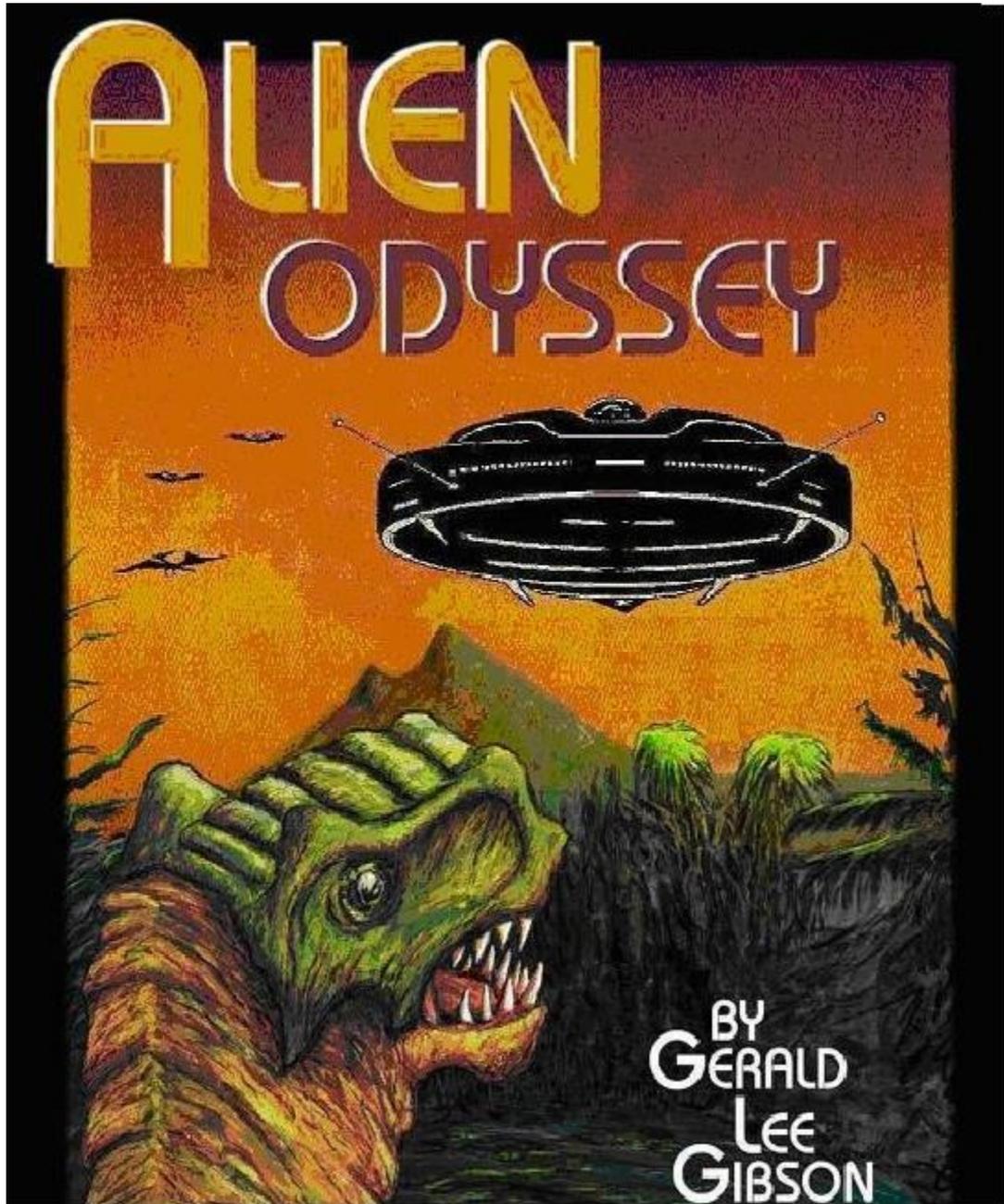


Email me with your comments!



