?”

She read in Martin's sad, distant eyes the answers to her questions.

Martin would not advance in the Corps. He'd been exiled to Phoenix IV. *Terminal* meant the same for his career—and Anna's—as it did for Authority expectations of the colony. *Terminal* meant permanent expatriation from Authority affairs. Covert or not, it didn't matter.

Anna knew why.

They'd striven to remain neutral when it came to the growing ideological rift between Authority and Familia. They, and a few like them, allied themselves with neither belief, political or religious. Such a stand had become more untenable as the gulf between the two worldviews widened.

The clandestine conspiracy Martin believed he'd found—and Anna saw no reason to doubt him—included exile of Authority officials, like Martin and Anna, whose loyalty Government House doubted.

* * * *

On her own time, Anna did some independent and illegal study on the matter in the days after the conversation, using personnel files access codes Martin gave her for the purpose. She discovered those

on Phoenix IV in direct Authority employ—admin, police, ships' systems, engineering, nanotech support, all four hundred Authority—had in their files strong mentions of “suspect loyalty.” All had been red-flagged.

That day, they decided to conceive.

“If we're never going to leave this planet,” Anna had said, “we might as well make the best of it.”

Martin nearly wept. Then he revealed, “I suspected before we left Earthome about the terminal conspiracy. But I didn't tell you because I...”

“I figured that, too. You did right. What would have become of your career—of us—if you'd refused the assignment?”

Martin laughed, and Anna was glad to hear it. “You agree,” he said. “Make the best, then. Our own baby. I didn't know how you'd feel about it, so I didn't—”

Anna hugged him, loving his touch, his smell.

“We'd never get a license back home,” she said. “Now we can do it our way.”

More discussion followed, lengthy, intense and serious; and a consultation with the colony's medical director, Dr. Lios York. The doctor's concerns were based on Authority policy, policy she believed in. In time, she approved natural fertilization as Anna and Martin wanted, but she opposed natural childbirth as an unnecessary potential hazard to Anna's health. Martin and Anna accepted her reasoning. They would conceive and transfer the fetus to Dr. York's professional care within the first trimester.

They disengaged their contraceptive systems and made a baby. The old-fashioned way.

Anna laughed aloud as she stood before Harvard Eighteen, ignoring the few disapproving glances her private outburst evoked from passers-by. Two minutes until class convened. Most of her fifteen scholars waited inside. All but three were Familia, robed in the usual drab greens, Earthome browns, tans and rusts.

She stood in the street and looked through the classroom door at the children bending over their slates, reading, scrolling, chatting. Some played and stifled giggles over some childish jest or other.

Her scholars were five-year-olds. Almost old enough, Anna thought, to learn how to suppress spontaneous laughter, avoid fun. Anna wouldn't teach them how grim their world would become as they grew older. She'd leave that to the Familia Sanctuary, the religious school that followed the children's regular government class she conducted.

“S'cuse me.” Ami Cohenclan brushed past, touching Anna on the elbow politely as she entered the room, little head swaying to some inner music, her own or, perhaps, a rec.

Anna sighed as she went to her desk at the front of the room, one or two scholars touching her as she passed their desks. In four hours, she would dismiss the children and walk over to Martin's office and tell him the news.

She considered whether she should tell him as soon as she walked in or play with him for a while over lunch, drop hints or make him guess.

She didn't want to wait. Should she dismiss class and go now? The scholars would be surprised, and their parents would—

The hour chimed in her right ear.

Anna stood at her desk and looked into her scholars' large and serious eyes. They sat, hands folded on their desks, watching, waiting for her to begin.

She fought back a grin and began.

CHAPTER THREE

Anna had just commenced her first lesson, the Twelve Goals of Mankind, Shipley's classic argument for the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, when she began to consider quitting class for the day and going to Martin. A few minutes into the recitation—she checked the time—she had to override Hector Garciacian's slate when she monitored the boy doodling math problems in the air above the screen instead of following highlighted text. Experience made her sensitive to the signs; she noticed the attention of other children beginning to wander and dropped the lesson midway. Her annoyance focused inward. Her own concentration had wandered first, a rare occurrence, allowing the children to drift.

“We'll continue tomorrow,” she announced, pleased to move on. Right or not, Shipley was a pedantic bore, made all the worse by his opinion's being required recitation.

Some children looked relieved to be off the rote exercise. Others groaned, anticipating something worse. They fidgeted.

As Anna keyed up a math exercise on the scholars' slates, she recalled Shipley's Argument would be contradicted in Sanctuary anyway. Like the Shipley, Familia indoctrination would undermine most of what she taught.

Anna adored her little scholars in their awkward, wide-eyed, pudgy-cheeked cuteness, but she knew she spoke into a void, filling it with little more than soothing chirpy noises. It hurt.

She ground her teeth in frustration. She'd felt frustrated often enough before and had suppressed it. Not now—and she knew why.

Anna touched her abdomen again, caressing the life growing there.

What would happen if...?

Fifteen pairs of little eyes focused on glowing numbers in neat rows and columns in the air a few centimeters above their slates; and—fifteen times ten—a hundred and fifty fingers tapped virtual keyboards, manipulating the numbers. Anna monitored the scholars' efforts from her master slate one-by-one and found no problems. Even daydreamer Hector Garciacian focused—he liked math.

What if?

Except for a colony-wide emergency, no procedure existed for dismissing class early. In the year since planetfall, nothing had happened to justify doing so.

Was it against the law? Anna knew Authority education law well enough and didn't recall anything about it. She monitored her scholars—all busy, attention on the exercise—then checked the net, found no reference.

Not illegal, but...

But it had never been done. What reason could Anna give for breaking routine, if not law? How would the children react? Or their parents?

Anna blinked her chrono on again. She still had more than three-and-a-half hours before class would end and she'd be free to go to Martin. She decided she'd spend some time exploring the issue.

She flicked on her slate and typed “To Dismiss” and “Not To Dismiss” side-by-side. She emboldened the words, made them blood red and made them blink. The words hung in the air above her slate, blinking.

Then she began to subvocalize, listing reasons why and why not. In a few minutes, variations of the phrase “I'd get in trouble” dominated one column. “I don't give a damn” dominated the other.

As no new permutations of the problem occurred to her, Anna stopped writing.

She started another list: “What trouble?”

A minute or two passed before she concluded little or no harm would come from dismissing class. She found no Authority law against it. Indignant Familia might demand official inquiry before an Arbitrator, but Anna foresaw no drastic punishment. In fact, she grinned, Arbitration might be a fun diversion. Her pregnancy, unusual for an Authority cohort, might prove a novel mitigating circumstance, since the Arbitrator would be Familia, and a woman. Yes, it might be fun.

An official Familia Shunning could be imposed. If that happened, it would mean little. It wouldn't change the frigid climate in which she and Martin already lived. Nor, she concluded, would her action embarrass or annoy Martin or compromise his position as Administrator. A pregnant Administrator's wife might even be a help.

Could she and Martin be separated as punishment? Could their time together be limited?

Not likely. The Authority had laws about birth licensing, cloning, taxation and progeny care but none about individual, personal liaisons made for romantic reasons. The Familia had intricate theoretical treatises on the subject. Strict doctrine and detailed ritual accompanied marriage contracts, including public ceremony and a couple's pledges, man and woman, toward future generations and the Familia.

What Anna and Martin called marriage had no meaning under Authority law or Familia doctrine. They lived in unofficial liaison by one standard and unsanctioned marriage by another. Even if official and sanctioned, trying to separate a pregnant person from his or her mate would be difficult, a legal nightmare.

So, she concluded, both Authority and Familia could not harm her—or Martin—if she stopped class early.

With a sweep of her finger in the air, she circled the phrase “I don't give a damn” in neon yellow, the

same color as her pantsuit.

A scholar spoke. She looked up from her slate, aware she hadn't monitored the math exercise as she should have.

"Pardon?" she said. Several children watched her, expressionless, fingers poised above slates, but she didn't know who had spoken or what they'd said.

"Yes, Mom Devlin. 'Pardon.' That's what I said." Claine Elonzoclan, the nervous little boy in the first row, smiled around cheeks puffed to hide his eyes in skin folds. Anna hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud.

"Oh, it was nothing," she said, exasperated with herself, hoping it didn't show. Several other children looked up from their slates, puzzled.

Anna sighed. *Might as well.*

"Scholars, please put your lesson on pause and give me your attention."

Fifteen heads came up from their slates and fifteen pairs of eyes focused on her.

"Thank you," Anna said. She cleared her throat and took a breath. "Class is dismissed." She was relieved to note her voice didn't shake as she pronounced the words.

The children stared at her; and for a moment, she thought maybe she'd spoken gibberish, but the expressions changed, little brows furrowed and lips pursed in bewilderment.

"Did ... did we do something ... um ... wrong, Mom Devlin?" Job Lopesclan asked in a tremulous voice. Anna often wondered what happened at home to make the bony girl so fearful.

"It's too early." Emma Juarezclan piped up loudly before Anna could respond to the Lopesclan girl.

"Sanctuary doesn't start for another ... uh..."

"What are we supposed to do until, I wonder?"

"Mom Devlin? Mom Devlin?"

The scholars shifted in their seats, muttering.

"Scholars, scholars." Anna raised her voice above the hubbub to regain control. "Nothing is wrong, Job, Emma. No one is being punished. I realize Sanctuary doesn't begin for another ... uh ... three hours. You may stay in class until then if you wish and study. You may return to your living rooms or go to the commons to play. Or go to Sanctuary early, if you want. But I-I have to ... uh..."

"You got—I mean, have—to go see Fat Dev—I mean, the Administrator?" The question from Claine Elonzoclan surprised Anna. Why had the boy asked that?

"Yes," she replied. "How did you ... I mean, why...?"

Grinning, puffy eyes bright, the boy turned to his deskmate, Ami Cohenclan. "I think Mom Devlin is ... you know," he said in a stage whisper, "pregnant."

Then he laughed, a high-pitched whistle.

The class erupted.

“Are you really, Mom Devlin?”

“A for-real baby?”

“How come you got to go early? I still don't—”

“Cause Pa Devlin don't know yet,” Claine said. “Isn't that so, Mom Devlin? Do you got to go tell the Administrator?”

“You mean, the, the Father doesn't know? How can—”

“Mom Devlin, Mom Devlin—”

The scholars went wild, discipline shot. Anna was committed, no turning back now.

She made no attempt to stop the gaiety, the tumult of giggly conversation. All the children talked at once, even the three usually-quiet Authority boys who sat in the back.

A pregnant teacher. The scholars knew, but the Administrator—the Father—didn't know. The novelty electrified them.

Anna turned aside the questions as she made her way to the door, each child touching her in Familia greeting as she passed. She told them she'd make a public announcement and explain tomorrow when class resumed.

It took a while to leave the classroom through the excited gauntlet of loving touch. When she at last stood in the street outside, she breathed a deep sigh. The children's giddy reaction— *exactly how I feel*—vindicated her.

The children didn't leave the room, their excitement riveting them all to their seats where they continued talking after she'd left.

It's like I'm the first person they'd ever seen pregnant.

Anna felt a warm glow. The children liked her. She'd believed so before, but now she knew for certain. Their touch confirmed it. They liked her.

As she turned onto Hernandez Street, which led to the admin office, she bumped into First Grandfather Jose Riosclan, stalking in the opposite direction. Both stopped and looked at each other. Anna expected the head of the Familia on Phoenix IV to scold her for not being in class. The big man's eyes blazed under thatchy brows, complexion fiery red. Sweat beaded on his high, round forehead, and he stank as if he'd skipped morning hygiene. His fingers clutched the large wooden Familia hanging around his neck.

Anna held her breath, heart hammering. She waited for the verbal assault she expected. Instead, First Grandfather Riosclan growled in his wattled throat and pushed past, stomping bull-like down the street, fists bunched at his sides, toward the central commons where he kept his office, Familia headquarters.

Puzzled, Anna watched him go. Had the First Grandfather come from the admin office? Anna knew Martin and the First Grandfather often argued, but she'd never seen Riosclan so angry.

She was twenty meters from the office door, her mind an emotional whirlpool, when the first bomb exploded.

CHAPTER FOUR

The hot shockwave knocked the wind from Anna's lungs, slamming her to her knees. The explosion came as a muffled thump, as if underwater. She felt it more than heard it, a giant fist pushing her forward, and a sharp, painful slap against her ears.

Nanos acted instantly to protect her eardrums from the sudden change in air pressure, attenuating the sound as the shockwave swept down the street. The nanos did their job, and she could hear.

Still on her knees, she looked back down the street. Her first thought: something had gone wrong in Harvard Square and her children were hurt or in danger. She rose onto rubbery legs, leaned on the wall as she tried to steady herself to run.

She blinked and quick-scanned the public net. Nothing unusual. Yet.

"Anna!"

No, she decided, not the classroom, hers or the others clustered around it. Nothing there could blow up, and the blast had been nearer.

"Anna!"

The blast came from the power relay station.

She'd just passed a street junction; the side street led toward the station, a hundred meters around the bend. Black smoke and hot air billowed from that street to where she now stood, in Hernandez Street.

The livewalls had shut down along Hernandez Street, gone flat, as far as she could see. Lights flickered, dimmed.

"Anna, what are you doing?"

The power station.

Someone grabbed her arm, pulled her around. Georg Jakes, the security chief, towered above her, face contorted with concern.

"Anna, can you hear me? What are you doing here?"

Lights stuttered, surged back on. The usually quiet air recirculators gasped spastically, overworked with the effort to suck up the thick, acrid-smelling smoke. Black tendrils seeped into the ceiling vents like ghost tongues.

“Georg, what's going on?”

“Power station. Explosion.”

“But it's solar. How can...?”

“Sabotage.” Jakes hissed through clenched, bared teeth. He looked scared. Georg never looked scared. He shook his bullet-shaped head. “Not your concern. Familia uprising.”

His grip on Anna's arm hurt. His gaze darted up and down the empty street as he spoke.

“Sabotage? Uprising?”

Jakes looked at her. He began to speak then noticed his iron-hard grip and let go. The imprint of his blunt fingers remained in the fabric of Anna's pantsuit sleeve.

“Sorry, Anna. No time to—”

“Are the children in danger?” The classrooms were back there, beyond the side street to the power station. She couldn't see past the smoke.

“Familia kids.” Jakes's thick lips curled in contempt. “Most of 'em, anyway.”

“Georg, those are my—”

“Anna!” Martin called out. Anna and Jakes turned.

He stood in the admin office doorway behind them, ten meters away, eyes wild.

“Martin, what's going on?” Anna asked him.

“She's safer with you, Dev.” Jakes pushed her toward Martin. “Lock in.” He turned and disappeared into the smoke. “I'll send somebody,” he called as he ran.

Anna rushed into Martin's arms. “Martin, what's going on?”

“No time.” He broke their embrace and roughly propelled her inside the office. He shut the door behind them after a furtive glance up and down the street then slid the manual lock home.

“Martin, what are you—”

“We're sealed in, Georg,” Martin tapped his right cheekbone and spoke into his comlink. “What's your status?”

Anna couldn't hear Jakes's reply, of course, but a barrage of panicky voices erupted on her own link—she'd forgotten to blink it off. The messages were garbled, full of static. Distracting rather than informative. She blinked off.

“Martin, tell me what's happening.” Her voice quaked.

He gave her a quick, pained look but didn't answer. Instead, he turned and strode across the Spartan

office to the computer console behind his desk. He tapped on his keyboard and spoke into the air, eyes unfocused.

“Government House, acknowledge. Government House?”

His face gleamed with sweat as he repeated his nullwire query. He looked scared. Martin never looked scared.

“Martin?” Anna's legs wobbled, and she couldn't get enough air. She leaned on the desk near him, tasting bile in her throat.

“Nullwire's jammed.” He didn't look at her. “I think we're not safe here.”

“Why, Martin?”

“Georg, the nullwire is down. What's your—” He seemed to hold his breath as he listened to Jakes's report in his right ear. “Got it,” he said at last. “We'll be ready.”

“Martin?”

He turned to Anna. He tried to smile, gave it up as a bad job. “We've got to leave here.” He looked pale, shaky. “Georg is sending an escort.”

“Police? But why?”

“Anna, we don't have time—”

“Damn you.” Anna grabbed his tunic in clenched fists and glared at him, nose-to-nose. “I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on.”

Her uncharacteristic, violent outburst startled him, and he blinked. “Uh, Georg,” he addressed the air, “how long till your man gets here?” He listened a moment then nodded. “Thanks. You, too.”

He took a ragged breath, gathered himself and gently removed her fists, still knotted in his shirt. He held her hands in his, caressing her skin until the tension in her eased a bit, then he spoke.

“The Familia are revolting,” he said in a quavery whisper. “We didn't expect it, thought we'd prevented it, but...” He shrugged, looked helpless.

“Revolution? But I thought—”

“There've been incidents on other planets, stations. Arrests—deaths, even. Increasing. Authority gags the news, figures publicity will play into Familia plans. Propaganda to feed the fire. Wrong. Familia had a plan all along, a big plan. Big enough to include our little outpost.”

“But the Familia aren't violent.”

Martin barked a mirthless laugh. “That's what everybody thinks, what everybody was supposed to think. Read their stuff again. Pay attention to what they don't say. Nothing in their philosophy precludes force. Remember, their roots are First Migration Earthome religions, revival of the old ways the Authority put down after the Fall. Updated, of course, for modern consumption, but still the same bloody mess of

self-serving, self-righteous, hypocritical..." Martin shook his head. "You know. At first, they wanted Authority to believe they didn't want a fight. Later, Authority wanted everybody to believe it, too. Authority thought if they kept the incidents secret the Familia would fail. Everybody playing at secrets." He laughed mirthlessly. "Who fooled who, huh?"

"What do they hope they'll gain? Are we in danger? What about the children? I don't—"

The room shuddered as if in an earthquake. Another explosion, deadened by the soundproofing. Still, Anna thought, heart in her throat, it must have been a powerful blast, or close, for it to shake the room.

Someone thumped on the locked door. She looked at Martin, alarmed and puzzled.

"Our police escort," he said as he crossed the room to the door in long strides. Anna moved close behind, feeling an acute need to be near him. He squinted through the door peeper, nodded as he addressed the air.

"Our escort's here, Georg. Thanks." He listened a moment, gave a grim-faced glance at Anna before nodding. "Right, Georg. Will do."

"We're to go straight home," he said as he released the manual lock and palmed the door open. "Don't worry. Our escort's armed."

Anna gulped in a dry throat. She knew police carried stunners, but they were discrete and nobody ever mentioned it. She'd never seen a stunner drawn, let alone used. Now, Martin had emphasized the escort was armed. It gave no comfort.

The door slid open. For a moment, for some reason she couldn't name, Anna felt relieved to see the stony-faced security officer in the doorway was a woman. Slight, blond, pretty. Her shoulders square, she looked confident, competent. She held her stunner in her right hand, hanging by her side.

Anna was on the verge of remembering the officer's name when the moment of relief vanished. The woman opened her mouth to speak. Instead, a sharp snap came from behind her, and the woman pitched forward off her feet as if shoved. Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a surprised O as she fell into the room.

"Damn," Martin hissed as he palmed the door shut, cutting off smoke tendrils creeping in behind the officer's sprawled body.

From the street, before the door shut, sealing out the horror, Anna heard the sharp snap again and remembered the sound from the entertainment net—projectile weapons. Illegal. Deadly.

Another sound came from the street, also familiar only through the net. An unreal, chilling sound. Screams.

On the floor, the woman security officer—Opal Barrs, Anna recalled, too late—lay still, a gaping hole in her back, blood oozing black-red against her yellow pantsuit.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bitter bile rose to her throat as Anna gaped at the body, blood seeping from the wound in the woman's

back. So much blood. She'd never seen a dead person. She inhaled a shuddery breath and with it a putrid foulness.

Smoke wisps had entered the room when the door opened and floated like ghosts in the air. The recirculator whirred, straining to eat them away. The floor vibrated, booming drum-like with some distant concussion.

Martin spoke, voice husky. "We've got to go now." He touched her arm above the elbow. Anna turned away from the body to him, saw tears in his eyes, his face otherwise expressionless. She hadn't noticed her own tears until he brushed them from her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he said, barely audible. "I'm so—"

Something hit the other side of the door with a sharp, metallic crack two meters from where they stood. The noise startled Anna. It galvanized Martin.

"Come," he said. A command.

He tugged her with him. He crossed the room in four long, quick strides and brought her behind the desk. He stood facing the desk, bent at the waist, tapping on his keyboard. His fingers flew, a manic staccato.

Anna wanted to ask what he was doing, but his intense concentration stayed her. She stood at his side, close, his body warmth enveloping her. She was still, arms folded tightly across her chest, breathing in tiny gasps.

A grinding screech followed another sharp thunk on the door. Martin didn't seem to notice as he tapped then stopped, waiting, fingers poised above virtual keys, then tapped again.

The grating grew more frantic, and the door abruptly shifted. It yielded a few centimeters. A thin, pointed object projected through the narrow gap at the edge like a probing tongue. In from the street with it came more smoke and sound—screams of pain, incoherent cries and the snap of projectile weapons.

Anna suddenly froze. Her mind collapsed inward on itself, forming a wall, sheltering her from the vicious storm assaulting her senses. In a dreamlike daze, she focused on Martin's clean, shiny desk, as if it were all the world and she'd never seen it before. The keyboard on which he typed sat in the center. A holocube showing them embracing, smiling, the one taken at their marriage ceremony three years ago, an unofficial celebration only a handful of close friends attended, sat by the keyboard. To the right, balancing the cube and the keyboard in a neat triangle, sat a potted miniature tomato tree. Two thumb-sized red tomatoes, their scent spicy, dangled brightly among delicate green leaves.

Martin moved again, tugging at her arm. He spoke, face near hers.

Startled back into awareness, Anna realized she'd momentarily gone catatonic, tried to stop time, dreading its inevitable progress, the nightmarish avalanche of events beyond her control. She'd frozen in an effort to avoid the next horror, whatever it might be.

She shook her head, shaking out cobwebs. *No, I won't give up, damn it. Not now. I won't.*

"...got to go now," Martin was saying.

The grating from the door had grown more intense, frantic, and the screams beyond it continued. Stinging, foul-tasting smoke boiled into the room, and Anna coughed.

Suddenly, Martin jerked her backward toward the wall behind the desk. But she didn't bump against the wall—she seemed to stumble through it.

She regained her balance, clutching at Martin, and stood in a dark space, looking back through a narrow door into his office. Sudden comprehension—the featureless panel behind the desk hid access to—

A secret door.

At the computer, Martin had opened that door.

The panel hissed shut, closing out the acrid smoke, the clamor at the outer door and from the street. And light. Sudden silence and deep darkness engulfed them—Anna fought back panic. She held onto Martin as if drowning.

“Security access,” he whispered. His voice echoed—tinny, as if they stood in an empty vault. Or street.

Anna reached out and pressed a hand to the wall on each side. Only wide enough for one person. She reached up and found the ceiling centimeters above.

“Follow me,” Martin said.

He moved away, and she followed. They trotted in utter darkness, the only sound their echoed breath and soft tread. Anna touched one wall as she ran, the other hand extended forward, occasionally touching Martin's back. Her eyes hurt from trying to penetrate the dark. She closed them and ran on.

“Where does it lead to?”

“To the arsenal. Georg will meet us there.”

Anna followed in silence for a few minutes, head still spinning. “How long have you known about this?” she asked at last.

“Georg thinks the Familia tried to burglarize the arsenal three months ago—”

“I mean this street. I never knew about it.”

Martin said nothing for a while. Finally, “Georg programmed it, with my approval. Only two others know about it, Georg's people. He has one like it between his office and the arsenal.”

Martin and Georg must have suspected a Familia uprising since planetfall, or before. They'd planned contingencies, programmed escape routes. But they'd said nothing.

“Not a word, Martin.” Frustration bordering on anger tightened Anna's throat.

“I thought it best—”

“If we'd had a warning—”

"I tried to meet them halfway, negotiate. I thought I'd succeeded. They fooled me."

"You knew. Damn it, Martin, you knew."

Martin stopped abruptly and turned, gripping her shoulders as she collided with him. "I did what I thought best for the colony."

"My children may be in danger, hurt. If you'd told me—"

"About this street? My suspicions about the rebellion? What would you have done? What could you have done?"

"I-I..."

"You could have done nothing, Anna. Nothing." He relaxed his grip on her shoulders. "Neither could I. I thought I'd settled with Riosclan. That's why I told you about the terminal policy. If-if I'd known..."

Anna remembered why she'd come to his office. "Oh, Martin, there's a lot you don't know."

"What do you mean?"

The floor vibrated, boomed just as it had in the office; and the two froze, listening.

Silence.

"Where did that come from?" Anna whispered.

"No idea. We're almost to the arsenal, I think. Follow me." He turned and set out again, Anna close behind. Soon, he stopped.

"Georg? Georg, are you...?" Then: "Damn. Anyway, we're here."

"The arsenal is here? How can you tell?"

"Touch the wall."

Anna did so and felt the change in texture under her fingertips, rougher than before. "Oh, I see."

Martin produced a penlight and scanned the wall with the wire-thin beam. "There's an empty storage cabinet behind here," he explained, "big enough for us to fit into. We can see into the arsenal floor from there without being seen. A good thing, if they've taken it."

"They? You mean the Familia? Is that where you keep the projectile weapons? I thought Authority outlawed..."

"Yes, Familia. Georg thinks the explosion at the power station was a diversion. And, no, we don't have projectile weapons."

"Somebody has them."

“Familia. Not us. We'll ask Riosclan about it when we arrest him.”

“All right. Now what?”

“This is programmed to respond to focused light—here.” Martin pointed the pinprick light at a dark blemish high on the wall. “And here. And...” He aimed the light at a third spot a meter below the first two spots. Responding to their cues, nanos programmed to the task dissolved the wall with a faint hiss and a burnt plastic odor. A narrow, rectangular opening manifested where a seamless wall had once been.

A bright light sliver stabbed into the dark street from a space beyond the hole, and Anna squinted to see in. It was a closet-sized room, little more than a meter deep and wide and no taller than the street. It was empty, featureless, except for a door opposite the hole in the street wall. A thin horizontal slit in the door admitted light from the arsenal floor beyond.

Martin put his finger to his lips, signaling for silence, and stepped through into the closet. Anna followed, pressing against his back in the cramped room. She listened but heard nothing.

Martin moved close to the narrow slit and tilted his head from side to side, peering in. Sweat bathed his face, matted his hair. In a moment, he stiffened, hissed between clenched teeth, and pulled away. He motioned Anna back into the dark street and, once there, turned on the penlight, flashing it in sequence at the opening's top corners and along one side. Like smoke seeping inward from the edges, nanos quickly resealed the hole. The light from the arsenal winked out.

“What's wrong?” Anna whispered.

“Familia in there. A guard. Armed, I think. I think there was a fight. I saw blood. Lots of blood.”

“Where's Georg, then?”

In the ensuing silence, Anna wondered if Martin had ever seen such violence, experienced such fear. She never had. From all she knew, all he'd shared with her before they met, she decided he must be as traumatized as she was.

“Can't go back.” He spoke softly, as if thinking out loud. “Can't go through the arsenal. Maybe Georg's office.”

“Call him. Find out what's going on.”

“He got ... busy ... last time we talked.”

“I thought you said he'd be here.”

“Busy, like I said. The Familia are full of surprises. It's chaotic right now.”

“All right, all right. How do we get to Georg's office?”

Martin hesitated. “I'm turned around. Just a minute.”

He turned on the penlight again and squatted on his heels, aiming the light at the floor, moving it back and forth at their feet.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for little markers on the floor. They'll show the way to—oh, damn!” Martin's voice rose in alarm.

“What? What?”

“Look at your shoe.” Martin held the light on Anna's right day-slipper. She bent to look, puzzled at Martin's alarm at first, until she saw the dark smudge on the heel.

Blood. Anna had tracked blood from the security officer's body across the office floor, behind the desk and into the hidden street.

“Oh, no,” she gasped.

From the darkness far down the street, they heard the distinctive sound of somebody trying to penetrate a street wall.

CHAPTER SIX

They ran. Anna followed Martin through the lightless street toward the security office, away from the persistent, dim mechanical thumping behind them.

Her mind had gone numb. As she ran, breathing in tight gasps between clenched teeth, one hand lightly touching a wall to guide her, she found herself thinking trivial thoughts, as if she'd gone to some safe netherworld where fear was outlawed.

She wondered if the explosions had interrupted power, if the tomato plant by their apartment door might wilt if it got too hot.

It might. The street is hot. Georg didn't provide for temperature control when he programmed it. No livewalls, no lights. What about recirculation?

Salt stung her eyes and Anna wiped at the perspiration sheen on her forehead. As she rubbed her sweat-sticky hand on her hip, she realized her pantsuit must be smudged where she'd come in contact with the walls.

No cleaning program, either.

Anna wondered if the children had finished their mathematics exercise before the explosions, and how well they did. Hector Garciaclan had been as excited as the others about the pregnancy, but Anna knew how math excited him and suspected his distraction wouldn't last. *He'll do well, as usual. Ami Cohenclan will need help, but Claine Elonzo clan will be there for her.* She frowned, remembered she'd left her slate in the classroom and she hadn't keyed in for remote access.

Anna decided the children were safe. They would have gone straight to the Commons when they heard the blast.

But, Anna thought, they might not have heard it in the classroom. They'd feel the vibrations, no doubt, but they might not know what it meant.

Would the Familia rebels go to the classroom? Armed? What would they tell the children? How would the children react?

Behind her, punctuating her worried thoughts as she ran, the banging continued with fierce precision, unabated. Before her in the dark, Martin panted in rhythm with his stride.

“Martin, you say this was all planned?”

“Yes. Well-planned, looks like.”

“I don't think so.” She bumped into him as he slowed. Then he stopped.

“We're here,” he said. “What do you mean?”

Anna didn't ask how he knew where they were, breathless and shaky from her panicky run. “I mean, I think something went wrong. I think—”

Martin swore as he dropped his penlight, its wire-thin beam dancing along the floor. He picked it up and began probing the wall with it.

“What if they're here, too?” Anna asked.

Martin didn't answer as he pointed the penlight here and there on the wall, his face a mask of concentration in the shifting light. Anna stayed quiet as he worked.

In a moment, the wall hissed, misted, dissolved into a rectangular door, like the one at the arsenal. Bright light entered the street from the hole. Anna held her breath, listening as Martin bent and peered inside. No sound.

He stiffened, shoulders hunched, then abruptly stood back in the street, pressed back against the wall.

“Martin?” Her voice trembled.

He looked back down the dark street into silence. The banging had ceased. “We can't go back that way.”

“They've stopped. Maybe they gave up.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. They can't bust through nanofactored walls, but they can breach a program.”

They listened again, breathless. Silence. Martin licked his lips and glanced uneasily at the hole in the wall.

“Martin, what's in Georg's office? Why aren't we going in?”

Then she smelled it. The same putrid dead-thing stench she'd smelled after the officer got shot. More dead in there.

Voices echoed dimly from far down the street.

“No choice now.” Martin sighed. He stepped through the hole, reached back for Anna's trembling hand

and pulled her through. He did something with his penlight again, and the wound in the wall sealed behind them, seamless.

At first, Anna thought three bodies lay in the room. She realized there were only two just before she leaned against a wall and bent over, retching.

Martin muttered something Anna didn't hear as she fought back the dizziness following the nausea. She didn't want to faint. She forced herself to stand erect, to look at the room, at the bodies.

The entire area seemed awash in blood. Bone fragments, blood and gore splattered one wall in gaudy streaks. One body lay behind the desk, another in the room's center. Anna couldn't see their faces, couldn't tell their sex.

A cabinet along one wall had been smashed open, doors hanging askew. It was empty. A dozen small, white boxes lay strewn across the floor. They'd been torn open, emptied.

Near another wall, a lightmap floated, glowing in colored, blinking lights and neon streaks. The map showed Natal, its streets, rooms and commons in blue lines. Big red splashes blinked here and there—the power station, admin office, nullwire uplink, powersled garage, other places Anna couldn't identify—and several yellow dots flickered. A rivulet of blood seeped down the wall behind the lightmap, parallel to the neon-blue line of Hernandez Street.

Martin stood in the gore behind the desk, lips pulled back from clenched teeth, concentrating, trying to call a screen up on Jakes's computer.

“Georg, can you answer?”

Silence.

“Martin, can we stay here? What are you doing?”

“Hello, Government House. Hello. Hello.”

“Martin, what's going on?”

Martin sighed and rose from the computer, shoulders sagging. “Can't get into his computer. Can't reach him on comm. Nullwire's still down. Don't know how long it'll be safe here. I think we should get out, leave Natal. It doesn't look good.”

“Leave? How? Where?”

Martin pointed to the lightmap. “Powersled.” He walked to the map, the lights etching his face gaudily. Anna followed. “I'm guessing these red marks are explosions. One here at the garage.” He pointed.

“Then how do we get a powersled?”

Martin shook his head. “Maybe the sleds aren't damaged. We'll check.”

“But if—” Anna swallowed the question. If the sleds were damaged at the garage, if they couldn't get there—fire, street blocked, somebody shooting at them, whatever—too many ifs.

Martin didn't seem to notice her trepidation as he continued. "We're here," he pointed at the map, finger bathed in colored light. "We need to get ... here."

"Then what?"

"Calcutta Falls. It's two hundred kilometers northeast. We can rally from there."

"We have to go down this street—DeSoto—to get there."

"Not far, but it's open."

"What are these yellow flickering dots? Are they people?"

"Not enough. Maybe it's some code Georg uses to—no, wait. Look." He pointed. "Two dots in the security office, here. One at the admin office. The bodies. How many other dots do you count? I think these are his people."

"This is how he keeps track of them, then..."

"And by comlink."

"I don't see any between here and the garage."

"Look at this group here. Six of them. Two over here, and one here, here, and here. That's it—his people."

"The six are in Riosclan's office, just off the Commons. Prisoners?"

"Maybe. Point is, if security is on the other side of the Commons—there, mostly, it looks like—the fighting is over there and we should be able to get to the garage unseen."

"Martin, aren't there any other options? What they did to that security officer, to these two. And the screams. I don't ... I don't..."

"I know, I know. But eventually they'll come back here, see if they can get into his computer. Anyway, it won't take them long to do a sweep of Natal, not find us and start looking more carefully. If we sit, they find us." He paused a moment.

"Everything will be okay. You'll see." Martin's words sounded reassuring, but Anna read the lie in his grim, tired eyes.

"So, we run," she said.

"For now. Sooner the better."

Anna nodded.

Martin looked around the room one last time. Then he wiped sweaty hands on his thighs, palmed the door open and peeked out. Anna stood just behind him.

In a second, he looked at her. "Run," he said.

The street was empty. The air seemed foggy. Smoke, Anna thought, as she ran a few steps behind Martin. In the distance, somewhere toward the Commons, faint shouts echoed. Anna listened but heard no shots being fired.

As they ran, the air thickened with smoke and a burnt-plastic odor. Visibility diminished, and they slowed to a walk.

It didn't take long to reach the garage, where they found the inner doors twisted open and the walls charred and black. Through the choking smoke, Anna made out the husks of two sleds, a third still afire.

“Now what?” she panted.

From down the street, shouts echoed, coming closer.

“We walk.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Martin was right. The Familia wouldn't think to look for them in the bombed-out garage. Nor could they find refuge anywhere inside Tierra Natal. The city was too small. Eventually, they'd be found.

Solution: leave, at least for now, until the situation could be stabilized and order restored. But walk? Outside?

“Martin—”

Anna tripped on something. It was a single work boot, heavy, blood-fringed and torn, smoking. She fell to her knees. Martin stopped, helped her up, and they moved on at a rapid walk. She coughed, and felt panicky—the thought of suffocation.

As she moved through the blackened garage, it looked like nothing she had ever seen before outside of nightmares. She imagined herself inside a giant dead beetle or some primitive monster's shell, something once alive but which had recently died in fiery agony. If the lights had been on and the air less smoke-filled, she'd see ribs arching above her.