To my wife Donna,
Daughters Jennifer and Kerri,
Son Matthew, and Seven Grandchildren.
Thanks for your inspiration and support!

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The Aliens

The Leaders

Doctor Arkru (the Professor) Chief scientist of the Ark, whose good intentions for the student collectors are based upon the friendlier worlds of Beskol, Raethia, and Orm.

Falon Commander of the vessel, who discovers the new planet, but remains Arkru's staunchest critic after landing on the new world.

The Students

Rifkin Prodigal student, whose reckless personality leads to disaster on the planet.

Zither Intellectual member of Arkru's class, whose personal odyssey becomes a central theme.

Rezwit Kindred spirit of Rifkin, a favorite of the professor, until mayhem breaks in the forest.

Vimml Fun loving but mischievous follower of Rifkin, who creates havoc on and off the ship.

Shizwit Shy student, who, rising to the crisis, becomes the Key Master of her class.

Alafa Female Student, the equal to Rifkin, who competes with the leader of her team.

Omrik Original friend of Zither, whose timid personality, is more suitable on the ship.

Illiakim Female member of Zither's team, who is traumatized by the horrors of Irignum.

Grummel Member of 'Rifkin's Gang,' who, on the new world, appears to be slightly mad.

Lumnal Youngster who identifies with the big kids, until disaster strikes in the forest.

Yorzl & Zeppa Male and female youngsters, who should never have been allowed off the ship.

The Technicians

Zorig An efficient assistant to Arkru, who proves to be a great disappointment in the forest.

Urlum Zorig's little sister, whose delicate emotions, keeps her grounded on the ship.

Tobit and Ibris Young technicians, who never wanted to leave the ship in the first place.

The Officers

Orix Navigator of the ship and chief critic of the mission, whose skepticism rings true.

Remgen First Mate, a critic of student collection until the search for Rifkin begins.

Imwep Second Mate, whose main interest at first is bagging himself a beast.

Kogin Third Mate, sidekick of Imwep, who befriends Zither at a critical time.

Dazl Chief Engineer, a crusty officer, who joins the search for Rifkin in the forest.

Abwur Communications Officer, ship sage and member of Falon's inner circle.

Doctor Eglin Chaplain and Medic, whose prayers are heard frequently from the bridge.

Other Members of the Crew

Varik Assistant Medic, who will make a lasting imprint upon earth.

Wurbl Portly Chef who supplies the ship's company with a limitless range of alien meats.

Imyor Assistant Chef who reluctantly volunteers for the second rescue mission into the forest.

Hobi, Jitso and Gennep Ship's Storage Clerks. Hobi and Jitso will later join at different stages of the search, but only one will return to the ship.

Chapter One

The Third Planet

Among the myriad of stars, one distinguishable point became visible from the ark's bridge. When first spotted by Commander Falon, it was entered into the ship's log along with all the other observations on his watch. Casually, following normal routine, he switched to the ship's scope with the intent of tracking it on his computer screen, a task that would take most of the hour. The point had appeared suddenly and fortuitously after the ship began to emerge unscathed from a belt of asteroids, yet continued to compete with much more wondrous objects in space.

Constellations, star clusters and nebulas loomed as a backdrop for meteors and comets, and the ghostly trace of exploded stars drew his attention away. At one point, which was taped into the ship's log, he recorded a black hole surrounded by a brilliant halo of light. Untold marvels and astronomical enigmas were sprinkled jewel-like over the cosmos to distract him from that dull point of light. Nothing seemed so spectacular in the cosmos after witnessing the aftermath of a supernova, a black hole and a gigantic constellation with its one hundred billion stars. Yet he knew, with increasing confidence, he had discovered something important this hour.

Raising an excited four-fingered hand to his mouth, his huge cat-like eyes widened in disbelief as the realization grew. This was not a star; it was a planet—a brand new world!

Commander Falon had no external ears, only portholes on each side of his head that quivered in response to sounds. At this moment, the holes were motionless, and yet his mind was reeling with thoughts. Although his pupils were dilated with expectation, his simian face, with mere breathing slits for a nose, showed little emotion as he stared at the new world. He was, as were others of his kind, completely bald and had bright pink skin, mottled slightly with red splotches that came with aging, as did the wrinkles on his neck and chin. In spite of his gangly arms, which appeared too long for his torso and his short bandy legs, the commander walked with a graceful bipedal gait. A smile played on his thin lips as he paced back and forth on the bridge.

The commander surveyed his crewmen critically but with understanding this late hour. Orix, his executive officer and the ship's navigator, had missed the planet entirely but so had First Mate Remgen and all the other crewmen on deck. He, alone, had made the connection, but he must be certain before sounding the alarm. Despite its apparent mediocrity, he had followed mission procedure, and now, it was paying off. The target point appeared fixed and radiated dully contrary to the blinking bursts of surrounding lights. The questions he continued to ask himself were basic to the mission. Was it a watered world? Was it a planet that might contain life? Exhausted as he was, Commander Falon, with guarded excitement, continued the difficult task of tracking the object with the ship's scope. For a moment, his eyes grew fatigued and he looked away from the monitor to study it once more with his unaided eye. He had detected it amidst billions of stars. Now that he had found it, he wondered if it would illuminate with the

right color: bluish white. After months of searching the cosmos, the distinction was critical—the difference between a routine asteroid or planet and a world that might support life.

Suddenly, as the last debris from the meteor belt fell away, the target object brightened into a steady, luminous glow. Falon caught the change at once and shot back up to his feet. Earlier, after first discovering it, he noted its constant glow among the twinkling stars, a characteristic peculiar to asteroids, planetoids and worlds. Now, as he had hoped, there was a definite bluish-white tint to the planet—confirmation at last.... and something else that caused him to gasp.

I don't believe it, he thought, dropping back into his seat. It has company!

He was almost totally convinced of his discovery. The absolute proof would come in the telescopic image on the screen. Judging by its monstrous next door neighbor, the planet was, it appeared, circling a moderate-sized star—another factor necessary to support life. It was not a mere asteroid or anomaly floating through the universe. It was connected to a nurturing sun. After lessening the magnification and placing the two objects on the same grid, he noticed the classic formation. There were, in fact, several planets of various sizes in this system. One large planet seemed to have a ring around it. Another gigantic world appeared to be hundreds of times the size of his target world. His planet, the only one with the proper tint, was the third planet from its sun. Additional magnification showed a large moon circling this world.

A crooked smile broke his expressionless face. The commander now felt vindicated for his long hours of searching and for their many months in space. Had he not caught its first glimmer, the ark might have passed this planetary system entirely and spent weeks, perhaps months, searching for a new world. While crew members manning the space-going ark were lulled into drowsiness and lethargy, Commander Falon, his staff and Doctor Arkru, the scientific director aboard ship, had taken turns standing watch. The star maps created by earlier explorers and the color spectrum pointing to evidence of water, oxygen, and life were the business of everyone aboard the ark, and yet most of the crewmen and student collectors were now asleep. Those on watch ignored the great window of the bridge, except to glance up occasionally at a passing comet, meteor or celestial anomaly, except one lone sentinel, whose mind never seemed to rest.

While on his long, lonely vigil, Commander Falon had become the first member of the mission to glimpse the new world. Now that he had honed in on the point with the ship's scope, he could barely contain himself as he adjusted the settings. In support of his visual findings, was the murky appearance on the monitor of the new world, which circled its own sun. Now it was time to bring as much detail as he possible on the screen. Adjusting the computerized scope as he magnified the image hundreds of times, he received only a blurred likeness at first, but there was no mistaking the blue, white and brown splashes of color against the blackness of space.