Something burned against the far wall fifty meters away across the vast interior, possibly a powersled. The flame flickered yellow and orange through a shimmery haze, smoke and shadow dancing a macabre nightmare jig in the hot air. The acrid smoke stung her eyes and lungs, and Anna spent no time trying to comprehend what little she could make out in the hellish darkness. Cabinets, machinery, parts and storage bins came into view as she passed them, all twisted into phantasmal shapes. The footing became tricky as she shuffled through small parts and hot, smoking metal, ceramic and plastic scraps littering the floor. Pops, cracking noises and hisses emerged from the volcanic gloom.

What happened here? Accident? A battle? Surely not deliberate destruction. That would be madness.

Madness? Not possible. It must have been an accident.

Martin tugged her through the bombed-out interior. “The outer door should be over here,” he gasped between coughs, his med-nanos overloaded.

The stumbling, groping journey from the smashed inner doors to the garage's far end seemed to take forever, and Anna wondered again if she'd survive. At one point, she'd considered willing herself back to the catatonic zone into which she'd momentarily escaped earlier just before running down the secret street. But she fought back the urge to close out the wreckage her world had become.

Something intruded on the urge to retreat, something more important imposed its will on hers, directed her to remain conscious, alert.

I'm pregnant.

As she trotted in staggering fits and starts behind her husband toward the garage outer exit, Anna discovered she was fiercely determined to live. At the same time, she noted with chagrin that there had been moments, however brief, in the last—how long since the first explosion? Minutes? It felt like days—when she'd forgotten the life in her womb.

The disturbing thought returned abruptly to the battering emotional tumult assaulting her. *Walk? Outside?*

But when she asked, it seemed as if Martin didn't hear. Or if he did, the thick, choking smoke stifled a response. Anna heard him now and then trying to comm Government House and Georg. His efforts seemed perfunctory, as if he'd given up real hope, acting out of habit.

The garage was big, as big as the central Commons. Even so, it could accommodate at any one time just a few of the two dozen or so powersleds on the planet. The small, fast car-like sleds, plus the six larger, expandable modular cargo skiffs and three multipurpose miner-diggers, were serviced and maintained here. Parts, engines, tools and equipment, fuel cells, nano-templates and matrix materials all had a place somewhere in the vast garage.

Anna didn't know how many people worked here, but thankfully, she saw no bodies as Martin led her through the workspace.

She did know that most vehicles were in use elsewhere, based at the ten exploration sites—potential future towns—scattered up and down the main Phoenix IV continent. Brasilia, as colonists called it. Tierra Natal served as the hub for the sites, roughly in Brasilia's center.

Abruptly, she bumped into Martin. They stood at the outer garage wall. They'd traversed the one hundred-plus meter interior without incident.

Beyond the wall lay Phoenix IV's bald, burning skin.

Martin had said "Walk."

Summer daytime temperature on the surface outside Tierra Natal averaged one hundred-twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Anna blinked and checked her chrono. Phoenix would be directly overhead now. She blinked for the net, found static. She blinked off.

She coughed. They needed fresh air, soon.

Martin probed the wall with his fingertips, looking for the airlock access panel. "Don't worry." He coughed. "They keep exosuits in the locks. We'll be fine."

Anna nodded and said nothing, still uncertain but unwilling to again interrupt Martin's concentration. He'd been outside before.

He eased along the wall to his right, and she kept one hand on his shoulder. The air hung so thick with smoke she feared she'd lose him if she didn't touch him.

They found the big vehicle access door a moment later.

"Here it is," Martin said. He palmed the lock, and the smaller personnel airlock door slid back with a grinding, metallic shriek. A transparent panel at the airlock's outer wall screamed bright light, penetrating the garage darkness. They stepped into the lock, and Martin quickly palmed the inner door closed. Smoke rolled in before the door creaked shut, but the air inside was fresher and cooler than it had been in the garage. Anna breathed a relieved sigh.

The chamber seemed big enough to accommodate five or six people at one time. It was empty, except for a row of battered lockers, tall and narrow, against a side wall and a dozen exosuits hung on pegs on the opposite wall. Anna followed Martin's lead, awkwardly worming into one of the single-sized, shiny, rubbery suits—feet first, then arms, then hood. Martin, with his greater outside experience, finished before her and helped press her front seal closed from crotch to neck. Then he went to the window to look out.

Anna flexed arms and shoulders and bent her knees, working the nanofabric, which adjusted, learning her body symmetry, bagging at the elbows, wrists, and knees, tightening along her arms, shins, and thighs. She adjusted the filters below her nose and inhaled cool, metallic air. The suit coolant activated automatically, and icy air brushed across her cheek and forehead, seeping up her legs and arms and tickling her sweaty crotch.

"Look at this." Martin squinted through the window.

Anna waddled to his side, the suit not yet fully molded to her lower body.

Outside sat a powersled. It looked undamaged. Anna squinted left and right across the bright, grassy plain outside. As far as she could see, there was no one, no activity.

"What's it doing there?" she asked.

"I don't know. If it's fueled, we won't have to walk. But maybe it's a trap."

Martin's remark reminded Anna of something she'd started to say earlier. "Not a trap."

Martin turned from the window and looked at her. "What makes you say that?"

"You said they planned this. I don't think so."

"Explain."

"The children. This..." Her spread hands indicated the carnage now behind them. "...happened while they were in class."

"I don't get your point."

“Familia adore their children, worship them. They'd have waited until the children were gathered in Sanctuary before they started shooting.”

Martin frowned. “The children. Makes sense. Create a diversion, cut communications, secure the arsenal, nullify security. Protect the children. That call I got this morning—one of Georg's people caught somebody tinkering with the arsenal lock program. I called Riosclan in and—”

“I bumped into him in the street seconds before the power station exploded. Just outside your office.”

“Did he say anything? How did he look?”

“He didn't say anything. He looked frustrated. Angry.”

Martin sighed, stifled a cough and adjusted his filters. “I'll tell you about my talk with Riosclan later, when we have more time. But I agree with you, now. I understand them.” He shook his head. “I'm sure you're right. They jumped the gun.” He sighed again, and Anna sensed bitterness in his tone.

“It means they made mistakes,” she said, “like not securing the sled. And maybe they weren't supposed to blow up the garage, or the power station—no, Georg said that was a diversion—”

“We can figure the details later, once we get out of here. Are you secure?”

“Yes, I think...” Anna nodded. The fabric pulled sluggishly at the new movement. “Not entirely. A few movements the nanos haven't learned yet.”

“But the coolant's active?”

She nodded.

“Good. You can teach your suit on the way.”

Martin tried to comm Government House and Georg again, and again quickly gave it up. He pulled the exosuit hood forehead flap over his eyes, nodding for Anna to follow his lead. She pulled her hood down, blinked rapidly; and the skin-like fabric adjusted for vision, eye patches turning transparent then darkening to cut the oppressive glare from the white-hot land beyond the window.

Martin peered out again, cautious, his masked face bathed in harsh light against deep shadow as his nose and cheek pressed against the window. Over his shoulder, Anna saw nothing but the abandoned powersled twenty meters away and the vast expanse of featureless whipgrass-spotted land extending flat to the shimmering horizon.

He checked her suit, nodded and unsealed the outer door. For a second, she felt a blast of heat. She imagined her nose-hairs burning, delicate lung tissue roasting, eyeballs drying and hardening like marbles. The second passed, and icy air blasted over her skin as the exosuit nanos diligently fought the suddenly hostile environment.

Stiff whipgrass stalks slapped at her legs as she ran behind Martin. Under her day-slippers, the ground felt bone-jarringly hard, unyielding. Hot. She'd forgotten to fasten her exosuit overshoes.

In a moment, Anna was shaded under the powersled's arching canopy. She climbed in, and the door

hissed shut automatically behind her, cutting off the blast furnace outside. She nestled in the cocoon-like passenger seat as Martin snuggled into the control pod to her left, snapping switches, activating monitors and controls.

Power cells engaged, the low grumble of the engine rose to high pitch and the broad vibrations refined, smoothed out. When the hum rose above hearing level, a soft beep emerged from the power console and Martin grunted. He pressed the powerstick forward, and Anna had a brief weightless sensation as the sled levitated ten centimeters above the ground.

He tilted the sled to the left until it paralleled the garage wall then pitched it forward. The sled moved, slowly at first. The ground lay smooth before them except for a water well; and they gathered speed, spreading the calf-high grassy clumps in their wake.

Anna examined the instrument cluster on the control console, recognizing a few of the indicators. Ground speed, seventy-five knots. Fuel charge, sixty-four percent. Direction, north-northeast. A small lightmap glowed in a box at her left elbow, between her pod and Martin's. In the map center, a red dot blinked.

“Is that us?” She pointed at the dot.

Martin glanced at the map for a second and grunted, quickly returning his attention to the land ahead.

Below the red dot on the lightmap, behind them, a white spot glowed. Tierra Natal. At the top of the tiny luminescent three-dimensional screen, another, smaller, white dot floated. Calcutta Falls. On the screen's far right edge, a steep three-dimensional rise marked Glacier Mountain's western slope, its peak off the screen.

Anna knew the general lie of Brasilia and Phoenix IV. She taught basic geography.

And geology. She looked through the darkened bubble curving over her side of the sled. Flat, mostly, all the way to the horizon. There, shimmering in the heated distance, a vague purple shadow rose like a dark pimple into the blue sky. Glacier Mountain. So far away.

West through the window, past Martin's shoulders, Anna saw Goliath's long north-south wall, a thin, dark-brown slice across the horizon, separating the pale-blue, cloudless sky above from the wheat-amber, flat land below.

A sudden tension in Martin's shoulders and arms, a sharp hiss, drew her attention. She looked ahead through the windscreen and saw nothing.

His eyes darted sharply between the map box and the windscreen. His jaw twitched, and his knuckles turned white on the powerstick. Despite the cool air in the sled, sweat coated his exposed face.

In the box, Anna saw three blinking red dots. They hadn't been there when she'd looked a moment ago. They clustered northeast of their own blinking dot, between them and Calcutta Falls, and they seemed to be moving toward them.

Compared to their own, the dots moved fast. Very fast.

Martin tapped his comlink and started to speak in an authoritative tone. “Who are you and what—”

An ear-piercing animal-like shriek exploded in the sled's relatively quiet interior. The sonic blast startled

Anna. Nanos in her inner ear instantly damped the amplified roar, and she realized the sound was a scream coming over the comlink. A savage war cry. The words, what few she could make out in the rapid-fire, manic, multi-voiced barrage following her initial shock, weren't important. Their intent was.

A Familia gang had come out from Tierra Natal, bent on intercepting them. Hell-bent on murder.

The words, their vicious, animal-like intensity, stopped Anna's breath, pressed tears to the corners of her eyes.

As Martin abruptly brought the powersled to a stop, she saw the dust cloud boiling up ahead, not far away. On the screen, the three red dots converged recklessly fast.

Martin turned the sled around, headed away from the gang.

They headed west, going fast. West, toward Goliath. A howling, murderous gang followed them. A towering, two-thousand-kilometer-long wall lay ahead of them.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Martin snapped off the comm with a gesture he might have used to swat a buzzing puffer fly, and the nerve-wracking shrieks coming from the pursuing powersleds stopped. The sled interior went quiet, except for the soft engine whine, the purring recirculator and Anna's heart beating loud in the close space.

"Martin, why are they—"

"There are things..." He stopped and heaved a huge sigh. When he began again, he spoke in a thin whisper, and Anna had to lean in toward him to hear.

"It's easy to dismiss it as politics, I guess. But it gets complicated. Things you haven't heard, things both the Authority and Familia ... conspired, you might say, to keep off the net."

"How do you keep information off the net?"

He ignored her as he resumed, speaking as if to himself. "Oh, we offered compromises that didn't fragment the structures, but they were intransigent. Talks broke down. Here, too. I-I guess I ... grew impatient. I don't know—"

"Martin, it sounds as if they want to kill us."

Silence.

"They're shooting at us, yelling like..."

He turned to her, eyes wide and filled with sorrow, or perhaps fear—maybe a mix of both. "They've gone too far. They can't let us live. Not now."

"What?"

Martin made as though to speak again, then fluttered a hand as if to grab the words from the air. He gave it up and shook his head in frustration.

They traveled westward in silence for several minutes, the sled flying smoothly centimeters above the ground. Anna studied the glowing lightmap, a smaller version of the one she used in class to teach geography. The situation stood out clearly; the three red dots on the screen's right sped westward toward the one red dot on the screen's left. The gang—Anna now thought of their pursuers as a gang—seemed to be gaining, three dots closing on one.

Goliath's north-south wall loomed closer in the windscreen. It looked like they'd be under its shadow soon.

"I think they're gaining on us."

Martin grunted then made an adjustment to the powerstick gripped in his white-knuckled hand and snapped a switch on the control panel. The engine whine lowered to a growl. The speed indicator slipped down to under fifty kilometers per hour.

"What are you doing?"

"Power consumption." He glanced between the lightmap and the windscreen. "The faster you go the more power you use. I don't know how much power they have. They're coming fast, using fuel. I'm hoping they run low and stop or turn back. If they get close, think they've got us, maybe they'll get reckless. Rough land ahead. The Barrens."

Anna nodded. The fuel gauge read fifty-three percent.

She thought she understood Martin's strategy. Northeast of Tierra Natal the land stretched flat all the way—two hundred kilometers—to Calcutta Falls. They couldn't evade their pursuers going that way. They'd been outflanked.

The nearest other town, Rock Springs, lay seven hundred kilometers south. Too far with the fuel they had unless they proceeded at a crawl, in which case they might be overtaken. She didn't know if there were extra fuel cells aboard. If so, stopping to install them would still take too much time, leave them vulnerable.

And while it was likely so, Anna didn't know for sure whether Rock Springs was Authority-dominated, as Martin had described Calcutta Falls. No matter—they couldn't go that way.

But the Barrens offered a chance to evade the gang. She knew the general lay of the land well enough from the geography lessons she taught. The Barrens was a hilly strip with little vegetation paralleling Goliath. It rose from the flat, grass-spotted plain fifty kilometers west of Tierra Natal, becoming more rugged and barren closer to Goliath's two-thousand-kilometer length. The Barrens varied in width from ten to thirty kilometers. Near Natal it was fifteen to twenty kilometers across.

There were places a stealthy sled driver might hide in the deep gully shadows between the higher hills of the Barrens. In other places, a careless driver might overturn a sled.

Into the Barrens then.

Anna frowned, thinking as she watched the ground ahead and the lightmap. The surface began to rise and fall, like a rolling wave. The pervasive whipgrass carpet under the sled disappeared, gave way to occasional thornbush clumps and less-frequent small chokewillow thickets.

What to do? Find a place to hide. Wait until night. Wait until it got bearably cooler then head for Calcutta Falls—or back to Tierra Natal.

If necessary—and if they had enough supplies—they could stay in the sled for several days, hiding under Goliath's shadow while monitoring the comlinks. Waiting for word from Georg, waiting for the chaos to subside.

If the comlinks were operating. Anna blinked the public net on. Hissy static. She scanned channels—public, government and private lines. Static.

She blinked off, frowning. Twice since planetfall the public net had been down for a minute, and occasionally, a government line might be down for upgrades for a minute at most; but she'd never experienced, let alone heard of, an entire system going static.

So many surprises.

Whatever the problem, the uprising doubtless caused it. Like the garage explosions, the power station and elsewhere, maybe the blackout hadn't been planned.

Again, Anna felt certain everything wasn't going as the rebels—the gang—had anticipated.

As if reading her thoughts, Martin said, “You were right—about them jumping the gun. But there's more, I think.”

“What?”

“Factions. I think it's why the talks broke down.”

“Factions? What do you mean?”

“They aren't acting together. Riosclan's mood—you saw it. I think he tried to hold his Uncles and Fathers back, but they went ahead anyway. The timing. That first explosion happened too soon after you saw him, after he left my office. Then all the damage. I don't think Riosclan would waste resources like that. And all the shooting we heard. I think they were shooting at each other.”

“They shot Authority police.”

“Yes, but I think they're shooting each other, too. We heard a lot of shots. A lot. Projectile weapons, not ours.”

“That doesn't sound good.”

Martin nodded. “I've oversimplified, Anna. Like I said, it's complicated.”

“Tell me. I'll listen.”

Martin wiped a hand over his sweat-slick forehead. “Later, after we get through this patch.” He nodded to the land ahead.

The topography began to undulate more, rising and falling under them. Goliath disappeared from view as

the sled arched downslope into a trough and rose as it crested a low hillock. Ahead lay steeper, higher hills and deeper gullies. The chokewillow and thornbush had given way to ground too barren to support their kind. Here and there, stiff gray-green spikeweed tufts, like tangled, grease-matted hair, pocked the hard ground. The desert-hardy vegetation huddled in the deeper clefts of the hills, as if trying to hide from the hostile sun.

Anna blinked her chrono on. Not quite fourteen-hundred hours. She was surprised how little time had passed since she'd decided to dismiss class to go to Martin and tell him...

“Damn.” She gasped in sharp anguish, suddenly remembering. Again, time had elapsed during which she'd forgotten about her pregnancy. If Martin heard, he gave no sign.

She looked at him, watched a muscle in his jaw and throat twitch. He sweated profusely despite the conditioned, cool air in the sled, and the cords in his neck knotted like cable. She wished she could hold him, comfort him, ease those tense muscles as he'd done for her earlier. She needed to hold him—and to be held. Maybe later.

She glanced at the lightmap. The gang was gaining, seemed to be right on top of them.

Anna turned around, pulling against the restraints, to see if she could see the pursuers over her shoulder. The sled's open stowage bed lay empty except for boxes lashed in place just below the rear window—boxes whose labels she couldn't see—so the view behind was unobstructed. But dust kicked up by their sled obscured it anyway.

She looked again at the lightmap. Closer.

The land rose and fell under them so sharply now that Anna was alternately pushed into her seat as the sled nosed upslope and pulled against the restraints when it plunged downward. The engine changed pitch with each speed change and lurch in direction.

“Hang on,” Martin said, topping another rise. The sled went airborne then crashed down with a muffled thump.

Until they reached the Barrens proper, Martin had driven in a straight line. Now, he fought the stick, arching the sled left and right, trying to keep below the higher hill crests, trying to keep the sled level, keep it from turning over.

The dots on the lightmap, pursuers and pursued, slowly converged, closer and closer.

Martin cut hard right, rolling across a hill flank and up a narrow, twisting ravine. Through the tilted side window, Anna finally saw them. Three hundred meters behind, a dark brown smudge rose against the sky, a dust cloud. As she watched, the cloud widened, became three distinct clouds.

“They're spreading out,” she said.

Martin nodded, eyes on the rolling terrain ahead. The sled jerked to the left as he turned, and Anna lost sight of the gang.

Ahead, Goliath rose higher, a solid, dull-pinkish mass biting into the pale-blue western sky. Smooth-seeming from a distance, closer up the wall looked like the bark of some dead Earthome tree, vertical corrugations carving the rock into narrow, parallel light-pink ribs and dark purple crevasses.

They raced straight toward it.

Craning forward and looking up through the windscreen, Anna tried to see the top of the sheer cliff. Small black spots pitted the upper rock face. Tiny, barely visible sawks wheeled, carving and slicing the sky near the distant black spots—the birds' nests.

But she couldn't see the cliff top. Too high.

Goliath's massiveness seemed to press down on Anna, overpowering; and she felt tiny, insignificant, an ant beside a skyscraper. The sight was awesome and humbling.

Suddenly, the hilly terrain they'd been traveling through flattened noticeably; and a field of rocks, some bigger than the sled, littered the ground ahead. Martin slowed then zigzagged the sled among them. It seemed to Anna, in the jostling, jolting ride, as if they were going to crash and overturn any moment despite the lower velocity. Her breath caught in her throat, and she locked her fingers to the seat bottom. She wanted to squeeze her eyes shut. Instead, she watched, hypnotized by shock, as Martin negotiated the maze.

Then, so suddenly it made her gasp, they cleared the boulder maze, and the sun disappeared. They'd plunged into Goliath's shadow. Their windscreen, darkened against the sun's relentless glare, cleared to admit the dusky light as Martin jerked the powersled to the right and headed north. Their new course now lay under the narrow sliver of early-afternoon shadow edging the wall's base, a hundred meters broad and widening slowly as the sun descended in the west behind Goliath's bulk.

Heart slamming against her chest, Anna felt weak, dizzy from the harrowing ride. She concentrated on controlling her breathing.

At Goliath's base, erosion had formed forty-five-degree talus slopes where the cliff's ribs jutted out. The slopes, no more than fifty to a hundred meters high and broad, were embedded with small rocks and boulders and pocked thinly with spikeweed clumps. They, and Goliath beyond, now lay to Anna's left. The boulder field, ancient pieces of Goliath's flank ripped off by wind and weather, lay now to her right. Between lay a band of relatively clear, flat land, almost a trail. Martin steered the powersled northward along the narrow, winding gap. He increased speed slightly.

"Sorry I forgot to warn you," he said. "About that last stretch, I mean. I got busy."

"I thought you were going to hit one of those rocks."

"I was going slow enough." He shook his head. "We weren't in any danger. Remember, I've been out here before."

Twice before, as Anna recalled, with resource exploration teams. Martin didn't need to go out on Phoenix's vast, blistering surface. He could stay in his comfortable air-conditioned office, taking in comlink reports from field supervisors. He wasn't involved directly in resource exploration, extraction or management. Not directly.

But he had. Unlike many others, he was a hands-on administrator; he took an active interest in overseeing planning the future for the entire planet. So he went everywhere, pole to pole, saw everything, asked questions. When he discussed resource and manpower allocation and coordination, budgets and timetables for projects, priorities and other long-range planning aspects with project managers, he

understood better what was being done, what needed to be done. The big picture. He saw it as clearly as any Colony Administrator could. His managers knew his interest in field activity and generally respected his policy decisions.

Yes, Anna knew. He'd be gone for days at a time, and often, too, on some field tour.

"Still scared me," she said.

"Sorry. I hope I did the same for our friends back there."

Anna looked at the lightmap. Their red dot lay now at the top of the screen. Behind them, one dot had found the easy trail they'd taken, while further behind, the other two seemed still mired in the boulder maze.

"I think you may be right," she said. "Now what?"

Martin glanced at the lightmap and grunted. "Yeah, looks better. Now we keep heading north until we're west of Calcutta Falls. They'll probably give up by then. In fact, look."

He pointed at the lightmap. One red dot, deep in the boulder field, wasn't moving. As Anna watched, it became clear the other dot had gone back to the stationary one. The third had stopped on the trail and fallen farther behind them.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

Anna thought a moment. "Maybe that one..." She pointed. "...crashed or something and that one went back to help. This one here, on the trail, has stopped to wait for them to catch up."

Martin slowed. Conserving power. The gauge read forty-two percent.

"Is there any way we can go opaque?" she asked. "Get off their screens?"

"Afraid not. They're using the same satellite nav system we are." He tapped the lightmap. "If you know how to program it, you can follow any moving vehicle on the planet."

"You said 'moving vehicle?'"

"Yes. When we stop and power down we go opaque. I see what you're thinking. I'll have to find..."

As he spoke, the pursuit clearly renewed. The dot along the trail started up slowly, while one of the other two dots in the boulder field moved even more slowly westward toward the trail to rejoin the chase. The third dot had disappeared. Stationary. Opaque to the lightmap sensors. Crashed, probably, as Anna had guessed.

Martin bit off a Familia curse. "If we stop now, try to find a hiding place, they'll know right where to look. No good. We keep going. They can't keep this up for long."

Can we? But Anna kept the thought to herself.

Minutes passed, during which the sled farthest south sped up and overtook the nearest pursuer on the trail. The sled that had been in the lead stopped as its brother passed it, going fast.

The action caught Martin's eye. "Jadu," he cursed between gritted teeth. "They're stopping to replace spent fuel cells then running at speed, in a relay, overlapping each other."

"Can't we stop, recharge, too?" The gauge now read thirty-eight percent.

"If we stop they'll be on us—one of them, anyway—before we can get back up again. No, they got smart. They're coming too fast now."

"If we can't hide..." Anna let the thought go unfinished. *Can't hide and can't outrun them.*

The leading powersled closed on them in the lightmap and it was now as near as it had been earlier. Anna turned around, again trying to see the gang through the rear window. A light glint, probably headlights—Martin had turned on theirs—from the lead sled stabbed through the shadows. A hundred meters back.

"Can't outrun them," Martin muttered aloud, thinking. "Can't evade them, can't hide, can't stop, can't fight them. Maybe we can bluff them."

"What do you mean?"

Martin slowed the sled as they rounded a talus slope and aimed it westward off the trail, heading into the deeper dark of one of the canyons between the wall's jutting ribs.

"We'll go as deep as we can," he said. "Up this crack till we find a good spot, turn around and face them. They've got to think we've turned desperate, or maybe they'll think we have weapons. We'll be hard to see in the dark. After a while, they'll leave. Maybe."

The walls closed in steeply on both sides of the powersled as it inched forward into the inky darkness. At the foot of the vertical sliver of daylight to their immediate rear, Anna made out headlights shifting, probing.

Martin drove further into the crack, which narrowed with each passing meter. Anna could have reached out and touched the wall on her side. The dark, featureless surface glittered, sparkled in spots with some unknown luminescence.

Various-sized rocks, some half as big as the sled, littered the otherwise flat canyon floor. The rocks forced Martin to adjust the powersled's lift and thrust constantly; and the ride, despite their slow speed, grew as rugged and jerky as in the boulder field they'd traversed a few minutes before.

"Are they following?" He couldn't manage a second to look back or check the lightmap.

The three-dimensional image on the lightmap showed their one red dot at the bottom of a deep, narrow cleft. It wasn't clear to Anna on the map how far the canyon extended. She didn't understand the sled's onboard imaging system enough to know if it could follow the fissure's exact dimensions.

Two red dots had penetrated past the lip of the canyon mouth. The gang still came. They were far back, but inching forward, into the dark.

She turned to look behind. The narrow slit of daylight at the mouth no longer existed. They'd gone far enough in, twisted and turned enough, that they now rode in total darkness. If light penetrated to them

from above, she didn't see it—too busy to look.

The gang came on and on, relentless. They advanced—shifting, climbing and falling among, over and around the rugged, boulder-strewn gully floor, just as Martin was doing. Closer, ever closer. Now, fifty, maybe sixty meters back.

Anna turned around, facing forward. “Closer,” she said. “Both of them.”

Martin said nothing, intent on driving.

The canyon started to curve sharply, winding snakelike through the narrow, solid rock walls. Anna saw only brief glimpses of the gang as they closed. Forty meters now, maybe thirty.

“Martin, they're getting closer.”

“Doesn't matter. Even with project—”

A series of rolling banks and heavily boulder-cluttered curves demanded his attention.

“The sled is nanofactured, right?” Anna understood. Everything manmade on Phoenix IV, including the sleds, was nanofactured, indestructible.

“Right. They can't touch us.”

The sled suddenly rang like a bell. Startled, Anna at first didn't recognize the sharp clang. Rock?

Then it came to her. Bullets. She turned to look back over her shoulder.

Light swords stabbed and slashed the darkness—powersled headlights. The closest sled tumbled over the rock floor twenty meters back, the other behind it, both pressing on. Relentless.

Martin came to a smooth, flat stretch, and time seemed to freeze. The demonic headlights fixed on Anna, level and unswerving now, for the moment blinding her. She felt the next impact. A bullet crashed against the thin, transparent membrane a few centimeters before her eyes. The sound deafening. The light blinding.

She blinked, watched something flat, round—a bullet—fall away from the unmarred window. Her head jerked in automatic reaction away from the impact, and she took in a breath to scream.

Instead, she blacked out.

CHAPTER NINE

Anna came to with a start, jerking against the restraints, gasping for air as if she'd been drowning. She was denied the luxury of disorientation. Before she could focus, or wonder how long she'd been unconscious, another bullet slapped hard against the rear window centimeters from her neck, so loud it seemed to explode inside her head; and she knew where she was, what was happening.

“Martin—” Her head whiplashed again, cutting her off, and the restraints bit into her shoulders and hips as the powersled lurched and bucked over a large boulder in their path. The jolt was so severe her teeth

clacked, and she tasted blood where she'd bitten her lip.

Martin grunted beside her. His head jerked and spittle flew from his bared teeth. He, too, was being slammed about as he drove.

The engine complained in an arrhythmic, throaty growl. The sled stank of fear, sweat ... and something else.

Anna wiped sticky, warm blood from her swollen lip with the back of her hand and looked down. Bile stained her chin, neck and chest, a watery sheen on the rubbery exosuit. While she was unconscious, however briefly, her stomach had rejected what little remained in it, what she hadn't vomited in Georg's office over the dead security officer. Her own stench made her choke.

She blinked her chrono. Surprisingly, less than twenty minutes had elapsed since they'd cleared the boulder field and entered Goliath's walls, just under two hours since they'd left Tierra Natal and less than three since the first explosion.

Exhaustion swept over her, and she felt heavy, her bones leaden. Anna believed that, despite her current adrenaline-charged alarm—or maybe because of it—she could fall asleep if given a few seconds of peace and quiet.

It was early afternoon, yet little light penetrated to the narrow, deep canyon's bottom. Their headlight beams sliced erratically through the darkness, bouncing from boulders and walls as the sled heaved and pitched over rocks, slid and flew around bends. Anna wondered how Martin could see in the darkness let alone drive through the nightmare obstacle course.

At times, the canyon walls seemed to squeeze in, making the track ahead narrower and narrower. Anna imagined the sled being pinched to a screeching halt then pulverized as the walls closed, crushing them like a can in the jaws of a vise. Several times, sparks flew from the rock beside her as the sled banged against it.

They advanced onto a winding, flat and rockless stretch of canyon floor, and the constant jolting eased for a while. Anna was able to focus on the lightmap. Three red dots floated in a row, evenly spaced. Too close.

The map showed the canyon floor twisting snakelike along the screen. Anna didn't see Goliath's eastern wall, the entrance to the canyon, on the right side of the map. She saw no end to it on the left.

She didn't know how far they'd come, or how far they could go into the defile before it ended and they were trapped.

Trapped.

"Martin, do you know where we are?"

"Not really. Been out here, the general area, once or twice, but—these canyons. Nobody's explored them much."

"You don't know if it's a dead end, or..."

"Most of them are pretty shallow."

“Do any go all the way through?”

He gave her a quick, sharp glance, and Anna lost hope the canyon they were in might go through Goliath, however far that might be, leading to escape on the other side. More desert lay west of Goliath.

There'd been no manned exploration west of Goliath since planetfall, and she had paid little attention to that area in her class lessons. She concentrated her scholars' attention on the vast grass-spotted plains of Brasilia east of Goliath and west of Glacier Mountain, where the new towns lay and where Phoenix IV's future growth was expected. West of Goliath was unknown territory.

She shook her head, exasperated with herself. Whether the canyon was a dead end or not didn't matter. With the gang shooting at them, all they could do was run.

She looked at the fuel gauge. Eighteen percent.

Maybe the gang would give up and go away.

No, she was certain they wouldn't give up. Recalling their manic animal howling on the comlink and their relentless pursuit, she couldn't anticipate rational behavior from them; and she had the chilly feeling that, for all it mattered at the moment, they were incapable of rational thought.

Another dense boulder field came into view, seconds away as they turned a sharp bend in the canyon floor. Anna took the brief opportunity left before their flight became a bone-rattling ordeal again to look behind her. Just before the sled jerked up and over the first obstacle, she glimpsed the first pursuing sled's headlights, a monster's probing yellow eyes.

It happened so fast she wasn't certain, but thought she glimpsed a flash of light, a tiny nova, erupt from the pursuing sled. A second later, the wall by Martin spouted a geyser of fine dust and small rocks. Shattered rock fragments clattered against the sled's roof and side. Martin winced, shoulders hunched.

Another shot fired. Anna wondered how much ammunition the gang had. Lots, she decided, if they could waste it on a powersled, an invulnerable and, in this case, erratically moving target. She wondered how they did it. Maybe they leaned out of the cab side, or they'd dissolved the windscreen, or the canopy. If one of them leaned out the side or stood up to fire over the top, maybe she and Martin would get lucky and the shooter would fall out when their sled hit a bump.

Maybe if they all fell out...

A weird and stupid thought. Anna snorted in disgust. It was madness to try to find anything rational, predictable or otherwise useful about their situation. The only thing she and Martin could expect seemed to be the unexpected.

She tried to look behind her again at the sleds. Her own vehicle's jolting lift and plunge as Martin maneuvered it over and around obstacles frustrated her ability to see clearly, but she'd become, to a degree, used to it. What she now saw was that as they rounded a sharp bend in the canyon their pursuers disappeared from sight for a minute. When the sled came into view again, it appeared to slow, even stop, and somebody would fire a shot. Then they'd come on again until the cycle repeated at the next bend.

Now and then, the canyon widened enough for two or three sleds to have traveled abreast for a short distance. Those stretches were straighter and the ground seemed more level, less rock-studded.

Sandy-bottomed, like an old riverbed. When the terrain presented the chance, Martin sped up, tried to gain distance on the gang, get around the next bend before the pursuing sled appeared. Anna guessed he must also be aware of the gang's tactics, had been aware long before she caught on.

So, at least something about the gang was predictable. Anna watched behind her again, neck sore from turning at an awkward angle and from trying to hold her head as the sled bounced along.

Yes. Round a turn, slow or stop, fire a shot or two, then speed up to repeat the process again.

Predictable.

Somehow, she thought—that ought to be something they could turn to their advantage.

Again, Martin rounded a bend and sped up into a stretch of relatively flat and straight, unobstructed canyon floor. The stretch looked wider, too, and Anna noticed something else twenty meters up the canyon wall—shadows. She craned her neck and caught a glimpse of blue sky high up.

Either they'd climbed in the past minutes or the walls were now low enough to allow the sun to penetrate again to near the canyon bottom.

Anna recalled her geography lessons. Goliath rose in a high vertical wall on its eastern flank. It tapered westward and was half as high and less steep on its western side. The land farther west was unexplored, desert except for a hilly region far to the west. Then the shallow Eastern Sea spanned the rest of the globe, almost two-thirds of it, and lapped against Brasilia's eastern edge, east of Glacier Mountain.

They must have crossed the entire spine of Goliath.

Their fuel had dwindled to fifteen percent. The going had become less hectic and bumpy in the last few minutes. With their re-emergence into sunlight, the ground had grown tamer, almost as easy to traverse as the narrow strip between the rock field and Goliath's wall where they'd sped northward earlier. Straighter stretches occurred more often now, making for longer periods before the canyon curved and its wall protected them from bullets.

Nerves on edge and her mind at fever pitch, Anna knew the changed conditions—more light; smoother, flatter and straighter terrain—weren't healthy. The gang still pursued, and would be able to get closer in the open stretches, get clearer shots at them. At one point, they came two abreast, and the rattle of their gunshots against the back of the powersled sounded like an avalanche of rocks.

That still bothered Anna. If the powersled was impervious to their bullets, nanofactured like Natal's walls, why did the gang keep shooting? Maybe they'd gone mad.

A bullet hit the canyon wall high up and forty meters ahead of them. It dislodged a shower of rocks, some quite large, and Martin swerved—the floor was wide enough at the spot—to avoid the tumbling debris.

That's what the gang had been trying to do. The shots that hit the sled had been erratic ones—the canyon wall above and in front of them had been the real target.

Martin swore, voice anguished.

Anna eyed him fearfully. Now what?

She watched his glance dart between the road ahead and a gauge on the control panel in the maze of dials and monitors. A colored bar had grown vertically until it topped its scale, jiggling there as if it wanted to go higher. Blue at the bottom, red at the top.

Something wrong there.

Suddenly, she inhaled a sharp, pungent odor—not fear, sweat or bile, but something else. Something burning.

Like the lung-searing smoke in the garage.