"Great Celestial Father," he whispered, as he fine-tuned the image on the screen, "wait until Doctor Arkru sees this. A living planet, *after all these months!*"

The crew surrounding him went about their chores on the bridge, oblivious to this momentous event, until awakened by the sound of his voice. In speech resembling the chirp of crickets and croaking of frogs, he gave the first order of his watch. "Standby by for landing instructions!"

"Sir?" the executive officer looked up from his controls.

"Landing instructions?" First Mate Remgen muttered with surprise. "Where to commander? All I see out there are comets, meteors and stars. I've never seen the universe this cluttered before!"

Commander Falon had given an incomplete order, which left his subordinates suspended over their controls. Prepare to land *when?* They pondered amongst themselves. More importantly was the question *where?* Remgen seemed quite correct: all there was out in deep space was chaos. The commander, himself, had written recently in the ship's log:

For such a long time, our ship, on its mission to find living planets and collect specimens to populate other worlds, has seen the birth and death of stars, brushed comets and witnessed anomalies beyond imagination, never ceasing to wonder at the majesty of the Celestial Father's realm. More rare than a black hole or exploding star and less common than even the most massive star are the handful of planets spread throughout the universe supporting life...

Remgen exchanged a dubious look with Third Mate Kogin, the watch officer piloting the ship. Following the standby command should come the coordinates to land, but it appeared as if the commander, who was busy at his monitor, was not sure. An uneasiness fell over the bridge as the crewmembers paused in their tasks. How was it possible that they had all not seen the target planet too? The inexplicable fuzziness of the image began to clear gradually for the commander, until he was almost certain of what he had found. His training and experience had conditioned him against hasty judgments. The perfectionist in him wanted to be one hundred percent sure. As he looked away from screen to gauge the reaction on his crewmates, his mind reeled with the discovery. When he looked back, the image had cleared to almost perfection—ready for inspection, yet for one more moment only for his eyes.

"Sir," the pilot ventured nervously, "I've been at the helm before you arrived on the bridge. Is there something out there we've missed?"

"Look, all of you!" he cried, after transferring the image to the screen.

For a moment, the crew was speechless. The ocean bound world, they could plainly see, had moderately large land formations that were dotted with apparent cloud masses throughout. On each pole there was obvious indications of ice caps. To put the finishing touches to this picture, there was a lovely pale moon circling this world.

"Great leaping comets," exclaimed Remgen in a breathless voice, "he found one! Our commander found us a terrestrial world!"

"Finally, after all these months, a life-supporting planet!" the pilot cried jubilantly, clasping his four digit fingers together as if to pray.

There were different names for the phenomena on the screen. The star maps often listed them as animate planets or blue-white worlds. Almost always they were terrestrial and could support life. To the religious minded, today's discovery was a sacred event, for it proved that the Celestial Father's reach was immeasurable. At the far end of the universe, nearly a year into the mission, one more prize had been given to them. It was, as were the other planets encountered, the only reason for their odyssey in space, and this time it was the commander, himself, who had discovered a new world.

All of the crewmembers on the bridge were acting like Doctor Arkru's students, the commander noted indulgently. The long wait, in which they had all spent periods of time in their pods, was over. They would once again be on firm ground and out of harm's way with the prospects of added provisions for the ship's stores. Most of them, on scientific and hunting expeditions, would have a chance to explore the alien world.

Orix, the executive officer, who had been charting their voyage at this hour, was one such grateful crewmen and rose up to vigorously shake Falon's hand.

"Congratulations commander, your instincts were right," he spoke reverentially, "the color spectrum indicates life."

“Instincts be damned!” snorted the first mate. “While the rest of our heads bobbed for lack of sleep, our commander never gave up! He found us a world!”

“The will of the Celestial Father rides with the ark,” declared Commander Falon, folding his arms.

Looking out at the chaos in space, the commander sighed. It would have been fitting if Eglin, the ship’s medic, who was also the chaplain, could say a few words. When they began the dissent, he would have Eglin give a prayer to the ship’s company as he sat buckled in his seat.

“Prepare to land sir?” the pilot looked up from his controls.

“Yes, of course, set the coordinates Kogin,” the commander sighed with great satisfaction, “this old ark could use the rest!”

“This calls for a celebration!” Remgen clasped his eight fingers together, looking around for agreement on the bridge.

“When we land safely, we shall celebrate properly,” Falon promised, patting the First Mate’s arm. “For now, waken the galley and have Wurbl bring us some strong Revekian beer.”

Raising the ship’s phone up to his mouth, he punched a large gold button on the panel. Though self-controlled most of the time, the excitement detected on his expressionless face was visible in his trembling ear holes and the quivering movement of his nasal slits and mouth. His smile widened in its crooked fashion and, for the first time anyone could remember, moisture glistened in his great, unblinking eyes. This was, Falon reminded himself, Doctor Arkru’s moment too. The Collector, as they called him, was the chief scientist and organizer of the mission. He, more than anyone else, was responsible for the search for terrestrial planets and the collection of specimens on alien worlds.

“Doctor Arkru,” the commander said, clearing his throat, “you wanted a wake-up call when a new world came into view.”

“Now there’s an understatement for you,” Remgen chortled to Orix as they chatted with the other crewmembers on watch.

There would be great laxity in the next hour, especially with the Collector arriving on the bridge. Doctor Arkru would insist on an immediate celebration when he joined the crewmen. Soon the entire ship would be given the glad tidings: a terrestrial world, not far away by the interstellar yardstick, had been discovered by the commander. The long periods of slumber, interspersed with monotonous routine, would be replaced by adventure, exotic foods and a daily regimen of work and recreation. There would be no drug induced sleep for a while nor the idling sameness of the compartments and passageways of the ship. Everyone, from the youngest shipmate to the commander, himself, would have a chance to set foot on the new world.

On the other end of the phone, still draped in sleep, Doctor Arkru groped around for his robe as he spoke: “When will we be preparing to land, Commander Falon?”

“It won’t be long professor,” the commander’s voice constricted as his eyes traced the great blue sheets on the planet that indicated water and life. “Doctor Arkru,” he confessed with complete candor, “once again the Scientific Fathers are correct about blue-white planets. We’re certain this one is terrestrial as some of the other worlds. It has oceans and vast cloud masses too.”

In a short while the lives of everyone on the ark would change drastically as the ship prepared once more to land on an alien world. Though jubilant and filled with high expectations, the officers and crewmen had no illusions about what lie ahead.

The old collector could barely contain himself as he scrambled around his cabin looking for his pants, tunic and shoes. He had slumbered in his pod for many more hours, while Falon and his staff, after awakening earlier, sat tirelessly on watch. After a short period in which the crewmen mulled over the commander's discovery and shared their concerns, Doctor Arkru arrived with his young assistant, Zorig, bringing fresh enthusiasm to the bridge. As everyone else on the ship, both the professor and his assistant would soon be fastened in their seats. Entry and touchdown were imminent on the new world.

As with Falon, Zorig, and the others, there was mixture of feline and simian traits in Arkru's face and body, but the doctor's face was far more mottled with time. The wrinkles on his neck were extensive, and his ear and nose slits were crusted with great age. Normally the professor was, despite his years, particular about his appearance. To set a good example for his technicians and students, he always appeared clean, well groomed and in the proper attire. During this special occasion, however, the good doctor appeared eccentric and disheveled. There were, to the crew's amusement, a pair of mismatched shoes on his feet. His brightly colored tunic, which had been pulled on backwards, was tucked halfway into his clashing pants.

"Look at that view," his voice was tremulous with expectation. "Our commander discovered a new planet. I wish I'd been awake!"

"We need to run some spectral tests," Zorig declared excitedly. "We must check the atmosphere for toxins. Oh look, professor, there are ice caps, just like Raethia and Beskol!"