The gauge, its indicator pegged at the top. The odor. Martin's desperate concern. Smoke in the air, ghostly wisps.

Engine temperature. That's what the gauge shows. The rough handling. They didn't design the sleds to take such abuse.

“We have a problem,” Martin said. The words came out choked.

“I see it. What now?”

“Desperate people...”

Anna stared at him, mouth agape, petrified at the thought of what lengths he'd been driven to, what would happen in the next few seconds.

A long, flat and wide stretch of canyon came into view around a narrow-walled curve, bright sun beaming into it. Beyond it, a hundred meters distant, the canyon pinched into a narrow neck, through which only a single sled might pass at once.

“...in desperate times...”

He tensed and jammed forward thrust to the max, leaning on the stick, propelling their sled toward the bottleneck at the other end of the straightaway. The engine whined as if in pain.

Without knowing how, Anna knew what Martin had planned. She braced herself, arms locked, held her breath.

“...require desperate measures.”

An instant before their sled reached the bottleneck, Martin jerked the stick back, and the sled heaved nose downward, almost capsizing. He danced on the stick and foot controls, an intricate juggling act, balancing thrust and lift to keep the sled upright as he turned it around.

Dust and sand exploded into the air from their thrust, and for a moment Anna couldn't see anything. The sled jerked and twisted like something alive. When the dust settled enough and she could see again through the windscreen, she was, as she'd expected, as she'd dreaded, looking back down the broad, long canyon through which they'd just traveled. They were jammed into the bottleneck facing back toward their pursuers.

The first sled whipped around the bend at the far end of the canyon and halted. No shots came. Watching the motionless vehicle, Anna thought of a clever predator pausing, sniffing the air.

It backed out of view around the bend.

Stillness followed. Into that stillness, a groan rose from deep in the bowels of their sled, a metallic, mechanical moan that sounded remarkably human and agonized. Something dying. It took Anna a while to figure out what it was.

She looked at Martin. She didn't have to ask.

"Like I said," Martin whispered, as if the gang might overhear, "we walk."

Chapter Ten

The dying powersled engine groaned on and on. Sick machine parts serenaded from an unseen compartment below Anna's seat. The humanlike voices dipped and rose in pitch, faded and resurged, became a wavering chorus of doomed, hellbound sufferers lamenting their fate.

The cacophony of mechanical agony climaxed with a bony rattle, like an orgasmic shudder, a deep vibration Anna felt under her legs and back. Then, with a sigh, the engine died.

Silence—hanging over her, a heaviness in the tangy, smoky air. She breathed in shallow gasps.

Martin spoke, and although he whispered, it sounded explosive in the dead silence and startled her.

"What?" Her nerves had become frayed wiring, amplifying every sensory input; and when he spoke, she heard noise, not words. He'd shattered the dense quiet to which her neurons had become hard-wired.

"We have to," he said. He unfastened his restraints and they retracted, allowing him to turn and begin fumbling with hers.

"Have to? Have to what?"

"Run."

"Run? Where? Why?"

"Damn it, Anna, snap out of it," he barked, loud in the close space. Anna had never heard him shout before. At her or anybody. She looked at him and blinked, wide-eyed, startled.

"Sorry," he said, sheepishness in his voice and eyes. Her restraints fell away.

"Martin, Martin..." A sob bubbled up in her throat.

"It'll be okay." He stretched to put his arms around her, an awkward move in the confining cockpit. "Okay."

Anna clung to him, fingers digging into his shoulders. She tried to speak. Her throat seemed coated with ash, and her dry tongue rasped against her teeth. She couldn't breathe; her chest heaved. She felt dizzy.

Cool air seeped between the exosuit and her skin, but her exposed face, between chin and eyes, felt hot, feverish.

Martin's face looked mottled and sweaty, his eyes wild. He looked worn out, as if he'd run the distance from Natal through the Barrens to this street deep in Goliath. Anna realized she must look as beaten and spent as he did.

She tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

A shiny drop of sweat on the end of his nose quivered as he spoke. It grew, jiggled then gave up its fight against gravity, splashing on his arm, shattering into glistening fragments.

Concentrate on his words.

A street, yes, she thought. The canyon was like a Natal street, only narrower and with the top ripped open, exposed to the Phoenix sun. But nothing could rip open a nanofactored street roof.

She watched his pale lips move and tried to concentrate. Gradually, his noises became distinct words.

“Anna, you've got to snap out of it,” he said. “You've got to listen to me, do what I tell you.”

He leaned closer to her, salt-sweat odor stinging her nose. That and the drifting smoke—she wanted to sneeze.

He touched her abdomen, just below her belt buckle. Anna looked down at his hand. She wasn't sure why Martin had touched her abdomen, but it triggered a memory.

For a moment, she'd tottered on the brink of falling into the deep, quiet pool in her mind where she'd briefly found refuge earlier in the day, in his office. She'd returned to reality from that safe haven because she carried life in her womb, and staying alert was the best way to protect that life.

Again, the siren song of insanity had called to her. Again, she resisted.

I'm pregnant.

“All right.” Anna tried to smile. “I'm all right. Now.”

“Good. Stay alert. We'll need to move fast when we go.”

“What can we do? We can't fix the sled, can we?”

“It's shot. I figure we run. Or we stay here. Or we could give up. Or we could attack.”

“You've thought about this.”

“A lot.” He glanced out the windscreen back up the canyon, saw no activity from the gang and turned back to her. He ticked off his points on his fingers. “We could wait until they come for us, give up and take our chances they'll stop screaming like wild animals and shooting at us and decide to be nice.”

Anna snorted.

“Or we could stay inside, lock down. It’ll take a while for them to pry us out of this can. It’ll be hard work, too, and hot. Maybe they’ll get tired and go.”

Anna envisioned a pack of angry Familia howling like dogs, banging on the sled with rocks and their weapons. The inside of the sled would be like the inside of a drum. The racket might drive her and Martin crazy long before they gave up and went away. If they went away.

For some reason, she pictured the attackers dirty, with wild, matted hair, naked.

“Not much of an option,” she said.

“Other thing wrong with that one—did you see us dodge those rock falls back there? We almost got buried a couple of times. All this rock over our heads—I don’t like it. Maybe they could blast the walls, bury the sled then forget us.”

“I wondered about their shooting.”

“What about attacking them?”

“With what? Rocks?”

He shrugged. “It would sure surprise them.”

“They’d stay surprised two minutes. Then—bang-bang.”

“Tell me what do you make of that.” He pointed through the windshield with his chin toward the empty expanse of wide, flat canyon floor. At the opposite end, secreted in the bottleneck a hundred meters off, the gang still lurked unseen. Quiet. A rounded shadow rose against the far wall—the nose of a sled. “Why aren’t they rushing us? What are they waiting for?”

In unconscious imitation of him, Anna composed her thoughts aloud. “Maybe they’re out of ammunition, or their weapons have malfunctioned. Wonder how many they have. And where’d they get them? Made them, do you suppose?”

“We’ll ask them. Later. After they attack. After they realize we don’t have any weapons.” Martin paused then added, “Get it?”

“No weapons. We don’t have any, but they think we do, it looks like. But why?” Sudden realization: “Martin, those boxes lashed in the back. Do you think...?”

“Weapons, maybe. It looks like they think so. Maybe this rig brought in Familia conspirators from a mining site in the Barrens or somewhere else. With weapons. Or maybe those boxes are drilling supplies. There are five mines within a day’s travel of Natal. Anyway, we have to find out.”

“So, what are we waiting for? Why haven’t we checked yet?”

Martin gripped Anna’s elbows, turned her toward him. He held her eyes with his, demeanor grave. “Anna, I need you with me on this. I’ve done military courses, some field exercises. Part of my training. Combat environment, leadership emphasis. You haven’t. It’s already been a long day and it isn’t over. I’m not sure what’s going to happen in the next few hours or days. If we get out of this. If we’re going to survive...” His eyes narrowed, lips barely moved. “If we’re going to survive, you have to do as I say, no

questions, no hesitation. Understand?"

She nodded.

"I may have to ask you to do things that ... you might not want to do. But you'll do as I say." He bit into his words one at a time. "You must do as I say."

Anna realized with a shock that he meant he might tell her to shoot at the gang. He was right—she'd never used a weapon before, didn't know if she could do it. Unless Martin told her to. Then she could. Maybe.

Maybe.

She'd been hysterical. But she was okay now.

"I'm okay." She nodded vigorously. "Now I am. Really."

Martin returned the nod, stiffly, tight-lipped. "Whatever I say, you do. Good. Let's go, then. Out my side."

Martin had backed the sled into the bottleneck at an angle so its left side lay in deep shadow beyond the narrow mouth. The other side would open into view of the gang across the canyon floor.

After a quick look through the windscreen—still no movement from the gang—he palmed the door open. Pressure released with a hiss, and the door clunked back along its track. The soft mechanical noises sounded like bombs to Anna, and she was sure their enemies could hear.

Martin glanced out the windscreen again. "Don't know how long before one of them gets brave." Then he stepped out.

Anna followed, crawling awkwardly over the lumpy console between the passenger and pilot seat, her head pressed against the roof, knees knocking the control panel.

"Hurry." He extended a hand to help her out.

She stepped into an oven. Even in the shade, the air seemed to suck moisture from her exposed cheeks. She inhaled, and fire coursed down her already parched throat. The exosuit countered a fraction of a second later, and an icy breeze caressed her covered skin from forehead to ankles. It provided no comfort for her burnt mouth and throat.

Her feet burned on the ground. Glancing over the low sled back as he worked, Martin pulled the exosuit slippers over his feet, standing on one foot at a time. Anna covered her feet, too. Her toes immediately felt cooled but sticky and dirty, as if coated with oil.

"Keep an eye out for them," he said. "Let me know if you see anything."

Anna leaned on the sled then pulled her exposed fingers away from the hot surface. As she watched for movement from the gang, she flexed her fingers and wrists. The suit sleeves responded, growing up her wrists onto the backs of her fingers. She flexed more vigorously but the suit refused to extend over her fingertips and palms. Programmed that way.

She wondered what the miners and others who worked outside did to protect their hands. Gloves, probably, programmed to different specialized tasks.

Martin knelt and peeled a panel away from the side. It separated with a tinny rasp, exposing a low section of the stowage bed. He tossed it aside and grunted, stretching an arm into the exposed bed, trying to get at the boxes. It would have been easier to climb into the bed to release the tie-downs from there, but he would have been exposed to view.

Anna wanted to help but feared she'd just get in the way. The access looked too small, her arms were shorter than Martin's and she wasn't as strong. She didn't know how to release the tie-downs. She'd help best by keeping watch.

Still, she felt useless, helpless.

She saw a shadow flicker, a slight movement on the far canyon wall. A shape came and went just above the shadow of the gang's sled. Somebody moving.

A noise. A keening, or a shout. Martin hadn't noticed.

"Martin..."

He grunted again, a triumphant sound this time. He'd pulled a box free and opened it—a weapon.

Anna recognized it, having seen its like in encyclopedia entries, history of the Fall. A projectile weapon, a meter long. The hollow tube opposite the butt end expelled deadly, solid bullets. Crude but effective.

Martin held it up in one fist and grinned wickedly. In that instant, he looked to Anna like the mental image she'd formed, of the gang assaulting the sled, banging on it like predators smelling the kill. That look in his eyes both frightened and saddened her.

"That's a—"

"Gunnison assault rifle, point thirty-eight gee-vee," he said, an unfamiliar ferocity in his voice. "Standard issue during the Fall. Asian Alliance, but everybody had these, East and West. Lightweight; heat, cold and water-resistant; rugged. Wouldn't jam. They'd take near-direct artillery hits, easy to fix in the field. In fact, these things were designed to be so basic that troops could build their own in the field if they had to. Guerrilla warfare stuff."

"I recognize it from books, but it looks new."

"Nanofactured. They've been making these in secret."

"You didn't know?"

"Didn't know." Martin rasped bitterly, knuckles white as he gripped the rifle in both hands as if to break it in two. "Didn't know, didn't know—damn it to hell—I didn't know."

A faint noise echoed off the canyon walls. They both turned to look.

Two Familia appeared from out of hiding a hundred meters away, sneaking from shadow to shadow, hugging the canyon wall. Voices rose from behind the adventurous pair, challenges echoing off the high

walls.

“Come fight, you!” they taunted in high-pitched screeches. Or they may have said “Can't find you,” or even something else. As before when she'd heard their animal shrieks on the amplified comlink, Anna couldn't make out the words. Nevertheless, the tone and intent were clear.

Sawks nesting hundreds of meters up the walls wheeled into the air away from their rookeries at the noise. Dust and pebbles cascaded down the walls with their echoing cries. Martin did something to the rifle, made some adjustment to it Anna didn't understand. It wasn't working. He repeated the movement several times.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“What?”

He didn't answer. After a quick glance at the stalking Familia, still ninety or so meters out, he propped the weapon against the sled and knelt at the box. He poked around, looking for something, muttering, tossing aside three weapons. He hurled the empty box aside and reached into the stowage bed for another. He ripped it open, upended it. Four rifles fell out, but Martin ignored them. He examined the empty box, looking for something that wasn't there. Teeth grinding, a frustrated keening in his throat, he looked back into the bed.

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit.”

“What? What?”

No answer. Martin stood and looked grimly over the sled at the Familia pair, still coming, now seventy meters away. Both had weapons like the one he held.

He examined the side of the sled, looking for something—something other than whatever he'd been trying to find in the boxes. He stood in the opened door, facing the gang over the top of the sled so they could see him from the waist upward. Anna gasped at the incautious move.

He held the rifle above his head, jerked it up and down in his fist, and shouted, “I've got a Gunny, you sonsabitches! Another step and I pump you. You hear me? I have a Gunny!”

Then, to Anna's relief, he jumped back down, removing his body as a target, and crouched behind the sled. They both peeked over into the canyon.

A loud snap echoed, and a sudden white light blossomed and died from a shadow where one of the gang crouched. *Gunfire*. The shot pinged against the rock high and behind them, deeper in the canyon.

The two adventurers had stopped sneaking forward, lay huddled in shadows fifty meters away. Beyond them, two others entered the broad canyon. Anna thought Martin might fire a warning shot, keep them at bay. He didn't.

“Martin, if you fire a shot maybe they'll back off.”

He shook his head. His gaze flickered along the sled, along the canyon walls in front and above them and back down the dark depths of the canyon west of them. A muscle in his jaw twitched. Anna recognized the symptoms—he was thinking fast, desperate, and she dare not interrupt.

The gang continued to close in. Two others joined the four already edging closer and closer, shadow to shadow, screaming and howling. If they were saying anything coherent, Anna no longer cared.

What's wrong? Why doesn't he fire a warning shot?

The vanguard pair had regained their bravado, urged on by the four—no, six—others behind them. Another pair had arrived, and now four teams of two approached, each about twenty meters apart.

The closest pair was thirty meters away, still hugging the shadowed walls, but still approaching.

Instead of firing, Martin knelt at the side of the sled, set the rifle down and jerked open a compartment below the stowage access he'd opened earlier. Anna saw machinery, wiring and pipes. On the access plate, she read: caution—active fuel cells.

Martin suddenly stood, gripped her elbows so fiercely she knew they'd be bruised. The intense look in his eyes—haunted, like that of a lost boy—stayed the cry in her throat. He seemed forlorn, sad. Anna recognized the look that had, from time to time, revealed the little boy inside the man she loved, one she hadn't seen in a long time. A lost, hurt look that pressed against her heart.

"I'm sorry." He barely whispered. "I was wrong, I made mistakes. I'm so sorry."

"Come fight now!" or something like it the gang shrieked in ragged chorus. They were closer, bolder, louder.

"Martin, they're coming."

"I know." He released her, knelt, put his hand in the compartment, grunted with the effort to jerk or twist something. With a ripping noise and an airy hiss, vapor poured out.

He stood. Again, he gripped Anna's elbows, eyes now blazing with intensity.

"Listen, now, and do as I say. Run down the canyon. That way." He tilted his head toward the dark rift behind them. "Run as fast and as far as you can. Don't look back."

"But what are you—"

"No questions." He shook her, fingers iron. "Run."

"But—"

"Run." He pushed her, hard.

She fell then rose on shaky legs and turned to run, as Martin had commanded. He knew what he was doing. Had to know. Obedient, but with her head filled with questions and dread, Anna ran.

Something's wrong.

She hadn't gone fifty paces when she figured it out. Martin hadn't fired the Gunny because he didn't have any bullets. That's what he had looked for so frantically in the boxes. He couldn't find them. He stood up, showed the gang the Gunny and waved it, bluffing. It didn't work.

So, he quickly found a backup plan, a desperate spur-of-the-moment one—blow up the sled. That was what he was doing in the fuel cell bay. Safeties could be bypassed, and the cells could be overloaded, forced to critical.

He'd told Anna to run to get her away from the explosion he intended to cause. But he couldn't overload the cells and get far enough away himself before—

She skidded to a halt, stumbled.

“Martin, no!”

She turned to look back. Through the narrow, vertical light sliver at the canyon end, she saw him again menace their attackers with the rifle. He shouted something. The gang, maddened, surged over the sled—two, then three. Four. Five. They were on him.

“No!” Anna shouted, and started running back to him.

The sled transformed into an incandescent white flash of light. The explosion seemed to come from inside her brain. The ground heaved, lifting her into the dust and rock-filled air, throwing her backward. She flew, spinning, propelled by the shock wave. Sharp, flying rock chips stung her face and hands, ripping at her. Pain knifed her legs, arms and back. And abdomen.

She landed against a rock spur, knocking the wind from her. Vision blurred, breathing agony, she forced herself to look back down the canyon.

Through the flying rock and tumult, Anna saw an orange-and-yellow fireball climb the walls like a thing alive. Atop the fireball, suspended as though afloat on water, an object burned and twisting. A man.

She knew it was Martin, not one of the gang, although they must have also been incinerated. She didn't know how she knew it was Martin, but she knew.

A sudden sharp pain stabbed through her belly, and Anna knew something else had died, too; but she didn't know what it was. For a fraction of a second, she understood that if she thought about it she might identify the source of the pain. Something—no, some *one*—other than her, other than Martin, had been hurt in the fire. Not one of the Familia. Someone else.

With deliberate cunning, as though erasing a slate or computer file, Anna shut down the part of her mind she knew could identify the—the what?

Something—something bad—has happened. I don't know what it is.

She slammed another door shut in her mind, and forgot that there had been anything to forget.

Then she forgot that.

Like a slow-motion livewall, the canyon walls came down, rumbling, groaning. Anna felt but didn't hear the walls collapse. Nanos in her inner ear had shut down. Or she'd gone deaf.

She ran. Hurt inside and out, she ran. With her back to the fiery tumult and falling rock, she ran, as fast as she could, lifting swollen feet, pumping aching, bruised arms and scratched legs, breathing acrid air

through razor-slashed lungs, putting distance between her and the explosion. She hurtled along the rock-studded canyon floor, stumbling, getting up and running onward, running long after her breath had given out, after her body had become numbed to its many unnamed pains and the constant running.

Long after she forgot why she was running, she ran.

And ran.

And ran.

Lisan Navarroclan

For a moment, Lisan thought the old woman had merely paused in her story, gathering her memories before continuing. It was, after all, an incredible tale.

Living those events, she decided, must have required some strength of will or character not available to ordinary people. Describing the circumstances must also draw from within the Holy Mother certain strengths and capabilities Lisan could barely understand, let alone name.

She had heard bits and pieces before, of course, as had most of the children. But she'd long suspected the fragmentary, distorted and reluctantly told tales were exaggerated. At times, she had even suspected the adult's memory had faded with age and infirmity—and the plague—leaving vague shadows behind. At times, she believed some adults hid some secret shame about events back then.

The adults evaded questions about those times, grew annoyed, sullen or angry when pressed, until children generally avoided asking. But, now and then, somebody would let something slip; and Lisan had concluded more had happened than anyone let on. She'd long wanted to find out what those missing pieces were.

Now she knew. And she marveled at the Holy Mother once again—that she had not only had the strength—the courage—to live through those times, but to recall those memories, and tell the story. Amazing.

The Holy Mother sat, head down, face shadowed by a curtain of long blond hair, hands folded in her lap. Still. Then she snorted, the sound like a boxard in heat. She'd fallen asleep where she sat. She snored.

Lisan sighed. She wanted to hear more, hear it all. What happened next? But the storyteller had found a natural place to pause for the night, her weariness dictating the spot; and Lisan had no choice but to take a breather herself and appreciate how long she'd been listening.

Behind the alcove, to the east, the night had started to fade from black to deep blue. Morning's heat would be upon them in a few minutes. The Holy Mother had talked the entire night away, and Lisan had neglected her communal duties at the well. A dozen pouches still waited there to be filled.

No one, she knew, would scold her. There were no adults to do that anymore.

She quickly filled the pouches—half-filled them, rather; it would do for one night—and brought them into the shadowed cooling pit cut low into the side of the wall a few meters away from the Holy Mother's alcove. By the time she'd finished the eastern sky was pale blue, and the blazing sun an inch from peaking over the alcove back wall and broiling her alive where she stood.

Lisan retreated from the well into the relative cool of the open-sided, western-facing alcove, where she stood and panted in the rising heat. She forbade herself a drink of water in self-punishment for shirking her duties. Instead, she tilted Holy Mother Anna Devlin's sleeping head back, brushed a fringe of hair aside and splashed a few drops of water from her own pouch on the Holy Mother's slack lips.

The Holy Mother slept on, undisturbed. Snoring.

Lisan gathered the stick-figure old woman in her arms, marveling again at how light she was—and how loudly she snored—and descended the dirt rampart to the sleeping chamber deep below ground, into which the day's heat could not penetrate through the layers of packed soil. She arranged Anna Devlin on her sleeping cot and gave the air recirculator a twirl. The wide, curved blades caught on their wooden ratchet, spun; and a cooling breeze sucked into the room through the door then out the cooler-tube, lowering the temperature another few degrees.

Lisan tightened the whipgrass rope controlling the fan flywheel. The gear-rope was becoming frayed, making it necessary to rewind the flywheel by hand. She pinched her shoulder to remind herself to return before noon to rewind the blades. She pinched herself again as a reminder to ask Cousin Bever Francosclan to weave another rope for the Holy Mother's sleeping chamber.

Then she left, retiring to her own chamber. Sleep came slowly. Fitfully. Lisan had many dreams.

* * * *

“You must have run a long time.” Lisan sat again in the Holy Mother's alcove. It was a little after darkfall, the western sky still blue and starless—such was her eagerness to hear the rest of the story—and the air still seething, shimmering with the day's residual heat.

She had resolved to hear some more of the story first, before filling her quota of water pouches. Later, she promised, she'd do her duty. Later.

“I ran, yes,” Holy Mother said. They sucked on tubes of goat milk, their breakfast, as they sat on the stone bench facing west over the alcove wall. Slurp, slurp. They sounded like darters feeding.

“And?” Lisan prompted.

Holy Mother shook her head. “Finish your duties first, then I'll tell you what happened.”

“But I can—”

“You neglected them last night, and I am to blame. Your Cousins are annoyed with you for their half-filled pouches, and with me. They won't say anything to you—out of respect for me, perhaps—but we shouldn't annoy them further. And you don't need to be lectured about duty to one's family.”

Chastened, Lisan bowed and silently went about her chores. She filled water pouches as quickly as she could drop them into the well and draw them up again. At last, after storing them in the cooling pit, she returned to Holy Mother's side, her eagerness unabated.

A sip of water shared between the young girl and the old woman, and, at last, Holy Mother Anna Devlin said, “Yes, I ran. How long did I run? Forever. Forever.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

As she lay in the foggy, time-sluggish territory between sleep and wakefulness, Anna decided it must be a holiday because her alarm hadn't sounded in her right ear. If it had been a school day, it would have awakened her. Through her closed eyelids, she detected daylight.

Holiday, then. She felt no urge to know the time, or even the day. Sleep. Restful, refreshing sleep. The great restorative. She must have had a hard day to be so tired. Eyes closed, unmoving, she sought to go back into slumber.

She tried to recall the odd dream she'd had, interrupted by some noise she'd now also forgotten. The dream seemed more interesting than whatever had interrupted it. Slowly, she remembered.

A dozen strange animals chased her. The tall, bulky creatures resembled big dogs but were scaly, not furry. They ran upright on two short, stubby legs, balanced by a blunt tail. They looked like gigantic nilas and made a high-pitched sound, like Earthome whales keening, but punctuated with sharp, staccato clicks. It seemed complicated enough to be a language. Not English or Spanish. She didn't understand it, but the tone seemed clear—they were pleading.

They wanted something from her, but she wouldn't give it to them so they chased her down a dark, narrow street to take it. She called the lumbering beasts “the gang.” The name was logical in the sense that all things in dreams, however illogical on waking reflection, are logical. Dream logic.

Martin was in the dream, running with her. The creatures didn't want anything from him. Still, he ran with her, and seemed sad. He kept apologizing. “I'm sorry,” he'd say softly. “I'm so sorry.”

Sorry for what?

In the dream, Anna didn't ask.

As they pursued, never closer than ten meters back, the animals spat fire from their mouths in glowing neon arcs, like lines on a lightmap. The fireballs exploded into brilliant, colored light shards when they hit the street wall over Anna's head. They always missed.

Martin didn't notice the fireballs. He just loped along in the same loose-jointed manner as the gang, keeping pace but in no hurry. His shoulders sagged, weighed with grief, and he mumbled apologies.

The animals wore clothes. Familia clothes.

At one point in the dream, Anna found herself running alone. The gang no longer pursued, and Martin wasn't there, either. She didn't know at what point they'd stopped chasing her or why they'd stopped and why she continued, or where she was going. Or what had happened to Martin. It just seemed important that she run, just run, and keep running.

Then she noticed she wasn't in a street. The impossibly long one she'd traveled through was gone, and she ran in the open across a boundless, flat plain. She ran naked, on bare feet, under the bright sun.

She ran on and on.

As Anna tried to recover the dreamscape, she realized she now stood outside it, remembering it,

observing—not participating. She'd lost the thread.

The effort had pushed her closer to wakefulness. She felt weary. She didn't want to wake up.

But she was awake.

Surrendering with a weak sigh, she blinked for the first time. She saw nothing.

Almost all Authority, and many Familia, maintained some basic functions—chrono, stim, public net access—as implants, so they needed no external link. A malfunction rarely meant a software problem, something to be concerned about. It was most often a hard-wiring problem, some minor, easily repaired tissue, nerve or bone damage interfering with the neural net tied to the implant. It happened. Programmed med nanos fixed it.

Anna's hearing had gone fuzzy once when she was six years old after she'd fallen from some playground equipment. The inconvenience lasted an hour.

Now she couldn't access her chrono—and she couldn't hear, either. No, that wasn't true. She couldn't hear from her right ear. The left worked. That felt odd since she lay right side up, left cheek and ear under her.

Eyes closed, Anna tried to listen for the alcove sounds. She didn't hear Martin's steady, deep breathing beside her; he must have gone to the office early. Yes, he had. She remembered his warm kiss on her cheek, the mumbled apology about some administrative emergency—Georg had called, yes, that had been it—and rolling over and going back to sleep.

The recirculator hummed at the faint edge of audibility and a soft mechanical clicking came from the food prep—faulty heating coil. Better get that seen to today, after school.

But today's a holiday.

A twinge of worry seeped into her consciousness, and Anna felt sleep slip away another notch. She blinked again to try to activate the chrono, eyes still shut. Nothing.

Chrono down, then. Hearing down, too—no, just the right ear. She heard through her left ear, the one she lay on, a scraping, like something nearby dragging through loose gravel.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape. Pause. Scrape.

Strange sound. Not an alcove noise—she could no longer hear those sounds.

And the bed she lay on felt ... strange. Gritty.

Then there was the odor. As she inhaled it again, she realized the odor was what had awakened her. Tart, like lemon. Oily, but not a machine odor. Not food. Something else.

Anna inhaled the pungent scent again and opened her eyes. She didn't raise her head—it head felt heavy, and some instinct told her to stay still.

Dark, irregular shapes, a blurry, colorless landscape lay close to her open left eye. Oddly, she couldn't see out of her right one.

Vision down, too. Not good.

Something glowed above her. Not daylight, as she'd thought a moment ago. Not a lamp. More like a lightmap. Something else.

As she lay, trying to focus blurred vision, trying to open her right eye, she realized she wasn't in the alcove. She lay on the ground, in gritty dirt, somewhere ... somewhere outside.

Suddenly, Anna remembered. With a sharp, involuntary intake of breath, she sat up, heart in her throat. She bumped her head on something hard as she did so, but she ignored the pain. The memory had hit harder.

She blinked to clear her vision. A neon-glowing substance suffused the deep darkness around her in pearlescent globules, streaks and pools, refusing to come into focus.

She remembered.

The shooting, the killing. The terrifying, bone-jarring flight across the Barrens in the powersled. The Familia—the gang—chasing them into a canyon in Goliath, the sled engine dying, the gang's attack, and then...

...and then...

Anna saw again in her mind's eye the fireball consuming the powersled, the canyon walls—and Martin. She remembered running from the horror. She ran at first because Martin had commanded her to run; then she ran because ... because she needed to get away from the explosion, the gang.

No, that wasn't quite right. There'd been another reason, something she now couldn't recall, didn't want to.

She ran. That was all.

And Martin was dead.

For a moment, she wondered why the thought of Martin's dying didn't produce tears. She decided she must have cried herself out while running, that some sense of survival had pushed her beyond grief.

A memory nagged at the back of her mind. It eluded her, and she stopped trying to chase it. She had more immediate concerns, and grimly, she faced them.

How long she'd run through the dark, rock-strewn canyon, stumbling and falling, rising and running again, she didn't know. But she'd ended up—here.

Where?

It was night. The star-filled sky blanketed the desert. There were no high canyon walls to closet the daytime sky to a narrow, bright strip overhead. She'd run all the way through the canyon and kept on running into the open desert beyond, to where she now sat.

It had been day when she'd started running. It was now night. Fleet Phoenix lay a handbreadth above

the flat northwestern horizon, the transport ships clustered to form a silvery moon-like glob orbiting a thousand kilometers up. She had no idea what time it was. Maybe she'd run for hours.

Anna tried to get to her knees, but spasms of pain in muscles torn and bruised stayed her. She groaned and sat back, legs curled under her, head down.

She hurt, except the right side of her face, the only part of her body that didn't. Her med nanos had numbed the right side of her face to the exclusion of the injuries her pain-wracked body told her existed everywhere else. A peculiar imbalance, that.

Anna realized with escalating dread that a med nano concentration meant significant injury. The pain she felt everywhere else meant all nanos had been drawn to the more serious injury, that none remained in the rest of her body to repair lesser damage and stifle lesser pain.

Slowly, deliberately, she lay back on the ground. Pain knifed through her as she moved, and she resolved to lay still, to let the med nanos do their job. Rest. And think.

She closed her eyes, concentrated on slowing her heartbeat, steadying her breathing, and tried to remember her run through the canyon. She had no idea what she'd injured in her countless falls.

She blinked again, a habit. No chrono. No net. Hearing damaged in the right ear. Right eye shut. Right side of her face numb.

Serious damage.

She forced herself to relax. After a while, she opened her left eye and tried to see what she could see, trying to focus first on the weird luminosity clumped here and there around her in the darkness. She found it hard to focus with only one eye. No depth of field. And everything else was dark, vague.

Anna reached her right hand toward a globule of the substance a few centimeters away. She touched two fingers to the hand-sized amoebic mass. At first it felt cold; then her fingertips began to tingle. The glowing stuff stuck to them as she pulled away. She examined it.

An odor. Oily. Pungent.

She sniffed and got a blot of the stuff on her nose. Cold. Then her nose tingled, as her fingers had.

Her fingertips had gone numb, and she thought maybe some of the stuff had gotten onto the right side of her face and deadened it. She had been lying with her right side up.

Raising her head despite the pain the movement caused, Anna tried to look around. Against the greater darkness around her, a dark form came into focus. She saw a gnarled, twisted shape rising above and around her, faintly illuminated by the glowing substance. It resembled the tomato plant in their alcove.

It was a tree. She lay under the spreading bare arms of a tree.

Just a meter away, she watched a rivulet of the glowing, sticky, numbing stuff ooze slowly along a stiff branch. Fascinated, she forgot her pain as she tried to rise and look closer. Again, she hit her head on something hard—another branch arching overhead—and sagged back down. She gingerly touched the sore spot on her head, and her now-numb fingers transferred some of the glowing sap. In a moment the wounded spot on her scalp turned cold then began to tingle. In another moment, the pain had gone.

She watched the glowing sap dribble along the branch a meter in front of her and realized a part of the tree had been split open. A torn limb lay nearby.

Anna remembered. She'd been running; and in the dark, she'd crashed into the tree, breaking off branches and losing consciousness. She must have hit hard to break off the thick limb that lay on the ground, glowing.

Then, as she lay on her left side under the broken tree, unconscious, sap from the broken limb must have dripped on the right side of her face, numbing it. It may also have damaged her hearing and sight.

Time would tell whether her med nanos could fix the damage. She stayed still and listened to her body, waiting for some kind of internal signal to tell her all was well again. For a while, she repressed an urge to touch the right side of her face, afraid of what she might find. But the urge grew, and she gave in.

Her left hand crossed her supine, pain-wracked body and gingerly touched her cheek under her right eye. She gasped and pulled it away. Her finger was covered with sap, but in the seconds before they grew cold then started to tingle, Anna felt her skin. It felt gritty and dry, like boxard skin or like the dirt under her. Half her face had been transformed.

Anna forced herself to analyze what she'd observed. It helped keep the horror at bay.

Rough, burnt skin. Numbed by the sticky substance.

She recalled the pain she'd felt in the powersled blast, pain that shot through her as the concussion flung her across the canyon floor. Pain in the right side of her face. The explosion had burned her. Hand shaking, Anna touched her head, on the left side this time. No hair. Burned away.

Her heart had started to hammer again, and she tried to suppress her shock with a cold application of rationality. After a few deep breaths, the scream rising in her throat died away.

She sat up. This time she dodged the overhead branch, glowing with the sap leaking along its split length. She wiped the glowing goo on her fingers against her thigh. The exosuit hung in ragged strips around her, shredded somehow in the course of her flight.

Nanofactured fabric did not shred. But this exosuit had.

Nothing to fear, she thought. Not now. A fact to be coldly examined, like any other. Later.

Her fingers, wiped clean, quickly regained sensitivity. She took a deep breath—it felt like knives—then touched her face. She forced her fingers to touch the entire right side. The numbing sap coated the whole surface, and she scooped it away as she examined herself.

The wound, she found, extended from the crown of her head to her chin. Her right ear was gone and her right eye socket lay empty under her shaky, probing fingers. Her cheek had evaporated, exposing her teeth.

She found stiff, hair-like wires dangling behind where her ear had been. Touching bare bone there, she pulled away a square lump of something the size of her fingernail. She examined the lump in the weak light from the glowing sap. Her implant—now she knew why she couldn't access any systems. Her nano system had shut down.

Some fanatical Familia had had their systems flushed on purpose. Born Authority, Anna had been linked all her life.

She shivered and a sob crept up her throat, threatening to shatter her cold rationality. She wanted to let it go, let it become a scream—she needed to scream—but she didn't.

Physical pain regained her attention. Parts of the right side of her face, where she'd scooped sap gobs away, had begun to hurt. From the oozing branch in easy reach, Anna scooped more and spread it over her injury. Coldness superseded pain. Then came tingling. Finally, numbness.

Anna rolled onto her knees, slowly because it hurt to move. She dealt with that. She pulled the shredded exosuit from her shoulders and arms, letting it pool around her hips. She stripped away the thin, frayed pantsuit under it. The still night air felt warm, but not unbearably so, on her bare skin. Naked from the waist up, she spread handfuls of the numbing sap on her body, like a salve, from head to waist.

Cold. Tingle. Then numbness.

She stood on wobbly legs, stripped naked and daubed more sap on her hips, her legs and her bruised, lacerated feet.