"Simmer down lad," Remgen chided gently, "there's plenty of time for that. Just look at it Zorig and enjoy the view. Isn't that a beautiful sight?"

"Beautiful!" Zorig almost wept. "I can't wait to explore that world!"

For several moments Doctor Arkru and his assistant looked with wonder at the screen. Though the planet was still a long way away, the magnification made it look as if they were hovering directly overhead. Everyone agreed it was the most promising world so far. Against his better judgment, Falon allowed his crew a short round of libations, thanks to Wurbl, the ship's chef, who, with his assistant, brought Revekian beer for everyone on the bridge. The commander rose slowly and shakily to his feet, the rush of the strong draught causing him to tilt this way and that as he took command of the bridge. At first, he placed an arm around the professor and the first mate, as the two men stood sharing their thoughts.

"Doctor Arkru, officers of the bridge, members of the crew," he declared with a slight slur, reaching down clumsily to snap on the ship's intercom, "its time to wake up the ship!"

"You mean the *entire* ship?" the pilot looked up at him in disbelief.

"Now here this," the commander called out over the ark, "a terrestrial world has been sighted. Prepare to land. Those on patrol, awake your shipmates. Engineering mate on duty bring the ship to thrust-nine. Communications officer, chief medic and all ship's officers are to be awakened to supervise personnel at their stations. Crewmembers and students on compartment watch look lively. Those on patrol inspect the landing stations, while technicians on duty insure that all containment chambers for specimens are secured. Batten down all hatches crewmen, and secure all items not attached to the bulkheads or deck of the ship. Preliminary estimations indicate a watered and oxygenated world with gas levels that might require our suits. The chief medic will insure the integrity of our equipment and report back within the hour. All hands take care of your morning business, including, if scheduled, the feeding and care of specimens on aboard the ark. At 0075 star time, all hands will strap themselves into their landing stations for touchdown on the new world!"

Chapter Two

Forbidden Garden

After entering the solar system, the ark traveled at a much slower rate than light speed. Now, as the vessel approached the planet, the bridge was cleared of non-essential personnel. Everyone buckled in as ordered, including Eglin, the ship's chaplain and medic, whose words of thanksgiving reverberated over the ark:

“Celestial Father, our benefactor, we thank you for bringing us safely this far. We dedicate this planet to you, because it's part of your creation too. Guide our commander and his navigator as we touchdown on the new world. With your breath, you've deflected us from comets and blown away dark bodies lurking in space. Now, with your divine will, nudge our ark this way and that until a perfect landing place is found out of harm's way. After hearing about this verdant world, we know the bounty will be great, but remind our students and crew members that this planet could be, as other worlds, a forbidden garden with unseen pitfalls and hidden dangers at every turn. Guide our steps and the fate of our mission in the coming days. Give us the wisdom to succeed, yet the insight to escape needless peril.”

Eglin closed his eyes after his prayer, gripping the sides of his pod.

After decelerating to a modest speed, the ark came close to the planet, seeing almost the same wondrous scenes astronauts would witness during the twentieth century on earth. At this point, during the late Cretaceous period, the Age of Dinosaurs was reaching its final stage. North and South American had been united at last, and the great landmasses of Pangaea and Gondwanaland had broken up to resemble the continents and hemispheres of today.

As the ark entered the atmosphere and continued its descent, all thoughts for Eglin's message were replaced by private prayers. Randomly, or, as the Celestial Father would have it, by divine guidance, the navigator selected the Western Hemisphere and, from this point on, followed the commander's order to select the first green mass of forest with a clearing large enough to set down.

Soon the aliens, used to seeing bizarre and incredible life forms, would find creatures beyond their wildest dreams. For a few moments longer during the twilight of the dinosaurs, as the ark touched down, the third planet remained a pristine world. Except for this commotion in Northern Arizona, the new world would go untouched and unhampered for yet another sixty-five million years.