Cold. Tingle. Then numbness.

Anna breathed easily at last, feeling no physical pain.

For a long while, she stood, contemplating a thumb-sized sap globule she rolled in the palm of her hand. It had hardened like clay as she worked it.

She looked around, trying to orient herself. Except for the tree, she saw nothing close by. There was a low, dark barrier to the star-filled night sky on one horizon—Goliath, eastward and far away. All other horizons lay low, uninterrupted by mountain or other obstruction.

She found it almost funny; the bizarre glowing-sap tree into which she'd run in the desert, whatever it was, might well be the only tree—or living thing at all, except her—in dozens of kilometers. And she'd run into it.

She popped the sap ball into her mouth and swallowed it—her throat went cold, then it tingled. Then it felt numb.

Her stomach followed suit, going cold, tingly then numb.

Anna had thought to deal with any internal injury by swallowing the sap. But there was something else, some other reason she swallowed it. It had to do with some memory in the dark recesses of her mind. Not Martin, not the other horrors.

Something else. Another pain she refused to name.

If it worked or not she didn't know. She didn't care. Her eyelid and her numbed limbs grew heavy and warmth spread through her from the inside out. Anna lay on the ground and curled up to surrender to sleep.

Sleep. Restful, refreshing sleep.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Scrape. Pause. Scrape. Pause.

The scratching sound faded in and out as Anna drifted between sleep and wakefulness. She refused to open her eyes.

No, not eyes—eye. The right one was gone, along with her ear, the right side of her face, and her implants and nanosystems. All blasted away.

Anna recalled those events, and Martin's death, with detachment. She'd created that mental wall to protect herself. It worked. It was constructed not only of emotional distance but selective memory. She recalled the flight from Natal through the Barrens and Goliath, the attack in the canyon and the explosion, but the running was a blur—and possibly also a way of dealing with her anguish. There must have also been the therapy of tears, but she didn't remember.

She'd probably blotted out other things from her memory besides the running and the crying, including the physical pain. So, the wall worked. Like the sap.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape. A peculiar sound.

Anna lay still and listened, aware of some internal discomfort she couldn't identify. Her stomach felt—what? Cramped?

Internal injury? If she'd still had them, her med nanos would have countered any injury, but then, if she'd had them she wouldn't have felt discomfort in the first place.

She'd never experienced this sensation before. It wasn't like any pain she'd ever known, more annoyance than discomfort. She'd swallowed the painkiller sap. Maybe that now dealt with the unknown internal problem the way her nanos would have.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape.

She wondered if the sound, however tentative, might mean danger. She regarded the possibility of danger with calm, as she did the odd stomach discomfort; and realizing how composed she was gave her pause. How sobering to be so detached.

So. She would find the sound source, assess its potential as a threat and respond. Just so.

Anna opened her eye. Still night, the world a blurry haze of deep shadow and dim, colorless shapes and vague, still patterns. She felt faint. She blinked and tried to focus.

No good. She wondered if some of the sapbalm had gotten into her eye and blinded her. What she'd done with the sap earlier, when she'd smeared it over her body, swallowed it, had been an impulse, an itch quickly scratched. The stuff helped relieve the pain, but who knew what harm accompanied the relief?

She rubbed the thin glaze of sap from her fingers on a scrap of exosuit. The fingers lost their numbness,

felt tingly before they regained sensitivity. She scraped sap from her left eyelid and waited. Then she opened her eye, blinked, lashes sticky, and tried to focus. The patterns of darkness and dim light seemed less fuzzy now.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape. A steady, slow rhythm.

Anna looked around. On one horizon a blueness fed on the bottom of the night, slowly eating stars. A dark bar bisected ground and sky. Goliath. That was east.

She saw nothing. Still too dark to the north, south and west to make out features.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape.

The glowing sap provided enough light for her to make out her immediate surroundings; she looked for the source of the odd sound. Fragments of the broken tree lay near, split as if by lightning. When she went to sleep after smearing herself and swallowing the stuff, she'd scooted against the thigh-thick trunk and pulled the ruined exosuit around her as if to make a nest. The pantsuit was too thin and torn to be of much use.

The night hadn't been cold. Still, she'd huddled her naked body as if for warmth.

As light gathered in the east, Anna now saw the tree resembled a spikeweed, only huge. One broken, gnarled branch, reaching into the air like a corpse's stiffened arm, sprouted thorns for fingers.

Spikeweed, common on the whipgrass-dominated plain around Tierra Natal and more prolific in the Barrens, rose five to ten centimeters above ground and got no bigger than a person's hand. This specimen had stood twice Anna's height, the spike cluster at the branch end as big as her head. Unlike spikeweed, which was all thorn, this tree had five or six long, fibrous, twisty branches ending in spiky clusters. She'd torn off some limbs and split the trunk when she hit it, releasing the glowing sap.

Anna knew little about botany. She thought the spikeweed and this—*sapplant*, she decided to call it—might be related. She'd heard about tests showing spikeweed to be useless, maybe even harmful, but she didn't remember details. Maybe it was connected with the pain-killing sap.

So, sapplant might be giant spikeweed. Or spikeweed might be miniature sapplant.

Scrape. Pause. Scrape.

The sound seemed to come from nearby, in the darkness. From the west—in front—and, oddly, below.

Anna tried to peer through the gloom. She soon saw that she sat on the edge of a darker space, like an ill-defined black hole. The sound had come from the space. Her monocular vision precluded depth perception, but she stretched out a hand and found the edge lay in easy reach.

A hole. That's why the sound seemed to come from below as well as—over there.

Anna felt along the hole's inner rim. It was smooth, hard and slick, like glass. Not like the gritty ground where she sat. In the sap's eerie glow and the still dim light from the east, she guessed the aperture was ten meters wide, maybe three deep. A shallow bowl, like a crater.

If Anna hadn't crashed into the tree while running in the dark, she would have fallen headfirst into it. *I*

might have broken my neck.

She barked a mirthless snort, and the scraping sound stopped. She held her breath and listened.

Silence.

Waiting for the sound to start again, she recalled she'd heard it before, the last time she woke up, when she'd found the sap.

In a moment, the sound resumed, and she saw the source—a gigantic boxard, a meter and a half long, its clever camouflage betrayed by its movement and the dim light of the rising sun. It crept just below the far crater edge toward a now-visible burrow three meters away from it and ten meters from Anna. The burrow was a black spot against the lesser dark of the crater's far lip.

She now noticed other burrows around the crater rim, eight or nine round holes of different sizes.

“Would you look at that,” she whispered. The slurred words surprised her until she remembered her shattered face. The boxard froze again when she spoke; but Anna had spotted it now, and it couldn't hide behind its camouflage anymore.

A boxard.

Two boxards lived in a terrarium in her class, had been there for three months, brought in by Timofre Ramonclan, whose father trucked farm equipment and supplies between Tierra Natal and Rock Spring and outlying exploration camps. Like spikeweed, bist and puffer flies, boxards were so common, they went unnoticed.

The scholars made pets of them. They'd dubbed them Lefty and Righty. The names came from tan spots on their blotchy, squarish shells. The children were happy with the names, but Anna couldn't tell the difference.

Those two had each been as big as her thumb. This one was longer than her leg and thicker than her torso. Its round eyes blinked in slow motion. It raised its sharp-clawed, spatulate left front foot and the opposite hind foot, reached out a few centimeters, placed them firmly down against the crater glass then pulled its bulk forward with the front foot, pushed with the rear.

Scrape. It lay still a moment. Then the opposite fore and hind feet reached out, gripped and push-pulled it forward another few centimeters. Scrape. Pause.

Anna watched the slow giant, fascinated. It was headed for its burrow after finishing its nightly feeding.

Lefty and Righty used their long black tongues to suck nutrients from the soil in their terrarium, forming a maze of intricate tunnels behind them. If this one fed the same way, its tongue must be more than half a meter long.

I wonder what it eats. Now it drags itself to its underground lair before the sun comes up and—

She'd forgotten the sun.

In the few minutes Anna had been absorbed by the boxard, the sun had climbed up over Goliath's back. Soon, it would hit her, deadly hot.

Her heart should have raced but it didn't. As she'd done with the mystery of the belly pain and the giant boxard, she considered this new development with calm deliberation.

The exosuit was tattered and useless, along with the thin, frayed pantsuit. How it could have gotten shredded was another mystery to be considered later. Now, she needed shelter. If she didn't find it, she'd burn to death. The boxard knew the danger. *The thing is smarter than me.*

She looked around. All but a few stars had faded as blue oozed up with the new day. She could see enough now to get a fix on her situation.

Goliath was a long pinkish line across the eastern horizon, separating the bluing sky from the mottled brown-and-tan ground. She had no clue how far away Goliath was. She didn't know how long she'd run into the desert after she'd left the canyon. It could be five, ten, twenty kilometers or more. She had no depth perception. She recalled Goliath wasn't as high on its western side as on its eastern, but she didn't know the heights.

And it didn't matter. At this latitude, almost at the equator, day and night came and went quickly, the sun rising straight up into the sky as if rocket-launched. Temperatures changed rapidly from tolerable warmth to killer heat. The daytime average at Tierra Natal was a hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit. She'd heard temperatures east of Goliath had been recorded twenty degrees higher.

Those robot and satellite surveys may have been done in a different season, or a different latitude. It didn't matter. It was late summer, she was west of Goliath, naked, and the heat would soon kill her. She wouldn't live long without shelter.

An idea: she often used problem-solving techniques to teach. She'd ask her scholars to help solve this problem.

"Scholars..." she slurred through exposed teeth. The boxard froze when she spoke, forefoot suspended, and looked at her with one marble-sized eye, unblinking.

"Scholars, pay attention. Here's your problem. You're stranded alone in the desert. No exosuit, no equipment, no nanosystems or implants. The sun will be up in..." She looked to the western sky. "...ten minutes. Now find a way to live."

Anna sat up on her knees and looked around; the movement made her dizzy. She could never get to Goliath's shade in time. However near, it was too far to travel unsuited in daylight. North and south horizons lay flat, undisturbed by any feature suggesting shelter.

In the growing light, she saw lumpy mounds due west that might be hills, like the Barrens. She didn't know how far those hills were, or if she'd find shelter there.

"Can't run away, then." *Ironic, given how far I've already run away from—*

"Scholars, concentrate on the problem, please."

Anna now saw spikeweed, each small plant separated from its neighbor by two or three meters of bare ground. She must have stepped on hundreds of them in her frantic run from the canyon. Massed, they'd make shade, but she'd spend hours gathering enough to weave the branches to do the job.

Too bad she didn't have a shell like the boxard. If caught above ground in daylight, Lefty and Righty withdrew head, legs and tail inside their shells and waited for night. Usually, if unimpeded by curious scholars, they returned to their burrows at dawn.

Anna had a sudden inspiration; like a boxard, she'd hide from the sun in a burrow.

She stood and looked more closely at the burrows around the crater rim. Only one looked large enough for her to fit into, the one the boxard was headed toward.

She hesitated, uncertain. She might have to fight for the shelter. She'd never fought anybody for any reason. Ever.

The boxard moved slowly, but it looked powerful, well-muscled. Its sharp digging claws looked dangerous, but its legs were short. And it was slow.

The sky to the east grew more and more blue. No time. *Maybe we can share.*

She grabbed a meter-long sapplant branch splinter—just in case, she told herself—and crossed the crater, circling away from the boxard, which had stiffened as she moved. They stood facing each other four meters apart, the burrow between them.

The boxard hunched, hissed loudly and darted its long black tongue at her.

“Easy,” Anna croaked, “I'm not going to hurt you.” She held the spear in front her in both shaky hands, pointed at the animal. She backed away a few steps. “You go first.”

The boxard hissed, unmoving.

The sun rose higher.

“Go on home. Then I'll go.”

It didn't move.

Anna circled around, thinking to push it toward its burrow. It turned to face her, tongue darting.

The sun crested Goliath, and Anna felt the temperature rise. The glare made her good eye water. Desperately, she tried to force the boxard to move by poking at it. It responded with its tongue, remarkably agile, knocking the slender spear aside.

“All right, I'll go first. You stay outside then.”

Anna recircled the stubborn creature and edged toward the burrow, keeping her spear aimed. As she stepped inside—she could feel its coolness on her bruised and lacerated feet—the creature attacked.

It dashed toward her on its stubby legs and leaped, tongue outstretched—at least a meter—with a grunt. Both startled and frightened by the sudden charge, Anna flinched, took an involuntary step back and tripped on the burrow rim. She fell, and the boxard whipped its tongue out, catching her ankle a glancing blow.

Mind-numbing, acidic pain lanced the ankle where the tongue hit. Anna screamed.

The animal nosed down its burrow as she lay writhing in pain, head downward toward the crater bottom.

The pain. The pain galvanized her anger. Her world had been violently torn asunder, she'd been shot at, her husband killed and she'd been exiled into the hot desert, stripped of everything, including her clothing. And now this final insult.

A red rage burned behind her eyes. Any vestige of reticence she had felt vanished. She raised the spear, ready to stab at the retreating boxard, when, just as suddenly as the rage had overcome her pain, a thought—an idea, rational and calculated—surmounted it. Anna knew the source of her stomach pain and her dizzy spells. Hunger.

She'd never been hungry. Even if she had, med nanos would have compensated and she'd have felt nothing.

Her passion evaporated instantly as it occurred to her she needed the boxard just as she needed the shelter of its burrow. The boxard meant survival, as the burrow did. Its skin meant shelter from the sun, just as the burrow did, but its meat meant food. Moisture for her thirsty body. She had to kill it, now, before it got away.

Anna had never killed anything before, even by accident or in childish curiosity. But with the adrenaline rush of her rage still coursing through her veins, now tempered by doses of emotionless detachment, rationality and the sharp desperation of hunger, she thought she could.

She tossed the spear-stick aside and grabbed the boxard by its tail and hind foot—all that remained of it outside the hole. She pulled and the animal slid back a few centimeters. Then it caught hold and resisted, tugging Anna into the hole up to her shoulders. Her grip loosened, and she felt panic. It was escaping. She couldn't let that happen. *If it gets away—*

She couldn't pull it out. It grunted from inside the burrow in counterpoint to her ragged breathing.

She adjusted her grip on the boxard's hindquarters, braced her legs on the glassy ground and heaved. It wouldn't budge. Stalemate.

Anna gasped, sweat-drenched, fingers locked into the boxard's clay-like flesh. Shadows etched the ground. The air sizzled. Her lungs burned, and her arms ached. She couldn't let go. If she did, the boxard would get away and she'd die.

The creature tugged and grunted. Anna's arms felt like rubber. She knew she couldn't hold on much longer. She growled in her parched throat, gritted her teeth and—

Teeth.

She ground her teeth. The bizarre prospect that now occurred to her almost made her laugh, but she had no time or energy for it. Her muscles ached, her lungs burned, pain racked her sweat-soaked body and hunger gnawed her stomach.

The boxard tensed as if for a final lunge. Anna had no more time to think. She bit into the boxard's tail. It froze for a second as if studying the new sensation. Then, as her teeth penetrated the scaly skin into the tissue below, it squealed and kicked.

Anna now pulled with teeth as well as hands. She shook her head, trying to tear off the hunk of flesh. She growled. Flesh tore loose, and she spat it aside. Without hesitating, she resumed gnawing at the exposed hole streaked with pinkish sinew and gushing blood.

She bit off another piece of flesh, the effort easier this time, spat it aside and resumed her task. The animal screamed hollowly and thrashed, but Anna held fast. She bit, ripped and spat, over and over again, gnawing deeper into the boxard's body, blood splattering. The wound exuded a putrid, gassy odor.

Anna paused to retch, empty stomach heaving.

She pulled the struggling animal a few more centimeters out but that was all. The boxard's struggles grew sporadic, weaker, but it refused to die, to release its hold on the burrow. It wouldn't bleed to death fast enough.

The sun rose higher, burned hotter.

The spear-stick lay near enough. Anna risked letting go with one hand, grabbed it and jammed it into the wound.

The boxard screamed. Anna shoved the spear deeper, harder, holding a hind foot with one hand, shoving with the other.

A shudder. The boxard went limp. It died.

With a sob, Anna collapsed, loosening her grip on the dead animal. It started to slide down the burrow, and she grabbed it and hauled it up. She quickly retreated to sit at the eastern side of the crater, where a thin crescent of shade remained, shrinking with the rising sun. She was bathed in sweat, chest heaving, faint with hunger and fatigue. Her stomach rumbled. She looked down at the limp, glassy-eyed thing she'd killed. The outpouring of blood from the hole where its tail had been had slowed to an oozing trickle, and the meat looked thick and pale.

She bit off a piece of meat from the open wound and chewed—slowly, deliberately, her mind elsewhere. She retched again, gritted her teeth and took another bite. She chewed methodically. Eventually, she decided it didn't taste bad.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Anna's stomach rejected the first swallows of the stringy meat, and the violent dry heaving hurt her sides. But, in time, the protein stayed down.

Some animals ate flesh and thrived. Once, many people had done so, even into the early years of the Second Migration. Few did anymore, Familia or Authority. It had to do with the mass extinctions in the Fall. And disease.

Anna thought for a moment about disease. With med nanos down, she couldn't fight harmful microbes or bacteria. The alternative: starvation. She ate.

She didn't know how much of the boxard was inedible or even which parts she could digest. She

guessed she could feed on it for a while, maybe two or three days.

Or maybe not. Meat rotted, she recalled. She didn't know how long it took.

People in the old days cooked meat.

She'd experiment after she set up a shelter, putting some meat in the sun to cook. Maybe that would do it.

She also decided to eat as much as she could now. Just in case. Besides, she felt ravenous.

Satisfied she wouldn't starve to death, if she hadn't already poisoned herself, Anna turned to the shelter problem. She laid the greasy severed tail on the overturned boxard's stomach, licked her fingers then rose and gripped the carcass by its hind legs. Sweating, arm and leg muscles rubbery with fatigue, she dragged the thing, remarkably light for its size, to the east side of the crater, under the broken sapplant tree limbs. She gathered the exosuit scraps and set them in a pile. Then she scooped hot dirt aside from the spot she'd chosen, exposing cooler, darker earth. She sat in the makeshift nest at the crater's eastern edge, resting a while. Then she knelt over the carcass and began skinning it, not an easy task to start without a knife.

She gnawed a notch in the tough, rubbery hide under the tail and, using teeth and fingers to tug at the stretchy stuff, peeled the skin away from the white flesh. It felt like exosuit fabric, just as elastic, but thicker, tougher.

As she split the skin, she found it covered shell as well as the belly, neck, and legs. There was more than she'd expected. Without the skin layer, it glistened like wet bone, mottled white and pink. The neck was a half-meter long when stretched out.

It took little time and effort to strip the carcass. The hide came off in one ragged piece. There would be enough of it, with the shell, for her to curl up under. She might be cramped, but it would do.

She arranged two sapplant branches against the upright split trunk to form a crude frame. Then she leaned the carcass against the frame with the shell toward the sun, the underside shaded, and stretched the rubbery skin over the frame. Splinters in the cracked limbs helped secure it in place. The first sun rays started blistering her as she finished.

The stretched skin and the propped-up carcass blocked out the sun. The shade provided immediate relief. She sighed and munched tail meat as she thought about what to do next.

Midsummer days at this latitude this time of year on Phoenix IV, lasted just over ten hours. Nights were an hour shorter.

Ten hours. I can do it. I think.

Crossing the glassy crater bottom had scraped the sap from her feet and they felt tender and blistered. She stopped eating to scrape sap from a limb and apply it, completely coating them to above her ankles, paying attention to bruises and cuts. Relief came as it had before, and she wiped the rest of the sap on her arms and legs—her exertions with the boxard had prompted a torrent of sweat that had washed away much of the earlier application. She ached all over. The huge wound on the right side of her face began to sting.

Husbanding what little sap remained in the grooves of the broken tree limbs and trunk, Anna smeared a thin layer over her body again. She skipped her butt this time; the sap would just rub off when she sat. She applied a thicker layer to her face. The stinging sensation melted away.

She rubbed some on her inner lip, sucking on it to ease a soreness in her stomach.

Anna eyed the boxard remains for a while then pulled two clumps of meat from one hind leg and set them, grease dripping, on an exosuit fabric scrap in the sun.

As the day progressed and the sun passed overhead, she adjusted her shade. When night came, the desert would cool, and she could move around in relative comfort.

She ate as she thought about what to do next. She looked around for material to cover her feet. If she meant to walk on the hard, spikeweed-pocked ground, she'd need more protection than the sapbalm provided. Her shredded slippers had provided next to no help.

Walk where?

Civilization, or what had become of it, lay hundreds of kilometers east, beyond Goliath. No doubt she could get to Goliath during the night. She might be able to walk through the shady, narrow canyon the next day if she chose to try. Crossing the Barrens and the flat plains to Tierra Natal would take at least two more days. Plan four days, then, maybe five.

Anna checked her cooking meat, found it stiffer and darkening from a raw red to a bruised purple on the upper side. The grease had melted away. She flipped both pieces over.

Then, continuing to eat, she examined the carcass. The shell was one piece, as big as her torso. It looked like it could be easily peeled away from the body now that it had been skinned. She might find some use for it later.

Anna noticed the animal's spatulate feet were almost as wide as hers were long—and their undersides looked and felt tough. She could tie the animal's feet to her own with exosuit strips. It might work. She gnawed the tough skin on one leg and pondered going back to Natal.

Order would have been restored by now, or at least by the time she arrived, if she decided to go there. The Familia fanatics would have been arrested.

Maybe.

Maybe not. What if they'd won, killed all Georg's people, maybe even killed Georg?

Even if the Familia had won their bloody revolt, surely cooler heads would have reined in the fanatical, destructive element, stopped the killing. Grandfather Riosclan was no fool. Maybe he'd lost control for a while, but if the Familia won, Riosclan would restore order. Charismatic Grandfather Jose Riosclan. A leader.

Riosclan could be dead.

Martin had likely been right about factions among the Familia fighters killing each other.

The skin of the foot, with the claws intact, came off at last. Anna considered trying to dry the bloody

inside, but she had no way to do the job. She sighed and crammed her foot into the skin as into a boot. She wiggled her toes in the warm blood then tied it on with an exosuit strip. It would do.

Before she began on the second foot, the sun shifted higher, and she adjusted her shelter. Her cooking meat had hardened more and she flipped the pieces over again.

The exhausting fight with the boxard had taken place in the relatively cool night. Now, in the day's heat, even simple exertions were much more fatiguing. It was getting hotter. Anna understood why the animals she'd seen moved slowly, and seldom during the day. She ate as she prepared her other boot, thinking.

She'd need more sap in time. The returning pain soon after the fight with the boxard told her so. The pain had been less, but it had returned.

The night before, when she'd first found the sap, she'd rolled a gob of the syrupy stuff in her fingers. It had formed a clay-like ball.

She could prepare bite-sized balls and store them in a sack made of exosuit. Once night fell, she'd use the skin for clothes. She'd strap the shell to her own back with exosuit strips and wrap the skin around her. Then, when she had to stop again for the day, if she couldn't find other shade, she'd use the skin and shell. She'd need to take a few pieces of tree for a frame.

Anna hefted a limb, two meters long and slender, a gnarled and blunt spear. She found two others. Three spears. Not too heavy, and enough to form a tripod.

She ate and thought, checked her meat. She molded sapbalm balls and stacked them near the bag she'd made and her pile of exosuit fabric. The day eased toward noon, and she adjusted her shelter as the sun dictated.

It grew hotter, and she began to hurt again, especially her face and stomach.

Anna swallowed a sap ball. Then she smeared a thin film on an exosuit strip and tied it over her head and under her chin, covering the right cheek. She tied another strip around her forehead to secure the vertical bandage in place. She found she perspired less, and the sapbalm-saturated fabric seemed to hold the soothing medicine longer.

She wrapped sap-saturated fabric around her legs and arms and made pants to cover her bottom.

The sun progressed, and she adjusted her shelter. She moved as little as possible but stockpiled sapbalm, cooked meat. And thought. She'd tended her physical hurts, and she had food, clothing and shelter. What to do next?

No wind. Anna listened to the desert stillness. She'd never known silence so total before. Always, in Tierra Natal, something hummed or hissed. However faint, there was always sound.

Here, nothing. She held her breath. Nothing.

No wind. She recalled wind came with the few brief rains that had swept down on Tierra Natal from the north in the fall and spring. Three storms had hit soon after planetfall. This side of Goliath was drier than the eastern side, and hotter, one reason they put Natal where it was besides the relatively abundant grass they hoped to use for grazing sheep, goats and other animals. She didn't know if the same wind pattern existed here. Maybe it got windy more often.

Or less.

Again she sighed. She didn't know. Maybe a strong, hot wind would suck the moisture from her body.

Anna knew resource exploration crews traveled from Goliath to Glacier Mountain and from the northern icecap to Brasilia's rocky southern icecap. Martin had mentioned them. She didn't know where they might be or if they'd be helpful. She couldn't count on anything.

If she couldn't go back to Natal then maybe she could go to Calcutta Falls, a few days farther away. Eventually, she decided if she went back to Natal she'd do so quietly. If it didn't look safe, she'd check Calcutta Falls. If she found no haven there, she'd continue to hide in the desert. If she could.

If it looked safe then she could go home.

The thought of home felt wrong, somehow. For reasons she couldn't name but which felt compelling, Anna thought going back to Natal at all might not be a good idea.

Again, the reason evaded her, but the now-distinct aversion to going back to Natal seemed overwhelming.

Another problem for later. For now, survive the day. Then at night—

A compromise—she'd go back to Goliath. There, shelter from the sun would be abundant. She had enough boxard meat for maybe two more days. Sawk nests, bist and who-knew-what else might also provide. She'd find what was edible and what wasn't. She'd just have to be resourceful. Maybe she'd find another boxard.

What about more sapplant?

The thought gave her pause, and for the first time since sunrise, Anna stood up and looked around. In the early afternoon glare from the white land and with her monocular vision, she had difficulty seeing.

Goliath lay eastward, a pinkish slit across the horizon. She guessed it couldn't be more than two or three hours away. Maybe four—she'd been in a panic when she ran into the desert.

To the north and south, nothing but spikeweed grew on the shimmering flat ground. Anna realized she must have sliced her feet to shreds on the barbs time and again as she ran through the dark. It must have hurt, but she didn't remember. The sap had done wonders healing the wounds.

She wiggled her toes in the boxard-skin boots. *Yes, they'll do.*

To the west, harder to see with the sun starting to descend, Anna saw again the lumps on the horizon that could be hills like the Barrens. She couldn't tell how far they were.

The Barrens, she recalled, held fewer life forms than did the flat plains around Natal. Those faraway hills may be as lifeless as the Barrens, but they were certainly closer.

She thought about water. She got some moisture from the boxard meat, but would it be enough? She decided she might find a spring in those hills, like the one at Calcutta Falls.

Only one way to find out.

Anna couldn't tell which lay closer—Goliath or the hills to the west. Going west rather than east began to look better.

Then, looking west, she saw something else. It looked like a sapplant, far, far away. She looked eastward, toward Goliath. No sapplant.

The hot sun made her feel headachy. She sat back in the shade and began to make a hat. She ate, adjusted the hat and checked her cooked meat, which had become as stiff as boxard feet. She gnawed off a piece of the hard meat and sucked on it.

Anna thought about the sapplant.

Three times during the day—after she'd dragged the boxard across the crater, a few hours later and now, after standing up in the sun for a few minutes—she'd needed to refresh the sapbalm in and on her body, particularly the huge face wound. She noticed her bruises had almost disappeared, the most visible now just faintly yellow. It hadn't happened as fast as nanos would have healed a bruise, but it seemed fast enough. The face wound worried her. The fried skin had seemed to grow harder, like the cooked meat, but the wound hadn't closed. She suspected it might never fully heal.

Touching the place where her ear and implant jacks had been, she decided to head west when nightfall came. The tree couldn't be more than an hour away. Maybe two. She could harvest the tree then go back to Goliath.

The bit of dried meat she sucked on softened, became juicy. She swallowed it and bit off another piece. If it didn't poison her, the dried meat might do. It was easier to carry.

Anna stood and looked again, less than certain about her decision to go west. At least one sapplant tree out there. Maybe two, the other one farther still. She shook her head, uncertain, and sat back down in the shade.

She slept.

The need to urinate awoke her. At the same time, the sun had snuck around a loose skin flap to burn her hand before dropping in the west. Cool night would come soon.

She smeared a thin sapbalm film on her hand and noticed how dark the skin had become. Like the dried meat. Much of her exposed skin had darkened.

A few more days, and I'll pass for Familia.

Anna stepped away from her shelter a few paces and urinated in the hot soil. The dry dirt sucked up the moisture. Her skin, exposed while she urinated, felt blistering.

She dismantled and moved the shelter to the western side of the crater. She took her sapball pouch, her spears and the boxard carcass. The skin boots protected her feet from the hot soil.

She had maybe an hour until sunset.

The skin scraps she'd wrapped around her helped. Still, during the move, the sun burned uncovered

spots on her arms and legs. Sapbalm soothed the isolated hurts.

The move, though quickly done, had been tiring. Her stomach burned. She examined her small sapball pouch and selected one pea-sized ball to swallow.

She'd bled the tree dry. The pouch didn't seem to weigh much, and Anna wondered if her supply would last more than a day or two. She touched her face again under the sap-saturated exosuit bandage. *No, I'm going to need more sapbalm. West, then, to the sapplant. Right after dark. Then east, to Goliath.*

A raucous scrawk, more vulgar than a sawk's clear cry, startled her. Across the crater, on the eastern rim, stood a bird. She'd never seen its like. It looked bigger than sawks, almost as tall as she. Its leathery wings fluttered, spreading three meters from tip to tip as it settled. She hadn't heard it coming.

Its metallic scales glistened wetly in the setting sun. They were tiny and covered its body, except for its long, stiff, twig-like legs and its long, sinewy neck, which seemed covered with wattled, red skin like the boxard meat. Atop the neck, as long as the boxard's, large, white eyes blinked in a small head. From the head, a bile-yellow beak protruded. The beak, two sharp spears, was half as long as the neck. A bright red tongue quivered between the twin spears.

The bird looked at Anna, lifted one delicate leg, showing lethal-looking claws. It tilted its head to focus one eye on her and opened its beak.

"Cree?" it asked, bright tongue quivering.

Another bird landed near the first.

"Cree?"

In the purpling sky, other birds wheeled. Lots of them.

"Cree?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Scavengers. Just as she'd taught her scholars. Just as on Earthome and every other planet, nature filled every ecological niche on Phoenix IV with life. Of course, there'd be scavengers.

And predators.

Here were the scavengers, with their hungry eyes and carrion stench. Where were the predators? Anna now knew the answer to that, too.

The scavengers had waited till dusk, till the day's heat passed, before following the dead boxard's scent. Predators would also wait for night. Nothing moved in the day's heat.

Anna wondered how close the predators were.

East of Goliath, a reptile no bigger than one's hand preyed on the slow, thumb-sized boxards. The predators, nilas, were common throughout Brasilia. On Goliath, nilas raided sawk nests when they could

reach them and ate eggs and young. They grubbed for bist, puffer flies, insects and snakes. Sawks preyed on nilas, bist, boxard and other species.

“Cree?” One bird blinked at her as it flexed a raised stick-leg, delicate foot tipped with two long, curved claws. They glinted metallic in the low sun, and Anna thought of knives.

If the boxards here were so much bigger than those east of Goliath, then how much bigger would be the nilas—or their equivalent—compared to those to the east?

Another thought: when she ran from the powersled explosion through the night, beyond Goliath, out onto the desert, where were the predators then?

Anna counted twelve huge birds—she decided to call them creebirds—before their shifting confused her. They pranced, moved left then right, a step or two one way, a step or two the other. They shuffled, nervous scholars wanting to ask a question but too shy to raise their little hands. Simple finger-like claw-clusters tipped the birds’ bat-like membranous wings. Those wings fluttered now and then, partially extended as if for balance, and the claw-hands waved at her.

Maybe they need to pee.

Anna's smile was short-lived.

They called in their human-like squawk, their tone curious, questioning, not threatening, frantic or angry. Or hungry. Yet.

Anna wondered if they'd attack. She looked at the razor-sharp claws, no doubt made to tear through thick, armored skin to tender, edible flesh underneath, and the spear-point beaks and decided she didn't want to find out the hard way. She needed to do something.

The creebirds edged closer, a few centimeters at a time, encircling her. They pranced on their delicate, twiggy legs, knife-claws slicing the hard ground.

Not until Anna noticed they'd encircled her did she consider making a run for it. Too late. The creebirds fascinated, frightened her—she'd been watching, not thinking.

She didn't know what to do.

Then she noticed a curious thing. None of the creebirds entered the crater. None even put so much as a foot inside it. The behavior made it clear she could retreat to the crater bottom and escape their ravenous attention, but she dismissed the idea. She had enough food to last a few days, but she dreaded another day huddled in one spot, sheltering from the heat. She'd need more food and sapbalm soon. She had to move.

The sapplant she'd seen to the west had to be near enough, had to be. If she could confuse the scavengers, keep them busy long enough, she could dash to the tree, get more sap, maybe find another glass-bowl crater to shelter in.

She tried not to think about what predators might be out there in the desert, unseen, waiting.

The creebirds diverted her attention. They began to move in closer on three sides—north, south and west. They crept around the crater rim to within five or six meters on either side. Westward, silhouetted

in the setting sun, a few stood four meters away. Closer. Now, three meters.

As they closed in, their calls changed in pitch, became more insistent. One bold one crept to within two meters on the north side. It stood facing her, bobbing its head in a long arc while it scratched with one claw-foot.

Dread clogging her throat, Anna squatted on her heels, knees under her chin, and wedged deeper in the glassy boxard burrow on the western crater rim. But she couldn't huddle in the crater all night. If she planned to run westward across the desert to the sapplant she'd better do it soon. Who knew what surprises the night might still hold?

She recalled her scholars and the mental exercise she'd used at dawn when, with their help, she'd figured out how to make a shelter. They might help now.

"Cree!" the bold creebird demanded.

"Scholars, your attention, please."

The creebird's neck stiffened. It blinked and danced back. Several others stopped squawking and stood still.

"What's the matter with—?"

The big bird froze, head cocked, staring. More went silent.

"So, you birds have never heard a teacher before. Okay."

The bold creebird edged back a step, neck stiff, eyes wary. Two others behind it stepped back farther, making way.

Anna clapped her hands and several birds flinched, wings fluttering for balance as they hopped a meter into the air and away from her.

"Scholars, attention! Class is dismissed! Go to Sanctuary! Do so now!"

The creebirds chorused in alarm. They fluttered and flapped, rose and circled in a tight knot.

None strayed far. Ten meters. Eight.

Anna clapped and shouted. She tried to whistle but the wound in her face muffled her. Soon, the creebirds adapted to the alien noise. They moved in as before.

Anna threw dirt at them. They ducked and complained, bobbing wattled heads and flapping wings to shake off the dirt in dusty clouds. They moved in.

"Okay, scholars. What else?"

They were after the boxard carcass. She'd gotten used to its odor, sitting near it all day—she could understand how the smell might have carried for kilometers to where the creebirds nested or waited out the day—Goliath? Or the hills to the west?

She didn't want to give up the meat if she could avoid it. She needed it, didn't know how long until she'd get more.

If she stayed in the crater she'd keep the meat, since the creebirds avoided the confined area. Then she'd have to face another day in the same spot, which she'd already decided she didn't want to do—and she'd run out of sap.

To make a run for it, she'd have to give up the food to the hungry creebirds.

They ignored her shouts and clapping, and they ducked and shook off the dirt and rock she tossed, moving in, their calls more insistent, angry.

Anna tore a meat chunk from the boxard, a large piece—more than half the torso and one leg. She heaved it over the creebirds to the north, and the flock took off after it. They cried out like children at play, wings clashing and beaks clacking as they descended on the meat. Amid raucous caws, flapping wings battering each other, they tossed it into the air, ripping at it.

She spared a moment to watch in fascination. The morsel wouldn't be enough for the creebirds—buzzards, that was it. Something like it on Earthome and on Espana called *buzzards*.

When the buzzards—creebirds—finished with that piece, they'd demand more. She couldn't meet that demand.

Anna had an idea.

Yes, the nilas here, wherever they were, might be bigger than those beyond Goliath, but they'd be slow, too. Lefty and Righty moved like glaciers, and their nila predators weren't much faster. The huge boxard she'd killed had been slow.

The insight helped explain why she'd seen no predators the night she fled Goliath and the powersled blast. Her mind had been occupied, it was dark, they were camouflaged and they were likely as slow as their tinier relatives.

If she'd passed near any in the night—she may have even stumbled over one—they wouldn't have had time to perceive her alien scent as food and be quick enough to act. Maybe she ran too fast for them.

Maybe she smelled like a predator to the predators.

No, the scavenger creebirds didn't fear her, though it had taken them a while to lose their reluctance to approach.

If she ran fast, didn't stop and stayed alert, she could avoid nilas. When she reached the tree, maybe she could climb it, though she didn't know how tall it might be or how stout or if the predators could climb, leap or—

Maybe she'd find another glass-bowl crater. Maybe a giant nila would avoid the crater, as the creebirds did.

Maybe. She didn't know anything.

She sighed. It was a plan. It would have to do.

She needed the sapbalm, too. A dull ache in her abdomen and along the right side of her face made it clear.

She'd seen scavengers in holos go cannibal, turn on their own kind when wounded, weak or old. If she could kill a creebird she could get away while they feasted.

She had three crude spears. After what she'd done to the boxard, she could do it. It seemed her only option.

The flock milled around pieces of meat, the nearest one three or four meters distant. Anna untangled the spear-poles from the skin shelter in quick, efficient moves. She rolled the skin around the poles as she might fold a tent and attached the carcass to it with an exosuit strip. She'd carry the poles on her shoulder.

She secured the sapbalm pouch to the exosuit belt around her waist and tucked the dried meat into it. She bundled the exosuit scraps in a pouch and tied it to her waist. Ready at last, she rose, scrambled out of the crater and stood watching the creebirds.

They'd torn the large meat lump into several pieces and had scattered farther afield, eating in twos or threes, some as far as fifteen meters off. Some did not eat. Those few eyed Anna as they had before, unsated. *Time to do it.*

A threesome fought over a tiny piece two meters away. Within easy reach. Something about flock behavior occurred to Anna. Herds had leaders, or those treated as such—she couldn't remember the term. The bold creebird, the one that approached, might be the group's leader. If she killed it, maybe the flock would leave.

She couldn't spot the bold one in the milling flock. They all looked alike. No matter.

She raised the blunt spear above her head and brought it down on a bird.

At first she thought her monocular vision might betray her and she'd miss, but she didn't. She hit its scaly back with a dull thump. It recoiled in pain and scrawked, wheeling, snapping its beak where she had connected. Some of the flock looked up at their screaming cousin, gory shreds dangling from their beaks.

Anna struck again, aiming for the spot she'd hit before. She missed and clipped its wing instead. The blow slashed a tear through loose wing-skin with a ripping noise. The creebird screamed louder, its gyrations more frantic. The other birds descended on it, pecking. They encircled the screaming creebird, which vanished under their undulating tidal wave.

The sun had dropped behind the far western hills now, and Anna couldn't see much in the melee; but it looked as if the creebirds were ripping off their cousin's wings. Devouring it. The screams got lost in the feeding frenzy, and she turned away.

She hefted the poles and skin over her shoulder. It weighed little. She ran westward at a fast trot. The boxard-skin boots fit well enough, though they felt slimy on her feet. They'd do.

Starlight illuminated the ground with ghostly pearlescence well enough that she ran sure-footed. A bright star on the horizon marked the sapplant, which she couldn't see in the dark.

Behind her, the raucous creebird feast continued. Soon, she could no longer hear the birds' cries. She ran on, pace steady, eyes on the ground a few meters ahead to ensure she didn't trip or run into something, like the sapplant. The bundles slapped against her hip and the poles bounced on her shoulder in rhythm with her stride. The scattered spikeweed knobs appeared as dark freckles on the lighter, starlit ground, ten or twenty meters apart. Anna couldn't avoid each spiky cluster, but she'd become adjusted to the boots and she no longer avoided the clumps. Her stride steadied as a result.

She settled into a relaxed daze as she ran in steady rhythm ... and she thought.

She thought about the peculiar biota she'd encountered at the crater, so like the biota near Tierra Natal. So unlike, too.

She tried to recall what she knew about biology in general. Niches. Species. Competition and cooperation. Predator and prey. The Common Origin Theory. She knew so little.

Anna had a hunch that when she got to the sapplant she'd find a crater gleaming in the starry night, like the one she'd left, and boxard burrows. The crater, the tree, the boxard—they were all a ... a system. *Symbiosis*.

Where there was one, there would be the others. *Symbiosis*.

She ran on. While there'd still been enough light, she'd sighted her destination just under a large star a hand's-width over the horizon. The dim starlight would help her spot the twisted tree arms against the lighter background when she got closer.

Maybe I'll run into the thing like I did before. So far, no predators.

She scanned the ground as she ran, occasionally sighting on the star, but she saw only spikeweed tufts. No predators.

It was dark, and they'd be camouflaged. Their backs would be splotched in tans and browns to fool prey into thinking them part of the landscape, to blunder in range of their long black tongues.

There would be few. Anna recalled there always had to be more prey than predators.

She mused over the size difference between the boxard she'd killed and Lefty and Righty and the nilas she knew. She shuddered. Still, maybe there'd be only one predator every few hundred meters or so, given the size.

Just ahead, the sapplant gleamed faintly. Not far away now. Good. She'd begun to tire.

Given the distance she'd already run, and the large size she suspected they grew to, Anna thought it odd she hadn't seen at least one predator yet.

Her relief abruptly ended. She tripped on a hump that shot up from under her with a rumbling groan. She fell head first and sprawled, one hand painfully uprooting a spikeweed. The skin-wrapped spears and boxard carcass flew from her hands on impact. She lost the shell, too.

Anna rolled onto her back, ignoring the spikeweed barbs in her arms and legs, and looked up. Up, at the dark, whale-like behemoth towering over her, blotting out the stars. It snarled, a stinking, gut-shaking groan; and from its mouth a black tongue snaked toward her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The giant nila rumbled deep in its chest, and Anna's bowels clenched. The ground shook under her as the creature growled. A scream rose in her throat, but she swallowed it. She panted through gritted teeth.

The monster's indistinct blob-shape blotted out the stars. She watched horrified as its tongue snaked toward her feet. As thick as her arm, it quivered, and it seemed to Anna as though the monster sniffed her with it.

It's bigger than I expected. It must be four meters tall.

She turned over, gathered her knees under her to run. She'd just started to push up and away when the muscular tongue snapped out and wrapped around her ankle.

Not acidic like the boxard.

The tongue constricted and jerked. Anna grunted as she fell face-first, arms splayed, hard to the ground. The tongue pulled her up. Fiery pain shot up Anna's calf from the constricted ankle as she was dragged across the ground. She kicked with the other foot, but she couldn't break free.

It lifted her off the ground, head down. *It's going to eat me.* She jerked and kicked, punching the nila's leathery chest with both fists. Warm, slimy saliva gushed from its mouth onto her calf. Its hot breath reeked.

Sharp teeth lined its huge mouth. The tongue pulled her toward the dark maw. She kicked and jerked.

Suddenly, it let go. It had caught her by the boxard boot. Anna thumped to the ground as the boot slipped off her foot. She scrambled away, got up and ran.

While in the nila's grip, she'd gotten turned around and she limped eastward. As she turned to look back at the monster, she saw behind it the sapplant tree she wanted to reach. She altered her course, taking a wide path around the nila north, then west.

She couldn't climb the tree to get away—the nila was too tall. She thought there might be a boxard hole to hide in, like those she'd found at the crater. She might break off a tree branch and use it as a weapon.

She barked a laugh at that last notion.

The nila's prehensile tongue was fast, but otherwise it acted as slow-witted as its tinier east-of-Goliath cousin. It regained its focus and lumbered after her.

Her wide sweep around the monster had taken her several dozen meters farther from her destination. A glance over her shoulder showed the nila on an intercept course, as if it recognized where she was heading. It moved faster.

She'd had a hunch about the sapplant, the crater, the boxard. A symbiotic relationship seemed evident even if its exact nature was unclear. The way the nila now bellowed in frustration or anger as it pursued told her she'd been right.

The creebirds wouldn't go near the crater. She could figure out why—later. *If there is a later.*

Anna increased her pace, ignoring her painful ankle. Just a few more steps, then—

The gnarled sapplant limbs, silvery in the starlight, rose into the sky. Her monocular vision betrayed her, and Anna almost collided with the tree even as she saw the crater beyond it, even as she felt the nila's fetid breath on her neck. She leaped into the air above the pit. Three steps earlier, she'd sensed her pursuer come to an abrupt halt. As she flew, it tottered on the rim.

Anna flailed, not knowing how far into the darkness she'd fall. She hit with a jolt, lost her balance and slid to the hard, slick crater bottom. Her ankle burned. When she stopped, she looked up, panting. The nila hadn't followed.

It stood very close—eight meters. Backlit against the stars, the monster loomed over the crater rim, the sapplant trunk two meters to one side, its tallest branches reaching as high as the nila.

Anna sat in the crater, looking up at the nila. It occurred to her that, if the creebirds and nila wouldn't go in the crater maybe they feared something. *I should be afraid, too.*

The beast crouched and stretched its long neck, tongue probing. She flinched, but the tongue got no closer than two meters. If she stayed in the crater center, she'd be safe.

The nila didn't appear afraid. *It's something else.*

Pain in her arms from the spikeweed barbs she'd landed on earlier caught her attention. She reached for the sapbalm pouch. Gone. The shredded exosuit bag hung loose at her waist, ready to fall away, but she still had it.

Anna stifled a cry.

Pulling barbs from her arms and legs, she thought furiously. Whatever kept the creebirds and nila from the crater hadn't hurt her. She'd spent a day in the first one and nothing happened. Again she shook her head in frustration. She decided she ought to get ready to run again. Just in case.

Her rapid breathing and heart rate had slowed in the minutes since she'd fallen into the refuge. It occurred to her she should be more tired—maybe the sapbalm had somehow helped improve her stamina.

Anna thought about the sapbalm as she plucked bloodstained barbs, laying them in a neat pile. In the dim light, she could see slivers buried under her skin. She thought about infection, bacteria. She thought about things she'd only read on the net and taught in the most basic terms.

Med nanos had dealt with such problems. She'd heard of people who'd deprogrammed their med systems—for experiments, for religious reasons, on a dare, for crazy reasons. She'd never known such pain...

Not so. There was the moment she woke up after the powersled explosion in the canyon, when she'd discovered the blast damage to her face, when she'd discovered the sapplant.

Which saved me.

She looked up at the sapplant, thin, gnarled branches spread across the starscape. At the tree's foot the nila lay like a dog, watching, tongue lolling. It sounded like a dog, whining unhappily.

The nearest sapplant limb hung over the crater close enough for Anna to feel certain she could stand up, reach out and grab it. But if she tried, the vigilant nila's tongue would whip out and grab *her*. Its eyes glinted, unblinking.

Her injuries stung in a dozen places. She needed the sapbalm. So close. She couldn't reach it. The nila watched.

It chewed on something. The boot.

“Huh,” Anna grunted. “Do you like boxard, then?”

The nila stopped chewing its morsel and tilted its head.

She smiled and pulled off the other boot. “Would you like more?” She stood, hefting the boot.

The nila grunted to its feet. It set the gnawed boot aside and gazed at her, muscles tensed.

“Fetch.” She tossed the boot westward as far as she could. As the nila dashed in its bear-like lumber around the crater toward in pursuit, she reached out and grabbed the nearest sapplant limb. She jerked it, and it snapped off. A quick glance told her the nila was still occupied fetching the boot and she had time to grab another limb. She tossed them to the crater center and sat down as the nila returned, lumbering back to the crater rim all the way around to the east side, where it put the second boot by the first, lay back down and chewed. It purred ... and watched.

Anna scooped sap from one branch end and wiped it on her wounds. As before, coldness gave way to tingling then numbness. She sighed with relief as she caulked her wounds then rolled a pea-sized ball and swallowed it.

Her face no longer hurt, and she'd stopped breathing hard. Slowly, the bleeding stopped and the pain eased.

She didn't know how much time had passed since darkfall, and more important, she didn't know how much time remained until day. Examining the stars, Anna tried to remember what little she knew about the starscape. She'd never needed to know how to tell time by the stars. She'd had a chrono implant. Had.

Maybe the nila will sleep, let me sneak away. She couldn't see its eyes in the dark now. It lay still.

An experiment. Anna eased to her feet. The monster tensed.

She had no boxard boots to throw as a distraction, which might have provided a head start. She looked at her meager resources. Two sapplant limbs, a little sapbalm, the remnants of her pantsuit and a few spikeweed thorns.

Spikeweed thorns she'd dug from her own flesh.

Hide like steel, yes, but what about the tongue?

Anna chuckled. The nila tensed at the sound and it raised its head, tongue snaking out a meter, quivering,

sniffing.

“Good. Stick your tongue at me. See what happens.”

It took some effort for her to assemble the makeshift weapon. At first, the spikeweed barbs lay flat against the head of the limb when she tried to tie them down with exosuit strips. In time she figured out how to fasten them so most stuck out. Soon, she had what she needed.

She stood up in the crater center, which brought the nila to its feet, alert. She swung the barbed club like a bat. It swooshed through the air, and the nila growled.

Satisfied, Anna laid the club on her shoulder and reoriented herself. She'd lost her bearings after jumping into the crater but quickly sorted herself out. Behind the nila was east, though she couldn't see Goliath. Fleet Phoenix had just risen in the east and begun its passage overhead.

Yesterday, she'd seen at least one other sapplant farther west.

West, then. That way.

Then again, even if she did hurt the nila, another run across the desert might be a mistake. There might be another nila, bigger, stronger. Or there might not be a crater under the next sapplant, or the crater might be too small, or...

She shook her head in frustration. *Just do it.*

“Hey, you.” Anna took a step toward the nila. As she expected, it stretched its neck forward and arched its tongue out, reaching. A meter away. Putting her shoulders into the swing, Anna aimed the barbed club at the tongue, hoping her monocular vision wouldn't betray her with a miss.

The club hit with a fleshy thump.

The nila roared, jerked back, wrenching the club from Anna's grip. She fell as the nila recoiled, pulling the club with it.

She stood and watched the screaming nila writhe and bellow, trying to pluck the barbed stick from its tongue with stubby arms. The club stuck like a harpoon. Blood sprayed. Anna thought of Earhome whales leaping above ocean waves. The ground shook. The creature screamed its pain into the night.

She grabbed the other sapplant limb, also barbed, and checked to make sure the sapbalm was secure in a new sack on her waist. She climbed out of the crater and stood on the west rim. And froze. Twenty, maybe thirty meters away—another nila lumbered toward her.

Anna slipped back into the crater, legs rubbery. She backed into the center as the new threat edged over the rim, tongue outstretched, questing. This one, smaller than the monster she'd batted with her thorn-club, gave her more room in the crater center. Like the monster she'd slashed, it took up its post with patient vigilance.

Anna eyed the boxard burrows, dark pimples on the crater rim, thinking she might crawl into one. All too small. She gathered knees to chin as she sat, and shivered as she listened to the alien night.

Sharp cries and sail-like flapping announced the creebirds' arrival. Shadows fluttered between the stars.

The birds dropped down to the west, a few dozen meters away. Their cries joined the injured nila's screams and the bellows of other nilas, also converging.

Maybe the nilas might attack their injured cousin as the creebirds had. It didn't happen—the grunts, purrs and shuffling around the crater continued as first one then another giant nila came to view her.

Anna sighed. There had been one idea she'd dismissed before she'd hit the nila. Now, it loomed as her only option. The nilas wouldn't go away. She couldn't drive them away. They wouldn't sleep. She'd be forced to stay in the crater until daybreak when the nilas, like the creebirds and boxards, hid from the sun. Then she could move—in the heat of the day.

With grunts and wild cries to serenade her through the hours until dawn, she began to make an umbrella.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Anna had never been clever with her hands. She'd never had to be. She took a long time to think about what she wanted to do, and then she took more time to think about how she'd do it. At last, clumsily, slowly—she had no skills, so she learned as she worked—in the darkness and with no tools, she made her umbrella.

As she worked, fighting nilas and creebirds serenaded her. She ignored them as she split the brittle, stiff sapplant limb and fashioned a cross. Between the cross arms, she strung exosuit strips and pantsuit with sap rubbed into the fibers to stiffen it to form a broad, opaque sail. Spikeweed barbs secured it.

She also made a hat and socks.

Sitting on her heels in the crater, she balanced the umbrella in her hands. It looked crude, but it might do. It would have to do; the sun would come up soon. Already the creature noises were dying away as they moved to safety, anticipating the morning heat.

Anna stood. A blue tinge on the eastern horizon grew brighter, and the stars began to fade. She thought again about what she planned to do, running through the desert in the day, a daunting prospect.

The nilas and creebirds had disappeared, and the desert had gone silent. A boxard scrambled for its burrow. Anna had noticed the dozen or so burrows, like moles on the crater's lip, but her attention had been focused elsewhere. As dawn broke, the boxard appeared and sought its refuge, just as the one she'd killed and eaten the day before had done.

It found its sanctuary and disappeared into it before she could move. Absently, she wondered how the slow-witted creature had avoided the nilas in its nightly sojourn outside.

She didn't try to catch it. Strange. She didn't feel hungry. Or tired. She regretted not having its skin and shell to wear, but resigned herself to the alternative she'd so laboriously made. She wouldn't have had time to skin it, anyway.

Two thoughts occurred as she watched dawn approach. First, a relationship did exist among the phenomena she'd observed—sapplant, crater, boxard, nila, creebirds. She'd seen other things moving in the night, too—a smaller, lizard-like scavenger—and insects buzzed around the crater.

There'd be another boxard at the next crater. She could catch one at dawn when it entered its burrow.

And, looking west, there was enough light now to see another sapplant out there at the limit of her vision, where she expected it to be. There were craters all over the desert, to the north and south too, all spread out.

Secondly, she'd become convinced the sapbalm had something to do with her good health. She recalled her energy as she'd run hours ago, before she tripped over the nila. She'd fought ferociously. She'd never been athletic, yet she'd fought hard.

And after, in the crater, she'd recovered her wind almost right away. Her wounds had healed rapidly after she applied the sapbalm. And now, she wasn't hungry.

As lighter blue sky spread in the east, she wondered. The sapbalm seemed like an organic nano-med system. She felt good, despite her circumstances, but she feared the sapbalm might later prove harmful—somehow.

She touched the leathery skin on the right side of her face. Eyeless, earless. The wound had closed, covering her teeth. Her skin felt leathery, like nila skin. No pain. Perhaps she should fear changes because of the sapbalm, maybe harmful changes, but she didn't. She felt good.

The first of the sun's rays touched the top of the sapplant tree, and Anna squinted into the brightening east. The wounded nila had been killed and ripped apart, picked clean, leaving nothing but scattered bones. Naked except for cap, socks and belt, she climbed from the crater, heading west at a steady trot, the sapbalm bundle slapping her hip with each step, the umbrella bobbing on her shoulder. She focused a few meters ahead as she ran. The flimsy socks wouldn't keep spikeweed barbs from cutting her feet if she stepped on one so she concentrated on avoiding them. Her monocular vision made it difficult. Luckily, ten or twenty meters separated each fist-sized cluster.

Anna found a steady rhythm and loped on. She carried little sapbalm in the pouch and no longer feared she'd run out. She glanced up as she ran to confirm the next tree stood out on the horizon. She expected to see one beyond that, and another beyond that.

She needed to reach the distant hills, find shade and refuge from the night-marauding nilas. She needed water, too—she'd absorbed moisture from the boxard meat, but she hadn't eaten since and she knew her exertion in the sun, despite her sunshade, would dehydrate her. How fast and how soon, she didn't know, but it would happen. There might be a spring in the hills, like at Calcutta Falls.

The sun's rays hit her upper back, and the intense heat tingled on her skin despite a thin sap layer she'd applied before she set out. She hadn't been able to reach a spot on her back. She shifted the umbrella to shade lower down on her shoulders.

She passed the first crater and trotted on to the second. Before she reached the third, she thought to measure the distance between them, so she counted paces between the third and fourth. She took four hundred and eight paces between those craters, four hundred and twenty-five between the next two and four hundred and twelve between the next two. About five hundred meters apart, then. Evenly spaced.

Ouch! Her attention had wandered, and she scraped a toe against a spikeweed cluster. She was breathing hard and sweating. She slowed to a walk and resolved to stop at the next crater.

When she did, she took out a pea-sized sap ball and sucked on it. Relief came soon as the balm dissolved in her mouth. She got her breath back, and her heart rate slowed.

But the heat had taken its toll. She'd hoped the sapbalm would restore some moisture in her mouth, but it didn't. Not enough.

A look at the western horizon told her she might expect to take an hour or two—maybe more—to reach the hills, which now appeared higher. They'd taken on more definition. Dark spots, she decided, might be vegetation.

She tried to blink on her chrono then wagged her head in exasperation, shaking sweat from her face. Old habits.

Anna considered what to do about her parched mouth and throat. She plucked a barb from a spikeweed. She chewed on the blunt end and found it moist. She worked it and salivated a little, to her relief.

She ran on, skin itching where she'd been unable to shade it, wondering if she'd made a mistake, if she should have tried to make it to Goliath, or stayed where she was—tried to shade up there. Nothing, even what she was doing now, seemed a good idea.

But she loped on, no longer counting paces. She sought some other mental exercise to take her mind off the increasingly unbearable heat and the fear she might die within the hour. *Where are the nilas now?*

She'd noticed, now and then, vague, low mounds in the ground, no more than a few centimeters high. It occurred to her they might indicate where nilas had buried themselves, hiding from the heat. The ground around the bumps looked disturbed, darker. The mounds were a meter or so across, three or four meters long.

Counting again, she saw no mound closer than two hundred paces to the next. Territory. Evenly spaced but widely disbursed in the harsh environment. Should she dig one up to see? No. A disturbed nila in the day might be a more fearsome monster than one encountered at night. Or maybe not, but she didn't want to find out now. Besides, she didn't want to stop; the heat was growing insufferable. She had to find shelter. Soon.

The sunlight glared off the ashy-white surface, and her single eye watered. She wiped at it and blinked, straining to keep focused on the ground a few paces ahead. Briefly, she considering burying herself, like the nila; but the ground looked too hard to dig up, especially in the heat. It would take too much time. She also thought of suffocation and the idea paled.

Anna didn't look up to confirm it, but she decided the hills couldn't be much farther away now. Her back hurt from the heat, an intense stinging. She tried to protect it with the umbrella, but it wasn't enough. The backs of her legs were burning, too.

She stopped at the next crater and daubed sapbalm on her legs, arms, shoulders and as much of her back as she could reach. It hurt to touch her skin.

I can make a sponge, some suit scraps on a stick, to reach my back. Later.

She checked the boxard burrows around the crater lip and thought again of hiding in one. None looked big enough. Time to move on.

The heat grew still more intense, hellish. She stopped once again and applied more sap on her backside. She took a thumb-sized ball in her mouth and sucked it until it dissolved. Not enough.

The sun stood midway between horizon and zenith—Anna regretted the impulse she'd had to check. It had taken a second, yet the effort had scalded her unprotected face. She looked toward the western hills. Too far. She couldn't make it. Her body was frying.

When she reached the next crater, she climbed up the sapplant tree to see how far she had to go to reach the hills. She'd count craters, as far as she could see. The tree was easy to climb, or perhaps the sabbalm had made her more agile as well as healthy.

But the effort was fruitless. She counted six craters, and the hills seemed even farther off. Six to eight kilometers, maybe more.

She sighed and climbed back down. She'd propped her umbrella against the tree when she climbed up, maybe four or five meters off the ground, and her back had become itchy by the time she got down. Sitting under the umbrella's meager shade, she put more sabbalm on her back. The skin felt papery.

With a sigh, she continued westward. Her stride became unsteady; and within a few meters, she stubbed toes on a spikeweed. She was tiring despite the balm. The heat was baking her alive, and she couldn't go on.

Anna hobbled to the next crater, trying to decide what to do. She couldn't make it to the hills soon enough, and she needed to be there soon—she needed to be there now.

The sun rose higher. *What options do I have?* She came up with nothing.

When she reached the crater, she sat under the umbrella and daubed sap on her wounded toes. Then she unwrapped the cloth strips from around her feet and removed her hat. Better assemble a shelter. She used the spreading sapplant branches to anchor the strips. She spread as much of the cloth as she could over her, feeling dizzy with weariness and the heat.

It soon became clear the shelter wouldn't be enough. She'd have to lay curled under it, knees drawn up. If she fell asleep and her legs stretched out, they'd burn. No choice. Even if the hills had been a kilometer away, she couldn't make it. Weak and weary, she could move no more.

The sun neared zenith before she finished the shelter. Anna smeared the last sabbalm on and swallowed a bit as she pondered the silent, hot landscape through her squinted eye. When she needed more sabbalm she'd break the tree against which she sat, but for now she needed rest.

With her back to the tree, she folded legs against chest and laid her head on her knees. She slept, expecting to die in her sleep.

* * * *

Not knowing how long she'd slept, she woke up to a coolness. A coldness. Anna looked up, puzzled, squinting to locate the sun. It had passed the zenith a few degrees, but it looked odd. And she could look at it without squinting. It looked blurry, indistinct.

She stood—and felt a breeze caress her skin. Wind, from the west.

In the sky—all around but more prominent in the west, where the wind came from—she saw something she hadn't seen but three times on Phoenix IV.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The first time Anna had seen clouds on Phoenix IV, two months after planetfall, there had been a misty rain. It would have been called a heavy fog on Earthome. Still, the real thing, however meager, was better than a livewall simulation. Colonists stopped what they were doing and went outside. She'd escorted her laughing, fidgety scholars out—some had never seen rain.

They'd stood in the cold drizzle, faces and arms uplifted, without exosuits, jumping and squealing with glee. It had been glorious fun, even for the adults who remembered rain. It started in mid-morning and lasted until past nightfall. By midnight, the clouds were gone.

Anna recollected the occasion now as she smiled up at the cool, gray sky. Back then, in those few hours, the air had a metallic tang, and a lavender sweetness. Within minutes, while the colonists watched, the dusty, mottled gray-tan desert had blossomed in bright green splashes dappled with tiny golden flowers. Spikeweed and whipgrass budded in desperate haste, taking advantage of the infrequent moisture. Remembering, she inhaled, eye closed, but she smelled nothing.

The ground had turned greasy-slick in the dampness; it seethed with crawling, hopping life. Boxards, nilas, bist and others surged from nowhere and spread everywhere. The air buzzed with insects. Sawks came from faraway Goliath to dart and wheel within sight of Tierra Natal. They avoided the humans, but barely, as they devoured flying insects and waddled after crawling and wiggling creatures in the mud.

Life had flourished through the next day and into the following night. Evidence of the spectacle disappeared by the third afternoon, except for the spikeweed buds' lavender scent, which lingered another three days above the damp-smelling grass. The desert dried up, and the whipgrass turned amber.

Two weeks later, clouds again descended from the north to blot out the sun, but no rain fell. Colonists went outside anyway to enjoy the cool air, and the novelty. Those clouds lasted half a day.

And three weeks after that, a cloud cover persisting only a few hours dimmed the sun. Again, no rain fell, though the air was moist and the vegetation budded suddenly as it had before. Again colonists went outdoors as if on holiday.

Three times. It constituted the rainy season at their latitude, though more rain had fallen farther north and on Glacier Mountain.

Anna remembered those occasions as she watched the clouds bunch up over the western hills, darker there than overhead.

She sniffed the air again. Now it smelled lavender, like rain.

Whether it rained or not, the coolness meant survival. She stood. Her legs wobbled, but the clouds rejuvenated her spirits; she resolved to move on to the hills. She guessed she had four to six hours of daylight left—she might make the distance by then.

She walked on, in time picking up her pace to a steady, easy jog. After a while, she looked up from the desert floor to gaze at the horizon. The nearest hills rising from the flat desert floor seemed within two or

three kilometers now. She counted sapplant trees as far as she could see. The sky had turned grayer, and she noticed she had no shadow. She felt a distinct chill in the air.

She stopped to look back. Behind her, soft green fuzz coated the distant ground. No rain had yet fallen, but the air felt damp. Spikeweed had started to bloom. She inhaled the lavender scent and smiled. Kneeling, she saw tiny buds among the thorns, ready to burst into flower.

She resumed her trek. True rain came, slowly at first as fat drops splatted on the parched dirt. A torrent soon followed, silvery rain curtains turning the ground to slick mud. Anna slowed her pace. Among the tiny yellow spikeweed flowers bursting open, beet and insects crawled. Now, Anna could see no more than thirty or forty meters. She shivered as the temperature dropped sharply.

When she came to the next crater, she stopped and stared, mouth open. A boxard knelt over the crater rim, long black tongue extended into the water-filled bowl. Opposite it, a giant nila also drank.

The nila knelt at the crater's east edge, the boxard at the west, between two large burrows. Predator and prey drank from the same crater. They ignored each other. Between them, beet, insects, worms and snakes and other creatures Anna had never seen before—most of them looked like lizards—lapped from the crater. More animals stood back from the edge, waiting their turn.

She understood.

Waterhole.

The animals ignored her. The huge nila ten meters away purred deep in its throat as it drank. Hundreds of animals—thousands—rimmed the crater and hung from the greening sapplant branches. A humming Anna could hear above the chattering rain filled the air.

Waterhole. Now she understood. The glassy crater bottom wasn't porous. The creebirds and the nila didn't fear anything in the crater. It was that at the waterholes the natural laws governing their kind were suspended. The waterholes were a kind of neutral territory.

She heard the raucous calls of sawks approaching, and creebirds called. The rain now fell in earnest, sheets of it.

Waterhole.

Secretions from sapplant roots, something in the burrowing boxards' acidic saliva, maybe something from the nilas or from the spikeweed root system. How it all worked didn't matter.

The harmony, the symmetry, awed her. She stood, staring. "Amazing. It's so ... so..."

Craters evenly spaced across the flat desert floor. It looked as if the nilas were also evenly spaced. Territory.

Everything fit together in a harmonious pattern. Not all the pieces were clear to her yet, but that was clearly the whole of it. Harmony. Symmetry. Symbiosis.

Anna recalled brief conversations she'd had with Martin, and the simple lessons she'd taught her scholars about ecology. Natal had been chosen as the colony's permanent capitol site because it sat over an aquifer. The ground under Natal acted as a giant sponge, storing water colonists tapped from several

nearby wells. Run-off from Glacier Mountain fed the aquifer. An infrequent stream ran from the mountain to Calcutta Falls and the experimental fields there, then disappeared under the ground. Water flowed up at Rock Spring to the south to nurture those experimental grains. The two settlements marked the aquifer's north and south boundaries.

Between, with Tierra Natal at the center, lay vast grass fields. Whipgrass wasn't edible, but colony scientists thought they might be able to adapt a strain to nourish grazers, like goats or sheep. Or maybe the animal fetuses carried from Earthome would be engineered to thrive on the native grass.

Amazonia. That's what they called the aquifer underneath the continent they named Brasilia.

She didn't remember hearing about an aquifer west of Goliath.

Again, she shook her head. "Amazing."

She considered appeasing her hunger with boxard flesh, but the moment passed; and she walked on, headed west, careful in the slick mud. Somehow, it seemed a sacrilege to disturb the serenity of the scene at the waterhole, all those beasts come together in a few hours. A system of nature that compelled reverence.

She wondered what the Familia would make of it.

The rain had eased, and she could see farther now, a hundred meters. Anna hadn't advanced much when something intruded at the limit of her vision.

Sudden arrival at the base of the hills, the rain-thick air and her damaged vision conspired to surprise her. She hadn't expected the slopes to rise so abruptly from the flat desert floor.

They were a pinkish-tan, like Goliath, and made of the same kind of hard, flaky rock. The one she approached rose more gradually than Goliath's eastern wall did from the desert, but it was just as distinct from the ground.

As she drew closer, she saw caves—the hills were pocked with hundreds of holes, large and small, some tiny finger holes, others as big as doors.

She began to climb, careful to avoid twisting an ankle. She knelt and touched the glassy rim of a large hole. Rainwater seeped into it and disappeared. The edge felt as glassy-hard as the crater bottom, as the boxard burrow.

She backtracked a few dozen meters and rounded a large boulder, a rock outcrop. On the eastern side, she found a hole in a wall big enough to get into, with a rock roof overhanging the cavity. It was dry inside.

Cautiously, she entered. She found no animals inside and no big holes in the floor. She sighed and sat, listening to the soothing patter of the rain. Gradually, it eased to a damp haze, and Anna could see a waterhole in the distance. The gray sky above and around the crater seethed like smoke with animal life, dozens of species. There were none near her cave.

Soon, the rain stopped completely, and the westering sun made shadows among the boulders and caves at the hill's edge. The hum of life from the distant waterhole came to her as a lulling murmur. Weariness overtook her, and she made a pillow of her scant cloth, curling up to sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

She awoke to a now-familiar rhythmic scratching. *Boxard*. Near the cave mouth, starlight glinted from the creature's metallic scales. It crawled from a fist-sized hole low in the cave wall, hesitated, eyes rolling, tongue flicking, then darted into another hole a meter away.

Not a boxard. Smaller. Half a meter long. Slender, fast. The yellow eyes bulged. Anna sat up slowly, probing the dark above and around her. She wished she had a spear, found a fist-sized rock instead and hefted it. Crude, but it comforted her. The cave ceiling, she now remembered, had been a few centimeters above her head when she entered. She stood.

Water dripped from the overhanging upper lip of the cave mouth and ran in a rivulet on the hard ground, away from the cave, downhill to the east.

And to the east, in the silvery starlight, Anna saw glittering glimpses of the menagerie around the nearest crater—the waterhole—as she had before she'd fallen asleep. Sharp cries from sawks and creebirds punctuated a drone, like bees humming. Spikeweed buds scented the air.

She'd slept into the night, and a boxard-like animal woke her.

Hunger. She found her pouch and popped a sap bead into her mouth. Not enough. She needed real food. And water.

Beyond the cave mouth, she found small water pools among the rocks. She knelt and lapped as the animals did at the waterhole. As she drank, she thought about killing a boxard to eat. There was one at the waterhole not far away. No hurry.

She decided to explore first, just a little, just the immediate vicinity.

In the shadowy semi-darkness, she found caves pocking the hills to the west, north and south. A confusing maze. Some caves appeared larger than others, some with door-sized mouths. A few dark pits returned deep, hollow echoes when she shouted into them. Water dripped or gurgled in several.

The hills were a giant sponge, a vast water source. Walking around would be difficult, dangerous, but she'd never fear thirst.

Concern appeased, she resolved to postpone exploring until daylight afforded greater safety. Then she thought about food.

Anna hung her sap-and-cloth pouch on a lip high on a boulder near the cave so she could find it when she returned; then she set out for the waterhole, a rock in hand. She looked over her shoulder now and then to ensure she could see the marker and find the spot in the confusion of hillside boulders and caves.

The walk to the waterhole was easy, without problems. Even in the starlight, spikeweed glowed in milky-translucent green leaf and puffy, yellow flowers.

At the waterhole, she hesitated, again moved by the beauty of the scene, all the animals peacefully drinking or milling at the fringes, the air alive with insects, sawks, creebirds and other flying things. She spotted a few lizards like the one she'd seen in the cave. Darters, she decided to call them. A few species

she'd not seen before.

Hunger soon overrode her awe, and she moved. First, she pushed through the animal mob, including a few darters, to the sapplant two meters from a nila. It ignored her. She tossed the rock aside and broke off a branch to use as a spear, stripping pale-green foliage from it. As she did, a cinnamon scent filled the air and insects buzzed and dived, gulping up the fluttering greenery.

The split end of the brittle branch formed a needle-sharp point. She hefted it, rounded the crater and approached a boxard from behind. It ignored her, tongue in the waterhole, lapping. She held the spear point a centimeter from the flesh at the base of its extended tongue. The spot looked the most tender; and remembering the sting when the tongue had touched her earlier, she wanted to immobilize it. She tensed and thrust downward.

The spear pierced through against some resistance, pinning the boxard to the desert floor. It wriggled and jerked, squealing. Anna spread her legs wide to avoid the thrashing tongue. Animals nearby grunted, squealed or cried in alarm and scuttled away but soon settled back to their routine, leaving a space around her but otherwise ignoring what was going on.

She held the weapon in place until the animal stopped wiggling. Then, bloody spear over her shoulder, she hauled it away by its back legs, its tongue dragging behind. She soon found the marker and the cave where she'd sheltered from the storm.

It was getting lighter. Day would break soon, but she'd be in the cave's shade.

Apparently, no animals had visited her new home. Sitting cross-legged and content in the cave mouth, she again used her teeth to tear open the boxard's tough flesh. Severing a hind leg, she bit into the meat underneath, cutting off the other hind foot as she ate. The sun was rising as she finished making a new pair of boots from the feet.

She continued to eat and in time became satiated. She hung the boxard carcass by a skin flap from a knob high on the cave wall, where she hoped no scavengers could reach it. Then she scooted deeper into the cave's coolness and curled up against the back wall. She kept one hand on the spear.

The distant buzz from the waterhole faded. Water dripping somewhere deeper in the cave lulled her to sleep.

The sound of scuttling woke her. Boxard. No. Darter. It whipped from one hole in the wall into another, pausing to flick its tongue and dart bulging eyes at the boxard carcass then scooting away when she stirred.

She sat up, bladder full. By the shadows beyond the cave mouth, she guessed it was midafternoon—she'd slept well. Rising to check the carcass she discovered some ant-like insects covering an exposed leg. She brushed them off with disgust, pulled off the leg and tossed it out of the cave. She killed the “ants” for a while then found a place they couldn't reach to store the meat.

Anna bit off a piece and chewed as she went outside. The sun blazed where she stood. The boxard boots kept her feet from being fried as she walked away from her cave, scurrying from shadow to shadow. She found shade against a boulder and squatted to relieve herself.

She returned to her cave and, feeling confident, prepared to explore. She stripped the shell from the boxard. With her spear and skin strips, she made an umbrella. She used skin to make a shirt to cover her

back. She then tore the remains of her pantsuit into thin, half-meter-long strips to use as markers so she wouldn't get lost exploring the boulder-and-cave maze.

Anna sucked on a sap bead as she set out. Her need for the balm had diminished as her bruises, cuts and other wounds healed. The open face wound exposing her teeth had closed so she could chew normally. Though she moved with care, she felt content, energetic and alert as she scrambled among the boulders, holes, pits and cave entrances.

She found several much larger caves nearby, gigantic halls with high ceilings. Some had tunnels running far back into the hills. She marked them to explore later.

In one cave she found fresh and dry scat—some large animal made it a home. This cave she also marked, to avoid. There was plenty of water stored in the spongy terrain; in one large cavern a stream gurgled.

Near nightfall, she returned to her cave headquarters. Despite her precautions the ants and other insects had found a way to get to the carcass, but they hadn't taken much. She shook them off and discarded the exposed meat they'd contaminated. She'd have to find a way to ant-proof her stock. Maybe they wouldn't bother dried meat.

Time to move. She packed her tiny collection of belongings and the carcass and shifted to a larger cave, picking up the yellow pantsuit markers as she went. The larger cave was cooler and had a spring.

Anna spent the last hour of the night scraping boxard meat from bone. At daybreak she'd dry some meat and explore farther into the hills. Finally she sat, spear near at hand, listening to the night sounds.

Water lapping had already become a familiar background noise in the hills she had decided to call The Confusions. From her new vantage, though, she no longer heard the animals at the distant waterhole. In time, Anna grew satisfied no predator would disturb her, and she dozed.

She awoke once during the night and left the cave to relieve herself, taking her spear with her. She returned and slept until just before daybreak.

At dawn, she set out meat in the sun to dry. Then she decided to find the answer to a question she'd asked herself when she'd seen the first giant boxard. What did they eat? Did they suck soil for nutrients, like Righty and Lefty did?

So far, sapbalm, spikeweed barbs and boxard meat had been the only food in her diet. She had a notion that, despite her apparent general good health, she needed more; she needed variety. The boxards' diet might give her a clue about what was safe for her eat.

To find out, she had to open her kill's stomach. Anna thought it a grisly task, even after having killed the animal and eaten its flesh raw. She'd become accustomed to the soapy, sharp meat odor, but what would the stomach smell like?

There was another reason she hesitated to probe the boxard's abdominal cavity, but she couldn't name it.

She smashed a thighbone and found a splinter with a sharp edge to use as a knife. She wrapped the bone-knife handle in skin strips, thinking about the task with trepidation. She took her time, fully aware she was stalling.

As she sat cross-legged in the cave mouth, the carcass splayed before her, arms, legs and other fleshy portions stripped, just the abdominal cavity remaining, her heart raced. Something about opening up the belly made her queasy. No, that wasn't it. Odd. Anna realized she was afraid to gut the creature. Afraid of—

Of what?

Unfocused anxiety had given way to puzzlement, then fear. Anna jumped quickly to anger; and from there, with an abrupt, impatient slash of the bone knife, she ripped open the slick abdomen.

Her impaired vision betrayed her again. Her angry slash split tissue just below the stomach and cut into...

She gasped. Her constricted throat strangled a cry, and she dropped the gore-covered knife from limp fingers.

She'd cut open the womb. At her feet, between her knees, lay a glistening, wet fetus, no bigger than her hand.

A baby boxard. Dead.

A baby. Dead.

A door burst open in Anna's mind. Memory spilled out, and she screamed.

Lisan Navarroclan

Lisan guessed an hour or more remained before sunrise, but she didn't press when The Holy Mother stopped her narrative in mid-sentence. Telling about it now, Lisan had come to realize, was just as painful for her as remembering it had been back then.

Lisan wondered—how could memory hurt? But then, she knew she'd had few painful experiences in her short life—so far. Her mother's death had been hard, yes; but by the time she'd died, Lisan had experienced the deaths of all the adults except for the First Grandfather himself, the last to go. She'd become hardened to death when it came for her mother, and the pain had been lessened.

Holy Mother must have encased her heart with similar insulation from the cold, Lisan thought. Yet, after all these years, that insulation often ripped apart and let the pain through. And there seemed to be no anticipating when it would happen.

Lisan shivered in the warm night air. She hadn't cried when her mother died. She wondered if those unshed tears—the pain—lurked somewhere, ready to burst forth, as she'd seen the pain burst forth in the Holy Mother Anna Devlin.

Sighing, she carried Anna's limp, snoring body to her sleeping chamber. Bever Francosclan had repaired the recirculator gear-rope, and Lisan started the fan with a gentle push.

Before she left the chamber, she dabbed a little water on Holy Mother's lips.

“Please don't dream, dear Mother,” she whispered.

“Dream,” Anna muttered distinctly, dreaming. “Dream of home. I dream of ... home.”

Lisan stood still in the dim chamber light, breath held, listening. But the Holy Mother didn't say another word about her dreams.

Until darkfall, the next night.

* * * *

“Dream?” Her brow furrowed at Lisan's question. “I spoke of dreams and home, did I?”

Lisan nodded.

The Holy Mother thought for a while.

“Ah,” she said at last, “I tried to not dream. I tried—but I shouldn't tell you. What would you think of me?”

“Holy Mother, you dreamed of home. You tried to come home. Isn't that what you did? I mean, I heard—”

“Whatever you heard, you didn't hear from me.”

“No, I didn't.”

“There.”

“But I want to hear.”

Holy Mother shook her head, turned away.

“Please,” Lisan said, ignoring her own impertinence. “You've told me so much already. Please tell it all. Please.”

The Holy Mother suddenly stiffened, and Lisan felt sure she was going to have another attack. The girl placed a hand on the sabbalm pouch, ready.

“All, Granddaughter? You want to know it ... all?”

Under the Holy Mother's piercing, uncompromising gaze, Lisan nodded. She gulped in a dry throat, tried not to let the Holy Mother see it, but Anna lay a gentle hand on hers, patted it.

“Strength, then,” Anna began. “Let us talk about strength. And about the cost of going back, of going home.”

Lisan nodded her head.

“Your grandmother told me I should come home.”

“But how—”

“And other scholars, your aunts and uncles.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Anna wanted to die, but the scream didn't kill her. She stood on shaky legs and looked around the cave through tear-blurred eyes. Without thinking, she held her breath and ran at the nearest cave wall, hoping to break her aching skull against the rock. In the semi-darkness, and with her damaged vision, she misjudged the distance and stumbled before she hit, lessening the impact.

Still, the glancing blow to her head pulled muscles, shooting pain down her neck and into her right shoulder. She fell, hurt but not dead. Still conscious. Worse, she still remembered the pain she'd tried to smash away.

She lay groaning, rubbing the spot on the right side of her head where she'd hit the wall. The rough skin didn't feel bruised, and she felt no blood. Numb. *Of course. The sapbalm.*

Her neck and shoulder hurt, though. And the emotional pain hadn't gone away. She sobbed and tried to scream again, but she had no voice. She couldn't scream the agony away, and she couldn't kill herself to forget.

The sobbing helped. It tired her. Maybe she'd sleep. *No. I don't want to dream.* She lay in the dark cave, weeping silently, massaging her neck and shoulder and remembering.

In time, the demands of her pain-wracked body overrode those of her memory-wrecked mind. She rose and found the scant sapbalm supply, smearing it on her shoulder and neck. As it took effect, she drank at the spring in the back of the cave.

Anna sat and mechanically washed her tearstained face. Her neck pain had eased to a dull throbbing. She could barely lift her right arm, but she could feel it healing under the sapbalm.

As she methodically cleaned her body, she noticed her hair was growing back. Soft, velvety stubble grew on her head except where the powersled blast had burned the right side clean. That part felt leathery and numb.

The mechanical cleaning ritual, the cool splash of water on fever-hot skin and finding her hair growing back soothed her.

She'd cried herself out. She didn't know how long she had wept. She knelt by the spring, numbly listening to its gentle gurgling in the semi-dark.

Now that she remembered the loss of her baby in the wake of the powersled explosion, she remembered the mental barrier she'd built to protect her from the horror. That barrier had now been breached.

“So, now what?”

Save the lulling spring-gurgle and her own harsh breathing, her question was met with silence.

She couldn't die. She couldn't kill herself. No, she'd live. She wasn't sure yet why; but with a certainty she couldn't dispute, she knew she'd live.

Anna had spent the past few days learning to survive the environment into which the Familia rebellion had driven her. Now, she found she was reluctant to throw that struggle aside as if it meant nothing. She would survive.

Why?

She caught herself a second before her unconsciously clenched fist slammed into the wall. A conflicting instinct had again stopped her, confirmed that the will to survive dominated and her attempt to kill herself had passed.

Why?

Anna suddenly remembered a mental exercise she'd used before to help her cope.

"Scholars," she croaked. Her throat, scraped raw by screaming, clenched in pain. She drank. She scraped sap from her neck and sucked on her fingers. "Scholars, your attention. Please direct your best efforts toward answering, in essay form, the question 'Knowing what I know now, what must I do next?'"

She smiled, seeing in her mind rows of little scholars watching her, bright eyes wide, serious expressions on their round faces. "You have ten minutes. Any questions?"

She smiled, folded hands on her desk, fingers twined, raised her eyebrows and looked into each little face, one by one.

Lisbeth Navarroclan raised her hand, waving.

Anna nodded. "Yes, Lisbeth."

"Um, does spelling count?"

"In this exercise, scholars..." Again Anna caught each pair of eyes. "...you won't be graded. The exercise is to find the best answer to the question. Understood?"

"Yes, Ma Devlin," several small voices said.

"Good. Any other questions?"

Will Hanson, one of the three Authority children in the back, raised a tentative hand.

"Yes, Will?"

"What if we can't think of nothing?"

"Anything. What if we can't think of anything? Do your best, Will, please."

"What if we ain't done in time?"

"You mean 'What if we're not done in time?' Not *ain't*. We don't use *ain't*, remember?"

Will nodded, blushing.

“Will, if you need to take more time, raise your hand and we'll see, okay?”

“Can I—may I—start now?” Will asked.

“Are there any other—”

“I do.” Lisbeth again. Anna nodded. “Can we write more than one answer?”

Anna considered, frowning. Lisbeth was an over-achiever, bright but boastful. She tried to keep the girl's ego in check, to limit her opportunities to play one-up on her peers.

“You may think about as many answers as you want, Lisbeth, but I only need one. The best one...” She included all the scholars in her answer, eyeing them as she spoke. “...is the one I'll use. What if you all come up with the same answer? Wouldn't that be interesting?”

Several students had already bent to the task, glowing letters dancing in the air above their slates.

“Begin any time, scholars.”

The others started. The recirculators' hum dominated the otherwise silent room.

Cave.

Anna shifted on the rock floor and settled back to wait. She glanced at the timer on the desk and tapped on the nanofactured imitation wood surface. Patience. She taught patience by example. She did, after all, have plenty of time.

Five seconds before the timer would have sounded, signaling the end of the exercise, Anna shut it off. Lisbeth had finished moments before and now shifted in her seat, antsy. In the rear, Will hunched over his slate, tongue between teeth, high forehead furrowed in concentration, writing furiously. Anna waited until he'd finished, then: “Time's up. Please save your essays to my slate now.”

An audible sigh rose from the scholars as they saved their entries and forwarded them to Anna's slate.

She sipped water in a cupped hand then sat up straight and *ahemed*. Her throat felt better, as did her neck and shoulders.

She read the essays. And as she read, her scholars silently disappeared back into the recesses of her mind; she again sat alone in a dark cave in the desert.

The exercise worked. Her scholars had made it clear what she must do. “So. If that's what I have to do, then that's what I'll do.”

Accepting her scholar's wisdom, and resolved to act, she stood, leaning one hand against a wall to steady herself. She began to plan her journey back to Tierra Natal, to confrontation with those who had wronged her. Most important, she began plans to return to her scholars, who needed her now more than ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Having decided to act, Anna felt in no hurry. In fact, a trek across Ghost Basin, as she'd decided to call the flat plain between Goliath and the Confusions, would be difficult so she prepared methodically.

She made two spears from sapplant branches, tipped with creebird beak points. She made an umbrella from boxard shell and skin. She made better boots, and gloves, and a skin skirt and blouse.

She made pouches. One held dried meat of boxard and darter and a few handfuls of a succulent moss she'd found deeper in the caves. Another held water. A third, smaller one, held a few sabbalm beads.

In the days since she'd reached the cool, constant shade of the Confusions' caves, her need for the sabbalm had faded so much she now used it only infrequently as a thin film to protect her exposed skin when she went out during the day. Even so, her skin had darkened. When she got back to Tierra Natal, she expected to be as dark as any Familia.

On the third day after the storm ended, the waterholes dried up. Three days later, the desert—Ghost Basin—shed its lustrous greenery and returned to more familiar shades of ashy tan and brown. Before the desert dried, she gathered spikeweed flowers and sapplant buds, which had been part of the diet of the boxard she'd dissected. She found them nourishing.

Anna also experimented on expanding her diet with other animal flesh, including small blind fish she found in a cave spring. All were edible, and most were docile and easy to catch.

Two days after the desert turned back to burnt ash, Anna set out just as the sun rose and the nilas dug in. She jogged at a steady pace. At each fifth waterhole, she slowed to a brisk walk for two. Then she jogged past five more.

When the sun reached its zenith, she stopped at a waterhole, sat against a sapplant and ate a light lunch. She felt good. She'd recovered from the injuries she'd suffered in the blast in the canyon and thereafter.

In fact, she felt stronger than she'd ever been.

As Anna ate, she wondered why the Ghost Basin and the Confusions hadn't been more thoroughly explored. The area had enough of interest to keep an army of scientists busy for decades. Maybe they *had* investigated the region. Orbital observations had been made, the location scanned and mapped. She knew drone flyovers and unmanned rovers had traversed the area, but she hadn't paid attention.

So much effort had been devoted to establishing a center at Tierra Natal and the grassy plains around it, mapping and exploiting the Amazonia aquifer and getting a toehold on the Brasilia ecosystem. No energy remained to study elsewhere in detail. Maybe they'd planned to look closer later, once Natal had been established.

Anna shrugged. Didn't matter now. She didn't really care. She stood and resumed her journey.

She hadn't reached Goliath by sunset, so she found a waterhole and camped for the night. She ate and listened to the desert night sounds, sleeping well.

A boxard scraping toward its burrow woke her at dawn. She watched it scuttle away, ate a few bites, drank a little water and set out again.

At mid-day, she passed the shattered sapplant tree she'd crashed into after running through the canyon in the dark. The canyon, a vertical purple slit in the pinkish rock, lay ahead. Anna reached it before nightfall. She found a shady nook for sleep in the wall a dozen meters above the canyon floor. She found sawk eggs further up.

At dawn the next day, her eastward route was blocked; a steep pile of loose rubble from the powersled blast choked off the canyon. She climbed the barrier carefully, cautious because her monocular vision made it more dangerous. She saw no wreckage—but then, she didn't look very hard.

Anna topped the rubble pile just before mid-day. Taking a break, she contemplated the path down the other side.

She was up near Goliath's flat top—she could tell it was so from where she sat—and Anna felt compelled to explore there. It didn't seem far, didn't seem a difficult climb, and she had time.

Goliath, she recalled from her geography lessons, was almost as flat on its broad top as the desert floor. After a brief period scrambling above the rubble, shinnying up a narrow fissure in the canyon wall, she confirmed it. She spent the day hiking across Goliath's roof, parallel to the canyon trench, to the eastern cliff edge. The Barrens lay below her. Beyond, in the hazy distance, lay the Plains—and Tierra Natal.

Three days away. Maybe four. Or five.

She drank as she walked back to the rubble pile, thinking about the journey ahead. She slept on a ridge above the rubble—the Gap, she called it—and climbed down the east side at sunrise.

Water pockets in the canyon's deeper shade replenished her stock. A sawk chick fallen from its nest, newly dead, fed her. She reached the canyon mouth in the afternoon and camped in the Barrens at nightfall. Out of food, she tried to eat tiny box lizards. They tasted foul. Out of water, she sucked on spikeweed. It helped.

She walked east. Two days later, in the distance, sunlight glinted from Tierra Natal's main dome.

Something was wrong. The glint seemed ... odd.

Anna shook her head, dismissing the notion as apprehension and impaired vision. Maybe it wasn't Tierra Natal after all. She'd gotten lost. A research station, or a wrecked sled.

She looked again. It was Natal. She recognized the familiar com mast sticking into the sky like a needle. But the dome reflection seemed ... wrong.

Though it was just after mid-day, she decided to rest before going on. To rest, and think.

She thought about what she'd do when she got there. She wasn't sure, and never had been. When the notion to go back had come, even then she'd had no idea what she'd do. Or what she'd find. All she knew was that her scholars needed her, and she had to go to them. That was all. It was enough.

Still, she'd be cautious and watch, unseen, for a while. Take stock of the situation. See who was in charge. If the Familia gang still held the town hostage with their violence—but that couldn't be.

Anna suddenly realized she had no idea what day it was. The thought made her dizzy.

Surely Authority must have restored order. Surely. *Still, I'll be cautious.*

Sleep came in time, restless and unrefreshing.

At sunrise, she moved closer to the town. She stooped low in the grass and slipped forward at a quick trot, although she felt certain no one would look out into the scorching heat of broad day. When she gauged she was a half-kilometer or so away, she stopped to rest, waiting until the afternoon sun was at her back before going closer.

At last she rose from the grass and stood. She blinked and gasped, rubbed her eye and looked again.

Tierra Natal had been shattered—the main dome covering the central Commons had collapsed, and the streets spiraling outward from it had been broken like glass. What remained of the community's nanofacted walls above ground serrated the pale, empty sky like broken teeth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

She understood now why the glint she'd seen in the distance earlier had been wrong, unsettling. She'd expected the dome, a smooth, round bubble rising silvery against the sky, familiar and comforting.

She saw instead the dome's sharp-edged bones, Tierra Natal's broken body.

Bitter bile rose to the back of her mouth.

Familia did this.

How they managed it, she didn't know, but they'd done it. They'd killed her husband, killed her baby—and they'd killed Tierra Natal.

She shuddered and sat, knees watery. She lay back in the grass, scooting side-to-side to move knifelike blades aside. Her mind went blank. She didn't know what to do or what to think. She lay and breathed, just breathed.

Mind on idle, she remembered a question she'd asked herself earlier, a puzzle she'd mentally stored to examine another time. She'd wondered how her exosuit could have fallen apart. It had been nanofacted. Nanofacted material didn't fall apart.

Here lay more mystery or, rather, a similar mystery of greater consequence. Whatever made her exosuit fall apart may have also made Tierra Natal fall apart. Age, maybe. Or weather.

A bomb?

A bomb. The Familia revolt violence. That's what happened here.

Anna whispered to herself as she thought the problem through, fiddling with a piece of grass abstractedly. "But how do you destroy nanofacted stuff? Anything nanofacted. How...?"

Not a bomb. Programming.

Nanofacted material was programmed to specific physical and functional characteristics. Safeguards

were embedded into the code to prevent tampering or accidental interference. It was impossible to alter a nano program.

Or so she'd been told.

She decided it must be possible for somebody clever or desperate enough—or fanatical enough—to tinker with the program, introduce a virus or whatever to change the nano's intent. You could destroy an exosuit by telling its nano to fall apart if you know how to bypass the failsafes. Do the same for a town.

Anna shook her head. "Nobody knows how to do that."

The exosuit and city walls had different functions so they had different programs. Both had failed. The Familia had managed the impossible in their sudden, violent rebellion. They must have done something to usurp the Tierra Natal nanosystems. Maybe it was an accident. If so, their plans, whatever they were, had gone wrong, terribly wrong.

Her stomach churned; and without thought, she reached for the sapbalm pouch then stopped.

No. She didn't need the balm to numb this pain. A tough nila-hide layer had formed over her emotions, and she would cope. She took a few deep breaths to steady herself. Who knew what else she'd find?

She gathered her resolve and rose from the grass to explore. As she stood, she heard a rhythmic shuffling. She hesitated, breath frozen, motionless, listening.

Inside Tierra Natal's broken hulk, someone moved.

Anna squatted below a shelf of rock and listened, breathless. She scanned the corridor wall twenty meters away, the interior black beyond a narrow, jagged split down the side. A filmy exhalation of dust seeped from the rent and flowed from left to right like a wave as somebody walked inside.

She didn't see anybody; but muffled footsteps, the faint exhalation of dust, marked the person's passage. The footpads faded away to the right. Silence followed in their wake.

In a moment, while Anna sat listening to the intense desert quiet, more footfalls came from the same direction and reached the rent in the corridor. They stopped.

Two people—male voices, an indistinct murmur.

Anna got up and looked around. No one outside under the blazing afternoon sun but her. She tiptoed closer to the shattered wall and the two men inside.

"...so what's the point?" High-pitched, nervous. Nasal.

"Keep quiet, dammit." Bassy, resonate. Older. "This is a gravy gig compared to some. Don't blow it."

"Oh, Grandfather High-and-Mighty is nowhere near here, you can count on that."

"He has ears. How do you know I won't report your insolence, eh?"

"Because we're in together. You report me for insolence, I report you for hoarding—"

"Dammit, keep your mouth shut, you fool."

"I know, I know. Hang together. Never mind. We're wasting energy. Now, where's that damn...?"

The man—the younger of the two, Anna decided, and more excitable—trailed off to muttering, and she heard little more. She pressed her ear to the scalding-hot wall.

Scraping echoed in the corridor, as if the men were digging. Anna thought of boxards and eased closer along the smooth surface toward the crack. The scraping ended, and the murmuring stopped.

Anna waited. The faint *shush* of their footsteps retreated down the corridor, the way they'd come. She wanted to go in and look around, but she hesitated. Her heart raced, and she felt both attracted and repelled. This was her home—had been, but it wasn't now.

The sun hung low over Goliath, ready to usher in the night. If she were going to see inside she'd have to do so now.

She took a few shuddery breaths to steady herself and slowly, carefully, poked her head past the crack and into the corridor.

Darkness. Then, as her vision adjusted, she saw the floor two meters below. She could get in.

She laid her spear down outside and grabbed the crack edge. She expected it to be sharp, glassy, but when she tugged a piece of the material and it came loose, it was flaky, like a thick piecrust. Not metallic. Chalky, brittle.

But the walls are indestructible, nanofactured. She tossed the piece aside. Not anymore.

She sat in the crack, feet dangling inside, then turned around and eased in backwards. She scraped the soft wall away against her belly as she lowered herself in.

Dust from the disintegrating wall hung in the air, glistening motes illuminated by a light shaft through the crack behind her. She coughed softly and waved a hand in front of her face. The air smelled stale, bitter and dry.

Up and down the corridor, as far as she could see, crooked light shafts pierced the dark through other cracks in the walls. Hand over her nose, trying to breathe through the dust storm she'd stirred entering the corridor, Anna wonder how anybody could live with air so foul. Then she noticed how much cooler it was inside.

It won't last, though. I wonder what they'll do when these walls tumble down, the last of them, and they have to face the day scrambling for shade.

They. I wonder who's left?

Anna shook her head, wiped at dust caked on her forehead and bent to scan the floor. Footprints stood out dark against the chalky film. Not many. This outer ring street wasn't used often.

For a moment, she felt disoriented. *Is this a residential street or one of the new storage expansion areas? I'll bet the survivors stay in the Commons. Stay together. Familia concept. Central authority and all that.*

She scanned the lower, inner wall intently for a hole or a loose panel that might show where the men had been digging, if that's what they'd been doing, and didn't hear the new one approach until he was almost on her. They both stepped back in surprise and stood facing each other through the murkiness, five meters apart.

Anna couldn't see his face in the semi-darkness—just a silhouette, backlit by silvery dust motes in the light shaft behind him. He stood a head taller than she, stick-thin torso wrapped in some coarse dark cloth, his feet two lumps inside bindings of the same dense material. A cloth draped the lower half of his face—to keep out the dust—and his hair looked dirty, wild and tangled.

He clutched a short spear tipped with a long, slender, metallic-looking blade. His eyes widened when he saw Anna and he gasped, stepping back in surprise.

“Hey, you're not supposed to be—” He looked at his spear as if suddenly remembering he had it. He gripped it in both hands and hefted it menacingly.

Anna stifled a laugh. The man looked frightened. She didn't recognize him.

“You heard me,” he said.

A guard. Still, however inexpertly he held the spear, the tip looked sharp.

“Come over in the light where I can see you,” he said.

Abruptly, Anna recognized his voice. Waylin Delgadoclan, Henry's Father. And his long nose and shaggy, dark eyebrows. Hydrologist.

“Who are you?” he said, and again, “Come over here.”

The crack through which she'd entered the corridor lay next to Delgadoclan's left elbow. He stepped back and twitched the spear at the light shaft. “Come here and identify yourself.”

Anna looked down the corridor behind her. Could she run down that way and leave through another wall crack? Maybe.

“Diddly-damn, do as I say, or I'll report you.”

Anna took a step forward, face still shielded in dark. Delgadoclan squinted, long face exposing curiosity and fear. “Who are you?”

Anna took another step forward and Delgadoclan retreated a step, the spear shaking in his hands.

No, not the other way. She didn't know where she was or if she'd bump into somebody more menacing than Waylin Delgadoclan. Her spear lay outside the crack, three meters away. She took another step forward, and the thin man retreated another step.

“Don't you come nearer, diddly-damn it.” His voice quavered. “I got this spear, and I got the authority from the First Grandfather himself...”

Anna growled deep in her throat and strode into the light. The setting sun, through the dust haze in the

dim corridor, cast a fiery-red glow on the right side of her face. The scarred side.

Delgadoclan's eyes went wide, he dropped the spear and ran away, screaming. Distant shouts echoed down the dusty, shattered corridor. She hoisted herself up the crack in the wall and regained the outside, panting, dusting herself off as she stood.

I wonder if they'll come after me. I'll bet they don't have guns or sleds.

She thought again about the crude spear Delgadoclan held, about his crude, primitive clothing.

No, she decided. No pursuit, not now and maybe not ever.

She crouched in the grass and listened to shouts in the corridor, a panicky, disorganized response to Delgadoclan's alarm. Twenty meters away, a man's head poked out of the crack she'd widened. He squinted into the sun, looked around and ducked back inside. Another man came out a crack fifty meters down the corridor, but he stayed in the heat only a few seconds, looked around quickly then went back in.

Anna picked up her spear and meager supplies and trotted westward through the grass.

Nobody will follow. They have no powersled, no weapons, projectile or energy. No clothing, no food. Probably no medical supplies or power equipment. Nothing nanofactored or nano-system maintained.

All broken down in the rebellion.

All gone.

Somehow, scientists among the Familia faithful had discovered a way to reprogram nanofactored material and something went wrong. Not just communications and power, but weapons and such. Not just enough systems failures to blackmail the Authority into surrender but everything.

Something went wrong, got out of control. The rebellion survivors, in a few short days, lost everything.

I wonder where the children are sleeping. What do they eat?

Anna trotted on westward after the grass petered out into thinning patches, the hypnotic jogging rhythm she'd developed in her travels across the desert now a habit.

Before the sun fully dipped behind Goliath, Anna found she couldn't see. She stopped and touched the rough cheek below her good eye.

Tears. That's all it was, blurring her vision. Just tears. She brushed them aside, blinked and regained her vision. She continued westward, looking for a place to camp for the night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Anna found a large boulder at the eastern edge of the Barrens, a dark blob against the star-speckled sky. The squarish rock rose twice her height above the desert floor. She climbed to its top, deciding any night predator wouldn't seek prey there. Still, she kept a tight grip on her spear.

Looking eastward from her higher vantage, she saw no light to mark where Tierra Natal must be. She hadn't retreated far—the dome should have glowed like a bright pearl on the horizon, but it didn't. The dome had been shattered.

No power. She shuddered, trying to wrap her mind around the alien concept—the power station nonfunctional. She thought about what the survivors did for fuel, hydroponics, communication or computers. She wondered what her scholars were doing.

In time, she lay back on the hard rock, overwhelmed. She forced her emotional turmoil to numb quiescence, ignored her aches and bruises and slept, fitfully.

Before dawn, disturbed by some disquieting sensation, she sat up. A dream?

She rubbed stiff muscles and looked at the night sky. The starry band of the Milky Way arched overhead. A faint susurration seeped across the desert, a night insect chorus.

No, not a dream. Something was wrong, out of place.

She stood, alert, heart pounding, spear clenched ready as if she expected attack.

Nothing. She opened her senses to the night, absorbing the insects' bell-like chirruping, the flat black featureless nightscape, the smell of chokewillow, spikeweed and dry air.

Nothing else. Still, the feeling of wrongness persisted.

The stars, unchanged...

Gazing upward, she found the familiar, dim star that was Earthome's sun. Then she gasped, realizing.

Fleet Phoenix, the synthetic star-cluster, the ships from Earthome, that symbolic and tangible link with Earthome passing overhead every eighty minutes as constant as the stars.

Gone.

Anna's legs failed; and she sat, head back, searching for the fleet. The colony's clocks had been based on its regular passage. Eighty minutes each orbit.

She hadn't seen it for—how many nights? Hadn't missed it until now.

She'd forgotten. The manmade star's passage overhead had become so routine she hadn't noticed it—or its absence.

Or maybe it had just now disappeared.

Or changed orbit or returned to Earthome. Anna refused to think it might be destroyed. *Surely, I would have noticed something like that.*

Shivering despite the warm, windless night, Anna tried but could find no other option. Okay, changed orbit. Maybe. Which means...? She didn't know if a new orbit would keep it from passing overhead eventually.

The light tinge on the eastern horizon wasn't from Tierra Natal. It was the sun rising. She decided to make camp in some shady spot within sight of the destroyed town and spend the coming day watching it and the empty sky. She didn't expect to see anything, but she'd watch.

And think.

Soon after sunrise, she found a mound of rock where she had both shelter from the sun and a good, slightly elevated view to the east. She caught a tiny darter and ate it as she observed, waiting, wondering what to do next.

Not long after she took up her dismal vigil, ten people emerged through the grass, parting it like a sea. She could hear the whoosh and crackle of their passage through the stiff vegetation long before she could see them. They wore stiff trousers woven from the grass to protect themselves from the knife-like edges as they pushed on. No doubt, Anna thought as she watched them approach, they also wore shoddy makeshift shoes similar to what she wore.

They had large umbrellas attached to their shoulders to protect them from the deadly sun and resembled starved, awkward birds.

Boys, adolescents. Even at the distance, Anna recognized two of them. Former scholars.

They carried spears.

She watched as the group fanned out and methodically searched the ground around the broken wall, combing the grass with weapons extended. They moved slowly, bent at the waist, as if looking for something. Soon, their shouts, indistinct over the distance, came to her, and she knew what they'd been seeking—the path she'd beaten through the grass. *They've found it.*

They took a while organizing a long skirmish line, but once they did, the boys began walking toward her, fifty meters apart, spears ready, umbrellas bobbing on slim shoulders. Anna watched as they slowly advanced, trying to decide what to do next. When they were a hundred meters away, she abruptly stood on her rocky spire, elevated maybe ten meters.

Excitement in their voices, the nearest boys cried out and pointed toward her. Soon the group, screaming like the gang that had attacked her and Martin—a lifetime ago—charged, hissing through the grass-sea.

She leaped from the rock and ran westward, toward the Barrens proper and Goliath beyond. She measured her pace, a strong, relaxed lope, keeping her pursuers no closer than fifty meters nor farther back than a hundred. They followed in a clustered mob, manic, screaming.

It didn't take long for the weakest among the band to drop the pursuit. They abandoned the chase one-by-one, and she hadn't gotten far into the Barrens when the hardest two boys, the last, stopped. She stood in full view atop a low rise and waited, facing east.

The two boys stood together, fatigue obvious in their heaving chests and raspy breath, fifty meters distant. They ventured no closer.

“Witch!” one called out, shaking his spear, boyish voice cracking. “Witch, damned to hell! Witch! Witch!”

Anna turned and walked east, toward Goliath. She'd explore the canyons along the eastern wall, that's what she'd do. Study the sawks. Stock up on provisions.

Witch, she thought as she walked.

No clothing, no energy or projectile weapons. No powersleds. They're as bad off as I am.

She pondered as she walked into her lengthening shadow.

Witch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In the days and weeks after Anna's first reunion with the changed Tierra Natal and its skittish residents, she explored the world outside the broken walls of her former home and far beyond. She resolved to ensure the exile to which she had resigned herself didn't become a surrender to bitter loneliness. She'd keep busy, keep her mind occupied.

She traveled north to Calcutta Falls and found it abandoned, wrecked. She uncovered signs of explosions, struggle and death. The sight of broken white bones no longer revolted her; the grisly, abandoned remains provided only information—battle and death, then scavengers picked the flesh off the bones and scattered them.

Powersled tracks led south to Tierra Natal. Maybe the Familia had gathered their survivors. Or maybe not. Communication had failed here, too. Whatever nanovirus or similar malady had plagued Tierra Natal had occurred at Calcutta Falls as well, probably at the same time.

A longer trek to the south helped reinforce her theory. Rock Springs lay in ruin just as Calcutta Falls had, with evidence of conflict and murder, signs of the town's total collapse, nanosystems breakdown. Tracks led north. By plan or spontaneous accord, surviving colonists had gone to Tierra Natal.

She explored far to the south of the continent, where she found few animal and plant species in the relative cold and the infertile, rocky ground. She improved and polished her survival skills in Ghost Basin. She made a small boat from the bark of a tree she found on the edge of the Eastern Sea, beyond the Confusions, and explored far out into the calm, shallow waters. She learned to fish.

Anna made a bow from chokewillow wood and learned how to use it. When the comparatively cool winter approached, she turned northward, exploring Goliath's western wall where she found more animal and plant species in the canyons. She learned their ways, and she survived.

In the lethal-hot summer, she sought refuge in the Confusions' cool caves. There, she grew bored. During a week-long windstorm that whipped the gritty desert into a billion tiny flying knives, she whiled away the days lecturing to a classroom of invisible scholars with a charcoal stick for a stylus and a large, flat cave wall for a slate.

Time passed.

Occasionally, in the early years of her exile, when the weather seemed right and she yearned for companionship her imagination couldn't fill, she trekked to Tierra Natal and watched the villagers from a distance. They raised sheep and goats, probably from frozen embryo stock that somehow had not

succumbed to the nanosystems failure, and grazed their herds in the grass fields between the town and the Barrens. Apparently, the animals thrived on the rubbery whipgrass.

Sometimes the herds, tended by boys with rickety umbrellas on their shoulders who carried crude but vicious-looking bows or lances, would venture as far west as Goliath's shadow. There, Anna would climb high up a canyon wall and watch, unseen.

Sometimes she listened to the boy shepherds below her, a hundred meters, fifty meters, away. She hid on shady, narrow ledges occupied by sawk nests, bist, bow lizards, darters and thornbush tufts and listened, sickened and saddened by what she heard.

Witch.

"I dare you to go into that canyon," one boy goaded his companion, pointing to the dark vertical slash in Goliath's wall.

"You first," the other boy replied, fists anchored on hips.

"What are you scared of, huh? Think the Witch will get you? I heard she eats scared boys like you. I heard she cooks them in—"

"Not so. She eats them raw. My dad told me so."

Witch.

Once, she watched four adolescent boys edge close to a canyon mouth, its dark interior cool and welcome to her but a forbidden zone of terror to them. She didn't hear, but the gestures came clear. One boy had accepted a dare to go into the canyon, dare the Witch's wrath.

The boy, chest puffed out in heroic pose, entered the canyon with a steady and militant stride, but for less than a hundred meters. He rounded a bend out of his friends' sight and crouched behind a rock, knees shaky. Anna watched as he muttered to himself in a quavering voice, a timing chant. Or a prayer. He had to stay in the forbidden canyon—he'd been challenged, she realized—for a count of...

"One hundred," the boy cried at last and dashed back toward the light.

Before his companions could see him run in terror, he stopped, took a few deep breaths and continued, chest once again puffed out in heroic pose, pace slow, steady and calm.

"Did you see her?"

"Did she try to eat you?"

"What happened, what happened?"

The boy became a hero. He'd defied the Witch and lived to tell the tale. What stories he told his companions and what stories they told to further the myth she had no idea.

Once, in a fit of pique, she showed herself suddenly to two shepherds who'd braved Goliath's shadow. The two boys faced a low rock wall, peeing. She spread her cape wide in the breeze and yelled nonsense at them. They ran away pell-mell, screaming, their little penises bobbing, pee flying everywhere,

sheep forgotten. She took one sheep as a prize.

The villagers, she knew, were poorer than she in resources. They seldom ventured far outside Tierra Natal, and Goliath's eastern shadow was their western limit. So, she took few sheep over the years. She had her own wild flocks and herds, and fields and gardens to tend, nurture and harvest in season.

Eventually, Anna stopped trying to track time.

* * * *

She visited Tierra Natal less often as years passed. For months on end sometimes she'd even forget the town existed, that other people inhabited the world.

Then, some odd event or stray thought would remind her. Her reaction to such occasions ranged from numbness to weeping or violent rages. Such reminders occurred less often as time passed and gradually the pangs of loneliness or a desire to go home lessened.

There came a time, though, when she sat in a cave in the Confusions, sunrise a moment away from coloring the starry sky in scarlet bands, when she looked east across Ghost Basin and remembered. At the time, she felt annoyed for forgetting the people, for not visiting them, for not inviting them to visit her.

She tried to remember the name of the town far away on the other side of Goliath. She'd forgotten. The people, whose names she also could not recall were ... what? Friends?

No—scholars. Scholars. They need me to teach them.

“I'm a teacher.” She spoke aloud for the first time in a very long while.

She recalled the lessons she'd once taught to the invisible classroom in a cave near the one where she now sat and tried to remember her scholars' names. She couldn't, and as the sun inched up the sky, Anna decided to go to the town and ask.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The eastward trek toward Goliath and the canyon splitting it in two, the one with the rockpile barrier she called the Gap, proceeded without incident. A routine cross-country hike, like thousands Anna had undertaken over the many, many years.

The problem of memory—names of people in the town, name of the town itself, time, dates, all of it—plagued her less and less. She'd given up trying to remember, really. If she was supposed to remember something, she decided, she would. Trying—and worrying about it or getting angry—didn't help.

With a grace and efficiency borne of experience, Anna crossed the desert and arrived in due time at the Gap. She spent a day in its shadow, resting for the climb up the steep escarpment. The rocks were loose on the slope, and she'd experienced rockslides before. Some of them, ready to topple, were bigger than—

Bigger than powersleds.

Another memory returns unexpectedly, Anna mused as she ate a meager dinner of boxard meat and cave moss. She could picture in her head now what a powersled was, and what it was used for. In her mind she conjured a scene—a powersled speeding across some rugged surface, bouncing, jolting, twisting, engines whining under the strain. She could see the interior clearly: instrument panel, telltales, readouts, lightmap. Viewscreen displaying steep parallel walls rising into darkness.

She wasn't driving. *Martin.*

She started to say the name aloud, and hesitated. It would hurt, she sensed, to do so. Hurt beyond anything she could bear. It would lead to ... to other memories—so she blocked it out. Stopped thinking. Stopped remembering.

The protective shield preserving her sanity fell back into place. Anna simply forgot her past and sat in a canyon with no name, at the foot of a massive rockslide, wondering how she'd gotten there, and why. A part of her mind knew she was protecting herself by forgetting.

She slept until past darkfall.

When she awoke, she remembered she was on a journey to a town far to the east, beyond the rockslide, where there were other people. People like her.

People who need me.

Maybe, she thought as she began to climb in the dark, they'll tell me why I'm going to visit them.

The climb proved more strenuous than it ever had before. *Yes, I've climbed these rocks before. I remember this route. But just the next few handholds and footholds, that's all I remember.*

Her breath came in spasms, and her muscles and bones ached. Twice she stopped to nibble on a tooth-sized ball of sapbalm. She realized, just before she reached the top, just before sunrise, that she hadn't brought enough sap. Then she realized—remembered—she'd needed more and more of it in the past season. Or so it seemed.

Anna nestled into a cool, shadowy crevasse near the top of the rock pile. The spot seemed familiar—she'd been here before. She found a small cache of supplies: rope, a bone knife, dried meat. Yes, she'd stashed the supplies on earlier expeditions. She thought about those earlier journeys and tried to remember if she'd cached anything else in the area.

Yes. To the east, another daylong hike, was another such cache. Near the eastern foot of the mountains, at the canyon mouth, just before you got to the flat land that led to the town.

Goliath. The name of the mountain. Another memory returned. A small thing, but Anna pushed it away impatiently. Memory was not good.

She slept well that day, without dreams.

* * * *

She awoke as some minor tremor deep in the rock persisted for several seconds. *Rockslide.*

She stood, immediately awake, alert, her spear in hand, gasping in the heat. She glanced around. Her

crevasse shelter was a wide, shallow crack in the southern wall of the canyon, a few meters above the loose rock making up the barrier she'd climbed. By the angle of shadow, she knew it was late afternoon, a few hours before darkfall.

She could see little else but a sliver of sky sliced by solid rock. And dust rising.

The trembling persisted.

Anna climbed out of the cleft into the open. The solid walls around the crevasse had seemed secure once, but not now.

Instantly, she saw she need not have worried. Rocks tumbled down the steep slope to the east of the pile, dust billowing up in their wake. The slide was lower down, no threat to her or her shelter. A minor disturbance, nothing more.

Still, she'd have to be more careful as she traveled down the eastern slope now. The slide would change the layout. She envisioned the route she'd taken earlier—remembered. She contemplated the problem and saw she'd have to take a different way around the new slide.

She decided to start down right away, to take advantage of the remaining daylight. It would be hot going, and she'd be exhausted by the time she got to the bottom; but it would be safer than trying a new route in the dark.

The descent took her less time than she figured, and the slide involved less surface area than she'd expected. She sat gasping for air on the flat canyon floor a good, safe distance from the rockslide base, in case more loose rock cascaded down. She sipped water from her pouch and thought about taking another salbalm ball but decided against. She'd have to rest through the night and hike to the canyon's eastern mouth in the daytime.

Again, she slept dreamlessly.

She awoke to the screeching of sawks echoing off the high canyon walls. The jagged, thin sliver of pale light far above, framed by the canyon walls, told her it was just after daybreak. She ate a few bites, relieved herself and set out.

Something caught her eye at the foot of the rockpile, glinting in the talus slope the rockslide had created. Something ... metallic.

Anna stooped over the object, brushed dirt away from a ten-centimeter flat square of shiny hardness. As she brushed, the object grew, and she scabbled with her fingers, using both hands. Soon, she'd uncovered the thing.

“Fuel cell,” she whispered.

A tumult of images flooded her mind as she pulled the thing—the size of a loaf of bread, or a sawk hatchling—from its grave. Squarish in shape—no, *rectangular*—it felt unusually heavy. Heavy as a rock. Heavier.

The size and weight—about as long as her arm, about as heavy as a...

...as a newborn...

A sudden pain stabbed Anna in her stomach, and she dropped the cell in the dirt at her feet, doubled over. She fumbled in her pouch for a sap ball and swallowed it.

It helped. She sat, catching her breath, contemplating her find like it was some kind of new animal carcass, possibly poisonous or otherwise dangerous. She focused on trying to figure out what the thing could be good for—now.

Nothing came to her. She had a little metal, and all she had was useful, but she had no need for a fuel cell. She had nothing to fuel. The cell was heavy, evenly shaped, but so were millions of rocks all over the planet. She saw three such from where she sat.

Anna shook her head, stood and sought a place to stash the object. Maybe she'd find a use for it later. The desert wasted nothing—she'd learned that much.

Then, another idea overtook her. *The people of the town. They'll want this. They'll need this.*

Anna hefted the fuel cell, brushed dirt off its legend, its activation switch, its still-glowing telltale and its hair-thin insertion rods.

She remembered the people of the town hated her, that if she wanted to get back ... home ... she'd need to do something about that. Fix it. She couldn't teach the children if their Familia hated her. But they'd want a fuel cell. They'd need it.

She remembered their ragged condition last time she'd seen them. Shepherds, half-naked boys tending a flock of skinny sheep in Goliath's late-afternoon shadow. No power. They'd want power cells, then.

Yes. I'll give them a gift. Something useful. A peace offering.

Anna set out toward the mouth of Goliath with renewed vigor, her stride sure, steady, the fuel cell bouncing against her bony shoulder in a boxard-skin pouch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It looked like the townspeople had found more water, Anna discovered. As she approached the town from the west, in the late afternoon so the sun stood at her back, she saw several wells, more than she remembered.

Tierra Natal had a well inside its walls, near the central Commons, and two outside the walls. From where she stood, she could see four rock structures that looked like wells, all within a half-kilometer of Natal.

She approached one located about a hundred meters out. It stood like a low rock rampart, round and flat like a medium-sized waterhole or an over-sized bist or boxard burrow, but lined with mud or clay bricks piled in neat, even rows. Like the one she vaguely recalled inside—so long ago—and others she'd seen near Calcutta Falls more recently. About waist high.

Waist high.

Someone stood at the edge of the well, a man in a simple, robe of crudely woven cloth, his long dark

hair tangled, his back to Anna. She saw him raise a cup to his lips and drink. From her vantage thirty meters away, she watched a narrow rivulet of water escape down his bearded chin into the coarse-woven collar of his loose, knee-length cloak. Plain rope cinched his slender waist. His wide umbrella-hat lay in the dirt at the foot of the well. His feet were shod in crude sandals, just like hers.

The man mumbled something to himself. She couldn't make it out.

They found more water, she thought. Good for them.

Tierra Natal, she now recalled, had been located where it was because an early robotic study of the planet indicated a large aquifer lay between Calcutta Falls and Rock Springs. Water from the northern ice cap and from the slopes of Glacier Mountain fed into Calcutta Falls through a series of narrow, shallow streams. The aboveground water disappeared in Calcutta Falls—fell into the ground—then reappeared at Rock Springs, in a steady, slow seeping at the foot of a series of clay masses.

Between, in the center of the aquifer, lay a flat grassy plain where an unmanned scout report determined, for a variety of reasons including ready access to the aquifer and potentially good grazing, Tierra Natal was to be located. Planners had believed they would be able to sink a well there with little effort and tap the aquifer “from the middle of the sponge,” so to speak. It hadn't quite worked out that way.

Only three wells had been productive—the one over which the town was located and two others outside the walls. Two more had proven hard to maintain, practically useless. The inner well met their water needs. Little effort had been made to maintain the others.

Apparently, Anna mused as she sat motionlessly watching the man slowly sipping water from a small metal cup and mumbling to himself, they'd now dug other wells. Maybe the inner well dried up. Or something happened to it.

Painfully, she dredged from her memory her last visit to Tierra Natal, the last time she'd come this close.

And, yes, now she remembered the name. But how long since she'd been here? That was lost in the haze of time. Years. Many, many years.

Calcutta Falls, abandoned. Rock Springs—the names were coming back to her now—also abandoned. After the—yes, the revolt—the survivors, the Familia, had converged on Tierra Natal. Because they had a well at Tierra Natal and they'd dug more of them...

Anna shook her head, exasperated. That wasn't it. There was water at Calcutta Falls and...

The man stiffened. He cocked his head as if listening.

Anna caught her breath, realizing she'd snorted aloud in her exasperation over trying to make sense of what she saw before her—a man bending over a well, drinking.

And chanting.

Even as the man turned slowly—so slowly ... time froze—to look over his narrow, bony shoulder at her, Anna remembered the chant.

A Familia chant, a prayer for guidance, comfort and wisdom.

The Familia.

A floodgate in her mind broke, and her skull burst with a gusher of painful memory. Through a building scream of rage and pain, she remembered the Familia, what they'd done so long ago.

She didn't want to remember. But she did, couldn't help it. And she raged.

A redness, like a bloody bruise, narrowed her vision on the slowly turning figure at the well, his mouth easing open as if straining against the hot and heavy air. Anna, screaming, rushed at him, now a frozen figure with eyes bulging and mouth agape.

Rage.

The man raised a pale, stick-thin arm slowly, so slowly, to ward off the coming blow. Too slowly.

Rage.

Anna hit him on his head. His skull snapped back on his skinny neck. Bone cracked. She hit him again. And again and again.

"You killed ... killed my..."

The man's head became gory mush. Blood, bone and brain arched into the air behind Anna with each blow. Her hands grew slippery with blood.

The body lay against the well's low mud wall, but Anna wasn't through, her rage unspent. She pulled the man to his feet. Limp, dead.

Rage.

Anna raised a bloody fist to hit him again. He slipped from her slick fingers and toppled backwards into the well.

Anna screamed in frustration as he hit the bottom of the narrow shaft with a muddy splash. She looked around, still wanting to vent her rage, saw nobody—no Familia—to hit. To kill.

She screamed her frustration, her rage.

Voices. From inside the ancient town's broken walls.

Anna wasn't sure when she'd stopped screaming, when she could again hear. Her throat felt as if she'd been gargling sand, and she heard the voices. She suddenly felt drained, rubber-boned. Panting, sweating, her whole body ached, and she didn't want to move.

She needed a drink of water, needed to eat, needed to sleep.

She needed to go away.

The voices, rising in alarm from the dark, crumbled town a hundred meters away galvanized her into action. She could see movement through cracks in a nearby corridor, its roof covered with a woven-grass net to keep out the sun. Something glinted in there, like a spear point.

Time to go.

She turned and saw, lying in the sand, a bloody metal lump. It puzzled her for a moment. Then Anna realized it was the weapon she'd used, hadn't known she'd used, till now. She'd found the thing in the rockslide the day before, in the canyon, in Goliath. The fuel cell.

It had been heavy when she'd found it. It had been heavy and awkward to carry across the ... the rocky place, then the hilly place, then the flat, grassy place to ... this place. The ... thing she'd carried ... to this place— *Where am I?*—had been heavy. But it wasn't heavy when she used it to ... to...

Doors in her mind closed. She shut down.

She knelt quickly, grabbed the dark-stained object in the sand, turned and tossed it into the well. She gave the gesture a meaning. When she let go of it, she resolved when it left her hand it would take the pain away with it. When it was gone, she resolved, so, too, would her memory be gone.

People emerged from the ... the broken walls of the ... place. She heard their unintelligible howling behind her as she turned and ran ... west—that way—toward the descending sun. Toward ... a broad, flat mountain. A canyon in the mountain. A desert beyond. Then ... away.

Far, far away.

The howling dropped farther and farther behind her as she ran, drawing on some internal energy reserve the existence of which she didn't question. Tired, hungry. But she would take care of that. Later.

Now, running was all. She ran.

Night fell but she kept on going, eventually reaching a high, nameless wall of rock under the dim silvery starlight and resting there a while. Then, not knowing why, she headed north, walking for now, following the wall to her left. She moved until daybreak, found shelter, slept.

At darkfall, she awoke, found a bist nest and ate. Then walked north.

It rained at daybreak, and Anna stood in the sudden, drenching downpour. She stood, face uplifted, arms outstretched, and turned in slow circles, letting the rain wash away the stains on her face, arms and legs. She stood naked in the rain, her clothes tossed away somewhere. She didn't know where, when.

Or why.

The rainfall ended as suddenly as it began, and Anna moved on. North to the farthest reaches of the mountain wall, where it turned into rolling hills and nights became colder, but not cold enough that her nakedness bothered her. The fertility that came to the land in the wake of the brief rainstorm sustained her over the otherwise-inhospitable terrain in the far north. At some point, she turned and went west across the rolling hills for many days, then south. The massive wall of the mountain was to her left again—she followed it south for a long time.

Anna came at last to the mouth of a canyon, one particular canyon, in the massive mountain wall. Satisfied she'd arrived ... somewhere—a place she wanted to be—she turned her back on the dark ravine, turned toward the setting sun again and traveled west.

There were hills beyond the desert she now crossed, she knew, without knowing how she knew it. Caves in those hills. Shelter.

And food along the way. She knew how to harvest it. And clothing, and tools.

As Anna walked, she contemplated the meaning of shelter. Coolness. Comfort. Food and water. Another word for shelter hovered on the verge of memory. She struggled for a while to find the word.

Something like ... home?

But what did that mean?

In time, she gave it up, decided she didn't really want to know.

Lisan Navarroclan

“Why didn't you go straight west, then?” Lisan asked, voice a gentle whisper in the silent night.

“What?” Anna turned to her. The bent old woman and the adolescent girl sat on a low bench made of clay brick and covered with sheepskin just outside the town walls. The night air was tolerably cool, and they perspired only a little. Both Anna and Lisan wore thin skirts rather than leggings in deference to Familia traditional modesty. No wind stirred the desert stillness.

“Instead, you went north,” Lisan said. “When you left Tierra Natal. After you killed the Uncle. At the well. You ran to Goliath and then—”

“I went north, instead of going through the canyon, through the Gap,” Anna finished. “Of course, I did. I know that. Surely, you can guess why.”

Lisan hesitated then nodded. “But, but...”

“In the canyon, memory lay like a trap. Waiting to seize my mind again. Take it away from me. Rage. Pain. Hate. I was tired—so tired—of being angry, tired of hating. Tired of remembering. I couldn't go into that canyon, you see?”

Lisan bunched perfect black brows together in a frown. “But if you avoided the canyon ... to protect yourself from ... from, um, going ... I mean...”

“From going crazy.”

“But how did you know?” Her hands fluttered before her tiny budding breasts, as if trying to grasp the words from the air. “I mean, if you knew enough to avoid the canyon, then you must have known what was in the canyon—what you were trying to avoid, the memories there. And if you knew that much, you couldn't have avoided it, couldn't have ignored what you knew. I mean ... could you?”

Anna chuckled and patted the girl's smooth hand, resting easily, casually on her thigh—such a childlike gesture, and so comforting, so tender—

The chuckle caught in her chest and stopped, jammed up against impenetrable pain.

She coughed.

Lisan dutifully plucked a sabbalm ball from the pouch and pressed it to Anna's thin lips. Anna swallowed the ball, almost choking. She licked her lips. Lisan listened to Anna breathing in the night, heard the balm soothe the Holy Mother's pain as it went down her throat, unclogging the painful, hot knot in her chest. Anna relaxed. In a moment, it was clear to Lisan the pain spasms had passed.

"The mind," Anna whispered as if to herself, her eyes still closed, "lies to itself. The things we do to preserve our sanity—to stay alive. We know, yes. But we lie to ourselves. And we believe our lies. Even though we know. You see?"

Lisan shook her head and laughed. "No, but I suppose, in time, I will. You know ... I believe."

Anna joined her laugh, tentatively at first. Then: "And if you don't figure it out," she said, "don't be concerned. Some things we don't know. Simply that. Some questions we'll never answer, some mysteries we'll never solve. Or live long enough to. It's all right. It's all right to not know, sometimes."

She lifted a hand and gestured expansively at the dark desert to the west. "What's out there in the dark? Some of it we know. Some we don't. The Barrens. Goliath. Ghost Basin. The Confusions. The Eastern Sea. But there's lots of unexplored territory. New things to discover, here on Phoenix."

Lisan's eyes were vacant as she pondered Anna's words. "And beyond that? Stars. Other worlds..."

"Other worlds."

"And worlds beyond those."

Anna shrugged bony shoulders.

"What's on them?"

"Other worlds? We don't know, do we?"

"I don't. But you've been on a starship. And to Earthome."

Anna grasped Lisan's hand, hard. "Even if we don't know, we're never afraid. Never afraid of the dark. That's why we came to Phoenix. Because we believed. You see? Remember that."

"Yes, but..." Lisan looked away, frowning.

"What?"

Lisan looked at Anna, boldness in her dark eyes. "You went north."

Anna hesitated a moment. Then she laughed heartily. "So I did. So I did."

They sat in silence for a while longer, watching the starry sky.

"Tell me about Michael," Lisan said. "When he came to you. Tell me about that. It must have come as a shock to you. How did you handle it? I mean, you'd created this protective wall, this mental shield. You said you'd even forgotten there were other people on Phoenix. At all. Then you see Michael walking across the desert. What did you think then, when you saw him?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Anna lived among the Confusions for a long while, although at the time she gave no name to the rolling hills and the caves that pocked them, and the maze-like boulder fields in and around the caves. She stayed in one cavern or another as long as she wished, letting whim take her from place to place.

She never questioned the uneasiness that occasionally overtook her, prompting her to evacuate one particular shelter for another. It wasn't as if the ones she chose were inadequate—they were all good havens, and from time to time she'd re-occupy one or another of them after months, or years, of absence.

Except one cave.

In it, Anna found writing on a wall. Symbols scrawled on a large, flat surface, smudged and indistinct. The cave made her uneasy and she avoided it, although it was big, comfortable and as cool as any other. She could never sleep there. There was something ... wrong with it.

She often explored the desert flanking the Confusions. Going west, she traveled occasionally to the edge of a broad, shallow sea where she caught fish and found abundant plant life at the fringes of the sluggish, brackish water.

Eastward, she often hiked to the wall of a massive mountain slicing the world in two, north to south. Goliath, of course, though during those years she gave it no name. She'd venture occasionally into the narrow, steep-walled canyons biting into the mountain like gigantic cracks. She harvested bist, bow lizard, darter, sawk egg, whipgrass, spikewood root and, now and then, a mature sawk.

One canyon she refused to enter. She didn't know why, but she knew there was a reason. Like the strange cave she tried hard not to think about, the canyon was haunted. Something wrong with it.

But this presented Anna with no problem, since there was a world to explore.

North she ventured, to the edge of the icecap, and found strange mosses, lichens and a sluggish burrowing worm that tasted much like boxard young. She found little else, and no shelter from wind or sun in the flatness.

She traveled infrequently to the south. There, she found more ice, if she traveled far enough. But the ground was rocky, barren, and lifeless, and she didn't stay long.

The desert was her life, between the Confusions and Goliath. There, she found resources so abundant she never had occasion to want or suffer. She knew where the best waterholes were, the chokewillow thickets and where the sapplant grew the thickest. She harvested boxard in season and learned to catch and kill nilas.

Life was good—except for the pain.

It had grown worse in the past few seasons, and Anna now feared she must soon die from some disease eating away at her insides. She nursed her supply of the painkilling sapbalm, harvesting enough of the precious stuff from trees throughout the desert.

As her demand for the balm grew—as the pain increased in frequency and intensity—she began to

journey farther and farther into the desert to harvest. At one point, she became concerned that her need for the stuff would exceed the supply. A plant could replace its sap only so fast, and there were few sapplants, even in the vastness of the desert. Anna was draining the available supply, it seemed, faster and faster.

It was a big desert. But not big enough, maybe, if Anna's demand increased. What to do about it worried her every day for months on end. No answer came. She'd explored the desert from pole to pole, from Goliath through the Confusions to the shore of the Eastern Sea. She knew where every sapplant grew. Every one.

Or so it seemed.

One day, Anna was probing deep into a canyon in the eastern wall of Goliath, a canyon a few kilometers north of the one she carefully avoided entering or thinking about. She'd been in this particular canyon, where a new colony of sawk had established itself a few years before and the number of sawk had grown steadily since. They were now likely ready for harvest, she'd decided, and so she came to explore.

As she'd headed east across Ghost Basin toward Goliath, she cached a supply of sapbalm here and there at specific waterholes. She took a little with her in her pouch, harvested and cached a little more and moved on. She felt satisfied she'd husbanded her resources carefully enough for the trip to Goliath and the sawk canyon she wanted to explore. Still, she wished she could find a new source of the medicine.

None grew in the canyons, she knew, or anywhere near Goliath's shadow.

So, Anna checked her supply carefully at the last sapplant-waterhole before the final leg of the trip into the canyon. She would have enough for at least a preliminary exploration, she decided, and moved on.

Over the years, she had become a good climber. She'd woven rope from whipgrass fiber and made hammers out of rock and chokewillow limbs. Splintered boxard ribs treated with gall and wrapped in sinew gave her pitons to anchor ropes to the steep walls of the canyons. So, she had been able to harvest sawk egg, sawk young and the occasional mature sawk over the years.

The walls of this one was serrated more than usual, with thin vertical cracks running from floor to very high up. Sawk nests lined both walls in great abundance. The ascent would be easy.

Anna smiled as she began climbing toward a likely nest, probably no more than fifty or sixty meters above her. She found foot and handholds readily and mounted the wall at a good clip to a point where she found a nest containing three fist-sized eggs, still warm. She anchored herself in place, unfurled her umbrella-shield to protect her from the startled, angry mother sawk's beak and claws and took two.

As she carefully wrapped them in her egg-pouch, cushioned with a lining of moss, she decided to climb farther up the same crack and collect a few more. She felt rested, secure and eager to explore. She climbed on, folding her umbrella when the nervous sawk left off stabbing at it and retreated to tend to its remaining egg, the others forgotten. She found another nest a hundred meters higher up, with the customary three eggs. She harvested one and moved higher.

The narrow blue slash of sky at the top of the canyon widened as she ascended, and Anna decided she'd go all the way to the top and see what she could see. She'd been atop Goliath before, farther north, where the walls weren't as high or precipitous. A blend of rocky escarpments and steep hills marked the

northern fringe of the mountain. From there, she had been able see south to where the flat mountaintop disappeared in shimmering haze at the limit of her vision. Along its entire length, Goliath was mostly flat, tapering to the west, rising to the east and kilometers wide—maybe a day's hike across, she'd once decided, years ago.

The sky above her expanded as she climbed. Anna wondered how broad the mountaintop was at this point, so far south of her last excursion up a wall.

She considered her supplies and hesitated, but only a moment. She had nests to harvest here, a small backpack of water, dried meat, other provisions and three fresh sawk eggs. She could manage two days journey if the going wasn't hard, maybe three.

If the trek over the mountain top took any longer than three days...

Anna stopped suddenly. She was going to cross Goliath's top. And see what was on the other side. Of course. She hadn't consciously decided that was her plan when she passed the last sawk nest. But, clearly, that was now her goal. Cross the mountain. See what was on the other side.

She'd been wondering, worrying, where she might find more sapplant to stretch the precious supply in Ghost Basin. She'd searched the entire planet—north to south, west to the sea and east to Goliath's western edge, as well as the canyons in the mountain's flank—but never on the other side, the eastern side of Goliath.

She resumed her ascent, annoyed with herself for not having thought of that before. But she felt excited about what she might find in this unknown, unexplored territory.

Before she'd given this new adventure in her life much more thought, the canyon wall abruptly ended. She climbed over its lip and was standing on top of the mountain. From her vantage, nearly flat pinkish rock fell away from one horizon to the next, disappearing in shimmering heatwaves. She saw scant vegetation—only a few thornbushes—and occasional abrupt crests, lumps or spires of rock.

The canyon rim she'd just cleared lay to one side like a flat, black, jagged snake across the ground, extending east and west. The cleft was so black, twenty or so meters across, she could see barely a few meters into it.

The sun blazed down on the dull pinkish-gray mountaintop like a hammer. A listless, gusting wind mitigated the heat-blast, blowing Anna's hair away from her face as she looked east, wondering. The wind tugged at her shade umbrella and pulled her cloak away from her shoulders so it flapped like sawk wings.

She turned in a circle, studying the flatness. Like the desert below. Featureless. But in the desert she had found life abundant under the surface. Maybe the other side of Goliath would prove as fertile as Ghost Basin.

The thought renewed her hope. She pictured groves of sapplant, the way chokewillow grew, rather than the solitary trees she knew in Ghost Basin.

Eastward, then. Into the wind.

The hike across Goliath's broad plateau was a relatively steady tramp up a slight incline, though Anna found herself tiring more often than she'd expected. Crossing the mountain took two and a half days.

She found the eastern wall—a sheer drop of a kilometer or so, she guessed—just before darkfall. She'd spotted the edge shortly after noon from atop a rise, a small hillock no more than about twice her height, and had decided to walk through the day to get there. The last leg of the trek had been particularly strenuous, and Anna felt exhausted. She decided to spend the night resting on the edge of Goliath, observing whatever she could see below in the dim starlight.

Most Phoenix animal life came out in the cooler night, and some of that life moved about in ways Anna had learned to recognize even at great distances, despite the relative dark. The nilas, for instance, raised powdery dust clouds when they moved about in their clumsy-looking, lumbering gait. She could spot waterholes even when she couldn't see them by listening to creebird cries, the bellow of feeding nilas and the grunt of adult boxard. Several flying insect species glowed in the dark, forming luminescent clouds above carrion or waterholes. These clouds varied in color and pattern, and told Anna what lay below them.

The apparent distance to the foot of Goliath stunned Anna, took her breath away, and she eased back a step from the edge, as if suddenly afraid of heights. Her unease passed soon, however, and she sat, feet dangling over the precipice.

Still panting a little from the exertion of the last few kilometers of hiking, she ate a few bites of jerky, finished sucking out the last sawk egg, drank a sip of water then sighed, content. Below her was a boulder field much like the Confusions, hugging Goliath's base in a narrow band stretching north and south as far as she could see, maybe a dozen kilometers wide at the widest point. She saw some tawny clumps amid the boulders, indicating chokewillow groves or something like it. The boulders probably harbored many species she'd recognize.

A few sawk whirled below her, their long wings spread wide to catch the last thermals of the failing day and, with luck, a bist or bow lizard that might venture out to graze a few minutes too early. Dusk was a dangerous time for predator and prey.

Beyond the boulder field, Anna saw hills undulating to the horizon. Those hills, she thought, seemed to be flatter farther out. Maybe more desert out that way, like Ghost Basin. Maybe sapplant out there.

But in the shadow of Goliath's eastern wall, in the boulder field skirting it and the immediate hilly ground beyond the field, she saw nothing like sapplant, or waterholes. Shadows grew longer as she stared, but she didn't see the telltale silhouette of a sapplant-waterhole complex.

Anna's eye watered, and she gave it up. It was getting too dark. In an hour or so she'd scan for luminescence, nila and boxard trace, other sign. Then she'd sleep. In the morning, when she could see better, she'd decide whether to climb down the eastern wall of Goliath—*I might have to backtrack or go north to find a good canyon to climb down*—or retreat eastward to stock up on supplies for a longer expedition.

The sun had just set when a stab of pain in her stomach decided for her. Only a fingertip-sized sap ball lay in the bottom of her pouch. She'd need to retreat, refresh her supply before continuing on to the new territory east of Goliath.

Disappointed, she bit off half the sap ball and chewed it to make it last before swallowing it. Immediately, the pain subsided. But Anna's euphoric mood had been dampened. She'd so wanted to explore this new territory. She'd have to wait—but she'd been patient before, and she could do it again.

She set up camp, shade to sleep until mid-day, when she'd retrace her steps westward and descend the sawk canyon. Then she'd provision for a full expedition. *I should stock up for at least two weeks...*

Suddenly, Anna saw something move out in the hilly ground far beyond the boulder field, something as big as a boxard or immature nila. She couldn't make out the image well, so far away. But it had glinted, bright, like boxard armor or nila fang. Like bone.

She rubbed her eye and squinted. She didn't see the glint again, but where she'd seen it, she now barely made out a long shadow bobbing down a hillside. Something out there. The image vanished for an instant, appeared again.

Heading west.

Not a nila, Anna decided as the shadow moved again, so vague, on the limit of her vision. A boxard that had somehow wandered afield from its waterhole niche would attract several scavenger and predator species. The sky above injured nila swirled with life. This was something else.

Something new.

Anna's heart raced as she watched for the image to reappear among the rolling hills. But it didn't, and darkfall overtook Phoenix.

She fell asleep. Wondering.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Anna awoke several times during the night. Each time, she gazed eastward into the blankness below and beyond Goliath. She saw the occasional luminescence here and there just beyond the horizon, but it was too far away to tell her whether it was waterhole or carrion.

She didn't see the apparition. She'd slept fitfully, wondering about it. Hallucination, maybe. It happened in the desert. Tricks of light and heat.

Eventually, she came fully awake, tired and hungry, not long after sunrise. Again she looked east. Nothing.

She packed up her shelter, ate a meager breakfast and prepared to head east, to descend the sawk canyon and return to the Confusions. There she'd re-supply and return to explore—really explore—the far side of Goliath.

Anna cached a small supply of dried meat in a crack in the ground, turned to leave—after one last glance out over the vast, unexplored territory...

...and saw it again.

In the early morning light, it cast a long, narrow stick-shadow before it, headed right toward her. It moved, a solitary figure, through the boulder field, shadow climbing a rock, slipping over and down then up another stone mound, only to disappear into a dark crevasse further on. It moved, this apparition with its long shadow, toward Goliath—and towards Anna.

Down there, sawk riding the early thermals cast wheeling shadows. They found little to eat in the day's bristling heat, and Anna often wondered why they moved at all when the sun was up. But over the years, she'd discovered sawk intelligence included knowledge of a tiny lizard species that came out to mate under the sun. Like a darter, only smaller and faster. But an alert sawk could catch it—if the sawk came out in the day.

Maybe, she had considered, the night sawk and the day sawk were two different species.

The shadow moved again, and she experienced a vague feeling of unease. It was like the way she felt when she thought about the cave in the Confusions with the writing on the wall, and the canyon in Goliath where she also refused to go. Haunted, the cave and the canyon. And so was this ... apparition. Haunted.

Something wrong with it.

Most predator species in Ghost Basin hunted alone. Anna sensed a similar kind of danger from this creature—it might be a predator. She squinted, but she couldn't see it well enough to tell anything about it, except...

...except that it stood upright, on its two hind legs, like a nila. If it had a tail, it was either very slender or very short. She couldn't see it.

It walked like...

Stomach pain drove Anna to her knees. She fumbled in her pouch, found the last tiny marble of sapbalm and popped it into her mouth with trembling fingers. She gulped it down and gasped for air.

Her nearest sapbalm cache was at the foot of the sawk canyon, two and a half days west of where she sat clutching her sides. Without hesitation, she began walking westward. The wind at her back picked up, cooling. Her stride was long, sure over the relatively even ground. She followed the dark ribbon of the sawk canyon, keeping it just to her left as she strode.

She'd descend to the canyon floor just before darkfall, she decided. It would take longer that way, perhaps be more dangerous, but she couldn't wait until she got back to the lower wall where she'd ascended. That was two and a half days away, and she feared she'd need to get to her sapbalm sooner than that.

Anna shut her mind down, as she did when she had kilometers to travel, as she did when she wanted to conserve her food supply, or when she knew she'd have to wait a long time before she'd get food or water. She became a self-contained walking machine, and she walked.

About an hour before darkfall, as she gauged it by the angle of the sinking sun, Anna edged near the sawk canyon wall and probed carefully for a likely place to begin her descent. In a moment, she found a spur of rock to anchor rope and a narrow vertical crack in the wall that appeared to extend far down into the abyss.

She scraped the bottom of her food pouch and licked the last drop of water before she began.

It took her more than an hour to get to the bottom. Midway through the first leg, a sawk attacked her; and she had to stop and open her umbrella-shield. The cumbersome wood-and-skin plate over her back and head made her look like a boxard, and made her as clumsy as one. She had to move carefully, testing each hand and foothold with avid attention. Halfway down, she harvested a sawk egg, sucked it

dry and moved on, refreshed.

She reached bottom, stowed her gear and headed westward on the narrow, rock-strewn canyon floor. She stopped after stumbling painfully for the third time, surrendering to the lightless canyon. She slept at last, nestled in a wall-crack after she'd checked it for snakes, insects and other vermin.

Shortly after daybreak she woke; and in the dim light afforded by the pale-blue slash far, far above her, Anna continued west. The sun was descending far out over the Confusions when she emerged from the western mouth of the sawk canyon. She paused in the hilly ground there, orienting herself.

Anna thought of the apparition she'd seen—or imagined seeing—on the far side of Goliath, and she shook her head in wonder. She tapped a supply cache at a nearby chokewillow grove and thought about heading toward the Confusions. After a while, she decided to wait until darkfall before crossing Ghost Basin. She felt more comfortable walking the desert in the dark—she knew how to spot nilas at night—and she was in no hurry.

She erected her shelter at the foot of the chokewillow grove, on a slight incline some two or three hundred meters away from the canyon mouth, and slept part of the day—comfortably, contentedly.

Something awoke her near dusk. Some sensation of dread. Not her stomach, not the pain. Not a predator. Something else. She stood, heart in her throat, looking around, spear in hand.

And saw it.

Far to the south, just emerging from the mouth of ... that canyon. The apparition, the upright ghost with the long shadow.

The walking ... man.

It—the man—continued westward, out into Ghost Basin, toward the Confusions.

Pain wracked Anna's body so severely she fell. She struggled with palsied hands to open the pouch where she'd restocked her sapbalm. In the agonizing seconds the drug took to subdue her pain, Anna's mind reopened. The floodgate of memory burst and again—she remembered this happening before—she knew she'd been right in trying to close it off. But it didn't work—*it doesn't work*.

She remembered.

She thought she should weep at the bitter memory, so long shut up in a dark room in her mind. So long forgotten.

She couldn't bring tears to her eye. She didn't scream as the horror reeled through her mind, as the plug blocking her memory exploded, loosed by the appearance of the apparition—the man—walking alone through the desert, walking westward.

Walking from ... from Tierra Natal.

She sat for hours observing the vision in the far distance move across the desert westward, his pace erratic. He was exhausted.

What is he doing out here?

Near darkfall, the man, still headed west, disappeared from Anna's sight. She climbed a sapplant to get a better view of him, far to the southwest. As she watched his figure grow smaller and eventually disappear in the shimmering, distant heat, she decided to follow him. To find out whom the man was, what he was doing in the desert. Her desert.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Not long after deciding to trail the man, it occurred to Anna he might have died in the night after she lost sight of him. That might be why he disappeared. He couldn't have avoided attracting a nila. Unless he'd found some crevasse to sleep in, or had done as she'd done so long ago—gotten lucky and stumbled into a waterhole. So, in the dark, Anna trekked southwest to find whatever might be left of him.

Maybe the nila that got him would leave something behind. His spear.

But she saw no sign of scavengers and decided he wasn't dead after all. It took her a few hours to find him. He lay in a little depression he'd apparently scooped out in a stretch of sand, nestled at the foot of a meager chokewillow thicket that had anchored itself to some nubbin of rock protruding above the otherwise flat ground. He'd staked his umbrella against the bramble clump so it would shield him from the rising sun. A pouch of some kind lay under his head and he clutched a spear, like the one she carried, in both hands.

Nilas avoided chokewillow thickets, and this one, Anna saw, was particularly thick, the ground below it too loose and sandy for a nila to feel comfortable.

She crept closer, fascinated.

The man snored. His chest rose and fell spastically in his uneasy sleep and his legs twitched. He moaned now and then.

Anna crept closer, closer, until she could've reached out and touched his narrow face, until she feared her breath on it would wake him. She squinted in the dark to make out his features. Long strands of dirty, tangled black hair hung in his eyes so she couldn't see him well in the dim starlight. He was small, slender, knobby-kneed. He wore a short leather skirt and a ragged cape over his shoulders. Two dark, shapeless lumps encased his feet, curled up under him—crude sandals; Anna suspected they were much like her own.

He smelled foul. Not like carrion or fresh boxard or nila feces. Worse. *Maybe that's why nila haven't got him. He doesn't smell right, not like food.*

She held her breath and leaned even closer as the man slept on, his breath ragged, fitful, almost a cough. His bronze, sweat-soaked face glistened.

Not a man—a boy. Beardless, but he had patchy fuzz on his cheeks and chin. His gaunt, slack-jawed face seemed innocent, guileless. She wanted to see his eyes but resisted the urge to brush his limp hair aside. They were closed anyway, and it was too dark.

The boy stirred, rolled to one side, exposing beneath his matted hair the necklace around his thin neck. The Familia, the carved wooden symbol tied by a cord, lay like a dead black bist against his shoulder.

Sudden, familiar pain knifed through Anna's abdomen. She soothed it with a ball of sapbalm.

Familia. Anna refused to think about it, focused instead on subduing her physical pain.

At last, she stood and retreated to a waterhole half a kilometer north of where the boy slept. She sat, back to the sapplank trunk, and waited for him to awaken. Or to die.

She thought about him, and remembered. She remembered Martin. The baby. The recollections felt like somebody else's.

Dispassionately, as she sat half-dozing, she considered killing the boy, strangling him with his own *Familia* if he didn't die in the desert. She wasn't sure if she wanted to. It didn't matter.

The sun rose, and so did the boy. He continued west, his distant image a shimmering dot as heat waves rose off the ground. Anna followed, keeping back, out of sight—not that he bothered to look. She found his trail where he had passed through sandy patches, followed it and studied it.

It was obvious he could barely keep to his feet—his trail wandered left and right in fits and staggers. He managed to miss several nila mounds in his delirious progress. He fell twice. Once, he crawled on hands and knees for a few meters.

Anna found his spear. Dazed by the blazing sun, he probably hadn't even noticed he'd dropped it. She packed it with hers, noting how sharp the point and blade were. Metal. It was secured to the shaft with wire.

In the sky, so bright she could barely see, scavengers gathered above the boy in a high, thin cloud. She counted the familiar seven indicator species, insect and creebird, as well as sawk. Sawk seldom ranged far from Goliath out over Ghost Basin, unless drawn by a substantial meal, fresh. The boy, staggering westward into the sun, would be that meal by darkfall.

Anna followed.

She turned off his path shortly after noon—the boy apparently hadn't stopped to rest in all that time—to tap a supply cache at a waterhole a few kilometers north of his path. She refreshed herself, stocked up on sapbalm and food and regained the trail two hours later.

She found his pouch an hour after that, stiff, dry and empty. It smelled like him, pungent, sour. She picked it up and continued. His cloak lay a kilometer farther on. When she found his umbrella discarded another kilometer beyond that she knew the boy was minutes from death.

Anna had spent the last couple of days—since the moment her mind ripped apart at the pressure of the memories the boy's appearance had prompted—thinking. Although she'd toyed with thoughts of killing him, of allowing the rage lurking under the surface of her mind to run free again, as it had once before—so long ago—other thoughts intruded. About teaching, of children, of her scholars.

Lonely thoughts.

So, when she saw the umbrella, and the vanguard of the hovering scavengers begin to descend toward their dying meal, she abruptly stopped thinking and decided to save the boy. She wasn't sure why she made that decision rather than doing nothing or killing him, but having made it, she acted.

She dropped her pack and pouches, save one, and dashed over the ground to his side. Waving hands, yelling, she scattered a milling gang of sawk and raucous, bat-winged creebirds. She hit one creebird with a casually tossed rock, breaking its wing. She caught it, snapped its snakelike neck and stuffed it under her belt.

Then she knelt at the boy's side.

He lay face down, head slightly turned, eyes shielded by a glossy fringe of hair, one knee drawn up. Anna touched his back, and her fingers slipped across the loose skin and opened an oozing, pus-filled blister. The boy's back was a mass of glistening, angry-red sores. He groaned at her touch, a pained, fragile and fluttery mewling.

Still alive. But barely.

Anna took a sapbalm ball from her pouch and pushed him over onto his back. He groaned weakly. She put one hand behind his neck, brushing the Familia aside, and lifted his head to slide the sap ball between his slack lips, pushing it between his teeth. His gag reflex caught the balm and he swallowed, then coughed, struggled in Anna's hold and tried to turn over.

She rose, took her bearings. The sun was almost down. Squatting, she checked the boy again. The sap had performed its miracle in seconds on him as it had on her so often. His breathing had evened out, strengthened. His eyes fluttered, but he didn't regain consciousness.

Still too weak.

Before going back to retrieve her supplies, Anna took off her own and the boy's clothes and rigged a shelter. It provided enough shade, but she was more concerned about predators. The shelter might keep them at bay, but it seemed so insubstantial. It would have to do, for an hour or less.

Reluctantly, she left him and ran eastward toward the spot where she'd dropped her supplies. A hundred meters away from the shelter she tossed the dead creebird aside and watched as the living cloud of carrion-eaters waiting for the boy to die descended on the spot. By giving them that readily available meal, Anna felt more assured they'd keep away from the boy long enough for her to get back to him.

It worked. She retrieved her things and ran back, finding only a dozen creebirds poking at the makeshift umbrella over the boy's limp form. She shooed the scavengers away then set about rigging a travois, using the two spears to frame the stretcher made of their clothes and her pouches.

At nightfall, she wrapped the boy securely onto the stretcher and dragged it across the desert westward to a large chokewillow thicket at the eastern edge of the Confusions—the boy had almost made it all the way—where she tapped a small spring in a deep rock cairn. She sponged water into his twitching mouth, forced another sap ball down his throat, and a finger of dried boxard liver. Then she ate, drank. And slept.

It took three days to nurse him back to health before he was able to sit up and put food into his own mouth. The blisters on his back had burst and left blotchy red welts in their place, the skin puckered and crinkled, the scars of his ordeal, like a map of the Confusions.

As he regained consciousness, became more aware, he started to notice his surroundings. Anna tried to keep him from seeing her face. She stood behind him when he tried to focus on her, and she wrapped her face from chin to crown, covering her blank eye and her massive scar, when she had to sit or stand in

front of him. She kept the sun at her back.

At last, the boy asked a coherent question.

“Are you the ... the witch?”

As she'd expected he would. But Anna had prepared for the moment, had rehearsed it in her mind many times. She would control the conversation. She had questions to ask. His could wait.

She had been kneeling before him when he asked his question, her face covered, the sun at her back. He was sitting up in the shade of skins woven through overhanging chokewillow brambles. She'd been spooning darter meat into his mouth, interspersed with sips from her water bag, when he feebly pushed her hand away and asked his question, squinting up at her.

Anna stood. She withdrew a few steps then half-turned, not looking at him.

“Who are you?” she snarled, over her shoulder.

He tried to speak but coughed instead. He found the water bag in his lap, grabbed it with stiff, spastic hands, tilted it to his face and managed to swallow a few drops.

“Try again,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Michael Riosclan,” he rasped.

“Riosclan? The son of Jose Riosclan, the man who—”

The boy shook his head. “Grandson.”

“Grandson? And Jose? Tell me about Jose.”

“He didn't want me to come, but he was too weak to stop me. Father's dead—”

“Riosclan still lives?”

“It's been many days.” He shook his head. “I don't know how many. He's probably dead now.”

“Dead? Why? How?”

The boy gripped his Familia protectively.

“Who sent you?” she shouted, voice screeching like an angry sawk mother's. “What do you want?”

The boy's face puckered around a sob, his shoulders shook, and he whimpered, though no tears stained his face.

Grandson? At least twenty years, then. More. Thirty or more.

She waited. “Take your time,” she said, careful to keep her voice even. “I won't hurt you.”

“Please,” he managed at last in a cracked whisper. “Please help us. I came alone because the others are

afraid. I am, too, may the Family embrace me, but the old ones are dying—uncles, aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers—all of them. You must make it go away. Please—"

"Dying? Who's dying, Michael Riosclan? Take your time. Start from the beginning and tell me."

He told her about the plague, slowly, painfully.

Lisan Navarroclan

Suddenly, Anna stopped talking—mid-word—and gasped, a phlegmy inhalation. Lisan jerked—sunrise wasn't far off and she'd started to doze—and reached instinctively for the sabbalm pouch at her side. But her reach was clumsy, and she knocked the bag to the ground at their feet, in front of the stone bench.

The pouch didn't spill when it fell, and Lisan grabbed it up quickly, opened it and took out a sabbalm ball. Anna snatched it from the girl's extended hand and popped it into her mouth without looking at Lisan or the sabbalm. The Holy Mother's gaze remained fixed upward, toward the sky.

"I'm all right," she said. "Look there." She gripped Lisan's arm with insistent fervor. "There." She nodded skyward. "Tell me what you see."

Lisan followed her gaze and saw the star.

Brighter than the others around it, a glowing white thornbush seed. And moving slowly amid the other, fainter, steady stars. The white star seemed to have risen from Goliath, climbed the sky and was now passing overhead. Heading east, toward Glacier Mountain.

"It's a star, but it moves. I don't understand." Lisan had no idea what she was staring at. None of the adults, as she recalled, and certainly not Holy Mother, had ever mentioned anything like this. The vast and familiar star field moved as a single mass across the sky, pivoting around the North Star, as it did every night. A slow, majestic, fixed light procession, like a boxard grazing.

But this star moved alone, separate from its cousins. Something new.

"What is it?" Lisan said. Her mouth felt dry.

Anna abruptly released her vice grip and stood. Lisan stood, too. She knew there would be bruises on her upper arm but she'd refused to cry out and wouldn't mention it. Holy Mother had no idea how strong she really was, but Lisan had long ago decided it was not her place to inform her.

"Fleet," the Holy Mother said, intense. "Fleet."

Lisan shook her head, puzzled. The look on Anna's face, her angular cheekbones accented by starlight, her thin lips turned down in a frown, her good eye buried in shadow and as blank as her absent one—something like awe, like wonder, shone there. Like fear. It frightened Lisan, mirrored her own fear.

"What is 'fleet?'"

"They've come back."

"Who?"

“So many years. They remembered. Someone remembered. But who? Authority? Or Familia?”

“Holy Mother, what is—”

“Authority. Has to be. Has to be.”

Lisan now recalled the vague and distorted references, the stories she'd heard from her Mother and Aunts, other adults, about Authority and Familia, the rebellion, about Earthome and the starships—Fleet Phoenix—that brought the Grandfathers and Grandmothers to Phoenix IV. Was this...?

“Is it a starship? That's what it is, isn't it, Holy Mother. From Earthome?”

Anna nodded, suddenly looking sad. “Maybe it's unmanned,” she muttered, “a survey probe. No. We sent back our reports. And its size. As big as the fleet. Same orbit, too. I remember.”

They watched the starship disappear behind the alcove's back wall. Morning's blueness began to ascend from that direction, slowly overtaking the night.

“How can I make a telescope?”

Lisan wondered what a telescope was, but she didn't ask. She had a thousand questions, but she knew better than to begin asking now. There'd be a time to learn more, to seek answers, and then Holy Mother Anna Devlin would respond in her own good time, in her own way. If at all.

“It wasn't here last night, Lisan. Or did you see it and not tell me?”

Lisan frowned. “No, Holy Mother, I—”

“Just arrived then. Since last night. If they follow protocol, they'll take a few days, weeks. Let's see—stabilize orbit, send out auxiliary satellites, drop robot probes, air and ground surveys. Then manned parties at the best sites.”

Lisan didn't understand a word.

“Yes,” Anna said. “Some time left. About two weeks, maybe more. Ten, twelve days. Not any sooner.”

Deep in thought, she stared vacantly at nothing, jaw agape, hands at her side. Lisan stood by, silent.

“Weeks.” The Holy Mother spoke to herself, a whisper Lisan barely heard. “Maybe months, if I'm lucky.”

Abruptly, she inhaled, nodded and turned to Lisan, fixing her with her hypnotic, intense monocular gaze, grim lines etched down her good cheek. “All right, then. I will tell you. I must. I'll tell you everything. Everything. We'll start tomorrow night, right after chores. All right?”

Lisan nodded. Telling her— isn't that what Holy Mother had been doing the last few nights? Telling Lisan, as she said? But maybe not ... everything.

“I don't know where to begin,” Anna muttered to herself.

Lisan *ahemed*. Holy Mother had been talking about Michael, how she'd met him in Ghost Basin.

“Yes, Lisan?”

“Michael said you made him, um, defecate in his pants,” Lisan said. “Did you?”

Surprised, Anna barked a phlegmy laugh. “He confessed that? A boy? I must have impressed him, then. Fine, then. That's where I left off, yes. So, that's where I'll start.”

“Holy Mother, did—”

“But later,” Anna said. “Day's coming on. I need to sleep. We both do.”

As Lisan escorted her to her sleeping chamber, the Holy Mother muttered, “Eighty minutes. That'll be it. They've plotted the same orbit Fleet did. Circular, equatorial. Stable. Best orbit, most economical. We'll have to make a clock. Water clock. Or sand. We can use the orbital rate to make a clock. We used to have chronometers hard-wired, did you know that, Lisan? Under our skin. All we had to do was blink and we'd know what time it was.”

“Yes, now and then, the Grandfathers would talk about—”

“And other things. We had books. Did they—your Grandmothers and Mothers—ever tell you about books, Lisan?”

“I remember they said—”

“Burned them. Burned them all.” Holy Mother's voice faded as she slipped into her bed, bony feet poking at the ceiling. “Lost art, reading. Have to teach you. Michael told me. Shit his pants, then he told me. Shit his pants, then he—”

Lisan cranked the recirculator then stood by Holy Mother Anna Devlin's bedside for a few minutes, listening to the steady insect buzz of her snoring, before she left the room. She didn't expect to sleep well, thinking about Fleet, about clocks, about burned books.

But before she fell asleep in her own chamber, not far down the street from the Holy Mother's, she thought about Michael, how he'd told the other children about what had happened to him out in Ghost Basin when he'd met the Witch.

After he got back—he'd been gone so long, they thought he'd died—he told the story in a stiff-lipped whisper, wide-eyed, grim-faced, as if sharing a dark secret, as if daring anybody to challenge the truth of it.

“She made me shit my pants,” he'd said, voice defiant. “Scared me that bad.” Nobody dared laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“...thinks it's witchcraft, and they pray and make sacrifices, but nothing works, so I said we should—”

“What?” Anna realized she hadn't been listening to the meandering tale. The boy had awakened vivid images in her mind, memory fragments long buried, untapped. Memories of home. She sensed, she saw, in her memory small, trivial details of that home. The way Martin curled his lip when he laughed, the way

his eyes crinkled almost shut. His clothes tossed carelessly at the foot of the laundry box. She smelled his hair, felt the tickle of his mustache when he kissed her.

There had been a tomato plant by the door, with small, red fruit dangling amid green leaves. She tasted that fruit now. A sharp acidic bite, tangy, fresh.

The memories had come to her slowly, in bits and pieces, when she first saw the boy; but at that time, they'd impacted against a hardened heart, ready to take them in with no emotion. It was as if those memories belonged to someone else, and Anna was a scientist observing them under a glass, dispassionately.

But the details, the intimate, exacting details that came into her memory as the boy told his story—they were hers.

Lest the pain she knew lurked under the surface explode again, she redirected her attention, focused elsewhere. She concentrated on the chattering boy.

Something he said disturbed her. What was it?

“Sacrifices,” she said. “You said ‘sacrifices?’”

“Yes. By Our Father's Blood Anointed,” he recited. “You know. The First Grandfather says it won't do because it's just hedge chickens, not real goat's blood, but—”

Her laugh cut him off. The boy took the laugh as a signal to relax and he smiled tentatively.

Yes, Anna recalled. The Familia group gatherings had included sacrifices. Prayer, singing and a symbolic slaughter were among their rituals. The blood offering was steeped in mystical associations extending, so she had heard, back into the roots of human cultural history. The worship of primitive gods and goddesses had involved, in some cases, human sacrifice, or the killing of a lamb or some other animal. Blood spilled on the altar to appease some capricious deity, an attempt to fathom the unfathomable.

Familia had, before the rebellion, eaten a soy-meat substitute processed to resemble a coil of linked arms. “Breaking of the bread” the ritual was called. She had paid no attention to Familia ritual. It hadn't involved her.

So, they make do without food processors, but not without their comforting rituals. They sacrifice hedge chickens.

The boy had also mentioned goats. Anna remembered the sheep, saved somehow from the nano-collapse in the revolt's chaos. The survivors had no doubt also saved other species. Goats, at least. And hedge chickens.

She licked dry lips, tried to concentrate. “What did you tell them?”

“Like I said, that we should ask you to lift your curse. We should come here and find out why you made it, and maybe you would tell us what we needed to do to lift it. They called it blasphemy, but I said—”

The witch's curse. Anna felt anger boiling up inside her. “Curse? What curse? How many of you are there?”

"When I left, twice two hands of adults lived, but one hand of those were sick, and, of course, any who get the plague die soon."

"Twice two hands?"

Twice two hands? Boiling, boiling.

"Yes. There are double-twice two hands and more children who live. I am the oldest. No children have caught the plague and First Grandfa—"

"Two hands?" Boiling.

"Y-yes." He nodded. Her tone had risen, sharpened; and the boy lost his casual, relaxed demeanor. He gulped, jaw quivering, and shakily reached for the water bladder, eyes fixed on her.

Incredible. They've forgotten mathematics. How far toward barbarism have they plunged?

Anna took a deep breath, tried to force calm. A feeble attempt. She struggled to suppress the fury behind her words, but her voice quivered with tension. "Tell me, Michael Riosclan, do you ... read?"

"Read?"

"Yes. Books. You know."

"Oh, books." He brightened, seemingly calmed by this turn of subject. He couldn't see Anna's eye blazing, or her tight jaw and knotted fists. "Praise the First Family, we're safe from books now. I was just a baby when First Grandfather burned the last—"

The dam burst, and Anna turned to face the boy. His eyes widened as he saw her shaking, knotted fists at her side. Her face still lay hidden under her hood; but her shoulders hunched, and her body warned him of blazing anger.

"Curse? What curse? Why should I help you?" she croaked, venomous. "Tell me why."

The boy tensed, turned white, eyes wide in terror, looking up at the shadowed woman—the witch standing over him menacingly. He tried to stammer an answer and failed. The water pouch dropped from his spastic fingers.

Anna howled and hurled curses at him. She vented the rage that over the years, until now, she had unconsciously released only at hunt's climax against some beast that became both food and surrogate victim of her madness.

Over the years, she'd wondered at her emotional release, the depraved viciousness that occasionally erupted when she killed. She had no idea where it came from, what need her howling and mad dancing satisfied. She'd buried the reason somewhere deep in her mind.

Now, she knew. Now, she recognized the hunger the ritual satisfied. She remembered, and she released the venom, let it run its course.

The boy kneaded his Familia as she raved in a cracked voice, danced her stuttering, mad dance before him, his eyes wide in terror, a silent prayer quivering his lips.

Suddenly, she stopped.

In the stillness, Anna slowly lifted back the cowl of her robe, exposing her face. She stepped aside, the sun no longer at her back, so the boy could see the blemish more clearly.

He stared in shock. She stared back without mercy, her left eye blazing alone, set beside the hideous hole where her other eye should have been in the middle of a massive purple scar spread from crown to chin. She had no nose and her lips pulled into the purple flesh in a fixed snarl.

The boy's eyes fluttered, and he fainted.

Sudden pain knifed through Anna's belly as he fell backwards, and she dropped to her knees. She clutched her sides and fell, rolling in agony. She groped for the pouch, grabbed a ball of the poultice and shoved it in her mouth. She swallowed and sputtered.

Her muscle spasms and panicked breathing slowed as the pain subsided. She lay in the sand and looked over at the unconscious boy. He had shit himself.

She laughed.

Laughter consumed her now as pain had done seconds before, as rage had before that. She let it go, and laughed until her ribs ached and hot tears leaked out of the corner of her eye.

When she'd regained her senses, Anna decided to follow the boy back to Tierra Natal, to let him live and make sure he got back safely to his home, to his Mother and Father.

No, his Father had died, he'd said. And his Father was Riosclan, leader of the rebellion that had killed her husband, her baby, her memory, her world. And her sanity. He hadn't said whether his Mother lived, but he had a Mother, and Anna thought about that for a long while.

She still didn't know why he'd come—something about a curse, and the adults dying—and she was curious. She wanted to ask the boy, when he woke up, but she wanted to see, too. She wanted to go back home.

No, not home. It'll never be home again.

And it wasn't concern for the adults of Tierra Natal, who had despised her as a witch after all these years, that motivated her. Not concern, nor mere curiosity. She watched the boy sleeping peacefully in the shade, occasionally brushing away puffer flies from his slack lips, and wondered why she'd decided to let him live, to go back with him to Tierra Natal.

Must be a reason, a good one. Might as well find out what it is.

Hours passed until, finally, the boy stirred. Anna hid nearby and watched him awaken. The sun had dropped behind the Confusions.

He rose stiffly, grimacing in pain. He looked around and saw the bundle where Anna had stood. He stumbled to it and found a water-filled bladder and some nila jerky. His skirt, cloak, umbrella and spear were stacked nearby.

“Michael Riosclan,” she called from the rocks, hidden in the shadows cast by the setting sun beyond the grove. “Go home. Do you hear? Go home now.”

“Please. Please. Will you help us?”

“Will the First Grandfather beg me to help? Will he come to me and beg me?”

“I don't know. Please. Please. Help us. Will you? Will you?”

She said nothing more. At last, the boy turned his back to the setting sun and began walking home.

* * * *

Crossing Ghost Basin, he awoke each nightfall to find the water bladder full. His food bag never emptied. By these signs he knew Anna followed. He tried often to catch glimpses of her—behind him, or somewhere out in the desert—without success.

Since he traveled at night now that he'd learned it was easier, she had to guard him against nila attack. The boy was lucky. He never saw one.

At last, she watched, hidden, as he entered Tierra Natal. She stood in the knee-deep grass a half-kilometer west of the broken walls of the old town. Waiting.

A day passed, then another. Finally, two Uncles carried a pallet with a man on it a few hundred meters west of the town. They set the pallet down in the deep grass, facing it so he could look west. Shielding their eyes against the setting sun, the bearer-Uncles saw the Witch standing alone. They waited for her to approach. She didn't move.

Hours passed as the First Grandfather and his escorts waited for Anna to approach, and Anna waited for the Uncles to leave the First Grandfather alone. Finally, they retreated, withdrawing halfway to Tierra Natal, where they turned to watch, leaving their charge alone on his pallet in the grass, alone with the Witch.

As the Uncles retreated, as the sun began to descend behind Goliath, she came. She approached the bed and stood at its foot, the sun behind her, her shadow over the man. He squirmed, but could not see her face hidden deep within the cowl's gloom.

The man was not Jose Riosclan.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Where is Riosclan?”

“Dead. Two days ago. I am Nathan Navarroclan, temporary appoint—” He collapsed in a coughing fit. She waited, immobile.

At last: “Will you lift your curse, Witch? I've come to beg you to lift your curse. The adults are dying, all of us. Will you do it? Please?”

“Just the adults? Not the children?”

The new First Grandfather nodded, cheeks puffed, bloody pink foam flecks in his beard.

“Tell me of this curse. Tell me everything.”

They talked long into the night. Anna gave him sapbalm to ease his pain, to help him talk.

* * * *

“Forgive me,” a little girl of about five recited the next day, “as I forgive you.” The girl dipped a tiny finger smeared with sapbalm diluted in goat milk and touched it on the purple gash scarring the old woman's face. Anna returned the words and the gesture. The girl was the last to complete the ritual five adults and forty-three children had already performed.

The Familia understood ritual.

It was part of the price Jose Riosclan's successor grudgingly agreed to pay for the Witch to lift her curse. He was the first to take part in what she called the Healing. The little girl was the last.

Navarroclan died before he saw the plague ended, and yet another took his place as First Grandfather.

Only the adults had become sick. Their symptoms resembled a common toxicity Anna finally recognized. The sickness had occurred sometimes among people who handled fuel cells. This she knew, but had long forgotten.

It came to her in the conversation with the Grandfather that first night: the well. The fuel cell she'd tossed into the well after killing the Uncle so very, very long ago had apparently been cracked. Not much, but enough. In time, the crack had eroded, allowing fuel to seep into the water, slowly poisoning it.

Several wells had been tapped into the Amazonia aquifer below the rotted town after the rebellion, as Anna had earlier observed. Familia ritual had evolved, changed, in her long absence from Tierra Natal. One particular well had been chosen to serve adults only. Children used other wells, never the one reserved for their Aunts and Uncles. That well, Anna learned, was the one where she'd killed the Uncle. It had become a shrine. And, in time, as the fuel cell in it eroded, it had become a place where adults slowly killed themselves.

Anna ordered the well sealed. The dying adults—for them, it was too late and she couldn't save them—obeyed. The children, awed by the Witch's presence, her hideous scar and her authoritarian demeanor, obeyed meekly.

As she settled into village life, the children began to call her Holy Mother. At first, Anna tried to stop such foolishness, but she was weary, and the pain often consumed her, so she stopped correcting them.

She was called upon to complete the occasional Familia ritual of forgiving, of blessing, of thanksgiving. She performed them perfunctorily, and gradually the children turned to her less and less often for the rituals. Some of the rites disappeared altogether.

The children relied on each other for ceremony. After seeing Anna invent the Healing and destroy the whole sequence of ritual associated with the sacred and tainted well, they began to invent their own sacraments. Anna tacitly blessed these inventions, even occasionally participated, but she said nothing in either praise or criticism.

She corrected their math—“Say ‘ten,’ not ‘two hands’”—but wasn't severe or angered when they lapsed back into their old ways. In fact, Anna never got angry.

She insisted they all remove their Familias and they did. Each was tossed into the tainted well.

As weeks passed, the stomach pains came more frequently, and she needed the sapbalm more often. Her supply ran low. She sent Michael Riosclan and another older boy out to take sap from the sapplant-waterholes in Ghost Basin. They brought back a budding sapplant, and Anna tried to make it grow in the hot, hard soil outside Tierra Natal. *It's good enough for the whipgrass and a few other species. It should support sapplant, too.*

But death hovered. Anna felt it growing in her stomach, a plague the sapplant could not stop; and she knew she'd never live long enough to see if the transplanted tree took or not. She'd accepted it.

But something felt—what? Unfinished?

The night she saw the Fleet arrive, the nagging feeling that there was something she needed to do turned into a desperate urgency approaching panic. But it wasn't until the following nightfall, after she'd slept and dreamed, that it came to her.

She dreamed of the classroom at Harvard Eighteen, and her scholars. She dreamed she was teaching them.

That night, instead of sitting in her alcove, chatting peacefully, unhurriedly, with only Lisan Navarroclan at her side, Anna insisted all the children drop their nightly chores and gather in the central Commons. All of them.

She taught them how to make slates of dried, stretched hide, like their umbrellas; and she showed them how to use fire-blackened tips of chokewillow sticks dipped in tallow to mark on the slates. She used a large blank wall as her own slate, and sat the children on the ground before the slate-wall in neat rows and files.

On the wall behind her as she faced the children, high across the top, she'd written a row of symbols in large, neat, bold strokes.

"That is the alphabet," she said, pointing to the symbols. She stood before them, enjoying the look of rapt attention in their big, dark eyes. "With these symbols, we can write words. Words make sentences, sentences make stories. We can write stories on our slates so that nobody ever need forget—anything—ever again."

She paused, fixing them each, one-by-one, with her single eye. They waited for her to speak. Trusting.

"Scholars, today, we're going to learn how to write."

Smiling, she turned to the wall behind her and wrote on the large white wall, slowly, carefully, in large letters: *Phoenix*.

Then she told them what it meant.

Lisan Navarroclan

My name is Lisan Navarroclan. I'm the second oldest of the children of Tierra Natal, second to Michael Riosclan, who was born a month or so before me. I've been told. Michael and I are both Of Age, and

we have pledged ourselves to one another, but we haven't pledged to the Family yet. We will, soon. A ceremony, in the Commons. Something like a Healing, I expect. We'll think up something.

Soon. After I tell the story.

Michael doesn't mind waiting. He understands patience, as all of us children do. Michael knows how important it is to me, to him and to all the children, to tell the story. He brings me a sharp stylus and fresh slates, keeps the ink tallow bowl full and brings me water and sabbalm.

My name is Lisan Navarroclan, but this is not my story, nor is it Michael's, although he, too, has a part in it. It's not the other children's story, either, but they're also a part of it. I'm just the one telling the story, is all. I'm telling it because I know, and I don't want anybody to forget.

This is the story of the Aunt we call The Holy Mother Anna Devlin. She doesn't like us to call her that, although she won't say so. I saw it in her eye. She doesn't really like anything that has to do with the Days Before.

Didn't, not doesn't. Sometimes I forget she's not here anymore.

In a way, I guess, she's still here among us. It's like she taught us. She said, "People are alive as long as somebody remembers them." And we remember Holy Mother Anna Devlin.

Holy Mother started teaching us after she saw you in the sky. She called us *scholars*. She taught us to write and to tell stories so we won't forget. She taught us night after night, knowing that you'd be among us sooner or later, but not knowing how soon. She wanted us to know before you got here.

She died two days ago.

Anna could have died long ago, before I was born. She could have let death ease her pain. But she didn't, because life meant more to her than pain. It may take me a long time to understand that. It took the Holy Mother a lifetime to understand it.

I don't know how long it will be before you get here. We saw your star split and part of it fall away the night before the Holy Mother died. She said it was a probe, probably manned, and that you'd be here in a couple of days.

I don't know who you are or what it will mean for you to come among us. You might be Authority or Familia or something else. Whoever or whatever you are, you aren't us. You're different. Your coming might be good or bad for us. I don't know. None of us do.

All I know is that I remember Holy Mother Anna Devlin, and I have a need to tell her story.

This is her story.

End

About the Author

Ken Rand lives in West Jordan, Utah, with his family, where he writes "semi-fulltime." He is a former reporter for print and radio. He's written a dozen novels, more than a hundred short stories, two hundred

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His writing and living philosophy: lighten up.

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