Far below, as the helmsman brought the vessel down, a familiar scene, played out untold times between predator and prey, repeated itself cruelly as forest creatures looked on. After catching sight of its quarry, a big meat-eater charged through the primal forest. The great flesh-eating dinosaur ran thunderously down a beaten path toward a large lake where countless plant eating denizens had gathered throughout the day. Gathering speed as it ran, it remained focused upon its goal. As it charged down the hill toward the river, its great body arched forward further to avoid large overhanging limbs, until it had broken through the trees and was racing unimpeded across the ground.

No one could be sure who was next. All creatures, large and small, gave it a wide berth. Only a few dim-witted brutes, who were too slow to get out of the way, were found cringing and

ducking as it passed. Peeking through the brambles and down from the branches, were the ancient marsupials, insectivores, and primates, who would one day claim its domain. In the clearing, at high noon, with the ancient Arizona sun streaming down, it was for a short while, the ruler of the forest, the greatest killing machine of all time. Its multicolored scales were suddenly ablaze in the sunlight as it emerged from the shadows, as if millions of glistening bronze sequins were attached to its frame. Towering nearly twenty feet above the ground, its small, bird-of-prey eyes darted around crazily in its gargoyle skull. Its reptilian smile, which resembled a serpent's grin, was made more hideous by rows of knife-sized and razor sharp teeth.

As it advanced toward its prey, tremors passed through the earth, causing the burrows of small rodent-like mammals to collapse along the way. A huge cloud of dust was kicked up as it passed. Safely elevated in the trees, insects, lizards and primitive birds remained unaffected by the commotion below. With the exception of a ponderous tank-shaped dinosaur moving toward the water and ground-dwelling mammals and snakes, everything that could hear its terrifying roar and the sound of its clamoring feet, had already fled the scene or crawled into a nearby bush.

It was hungry and pumped up with energy, in no mood for the swarms of pack hunters scampering through its domain. If necessary, it was quite willing to fight them or anyone else interfering with its meal. Today, tyrannosaurus rex planned on bringing down a female duckbill, its favorite prey, as she guarded her nest. The graceful, delicately built and gentle-natured dinosaur was no match for the murderous fiend approaching her now. Her maternal instinct to guard her nest should make her an easy kill. In spite of the obvious threat facing her and the fact that she was half its size, however, she held her ground. Her body remained crouched protectively over her eggs. Her long tail, which was her only tangible weapon, whipped around frantically in front of her face. The message was clear even to the tyrannosaurus's dim-witted brain: she would not abandon her eggs. Although it seemed hopeless, she was prepared to die in order to preserve her nest.

Inching closer and closer, its massive head poised to strike, it was confident of its next meal. In addition to the maternal instinct working against her, there was a dense thicket near the water's edge, blocking her retreat to the other side. As it began nipping leisurely at her legs, while avoiding her tail, its reptilian mouth seemed to draw further into its frightful grin, opening frequently to expose its dagger-like teeth. Its great legs, now planted firmly on the ground, barely had to move, while its tiny, almost useless arms, wiggled daintily in the air as it toyed with its prey.

There was no hurry now; it was just a matter of time. Sixty-five million years ago, in the twilight of the dinosaurs, it seemed it have all the time in the world. For just a moment, however, its bird-like movements gave way to a more methodical pose, as if it was having a change of heart. Within its small brain, there had never been much room for fear, yet suddenly and inexplicably, the duckbill's tormentor was startled and disoriented as it looked passed her up at the sky.

A dark, mysterious object began descending from the clouds. Visitors from another galaxy were arriving, searching for a place to land, with no one to greet them but dim-witted brutes. Appearing directly over the trees, their strange looking vessel caught the glint of the noonday sun, blinding the large carnosaur just long enough to set its victim free. Nothing, except flying reptiles, had ever come out of the sky. Now this monstrous bird cast a shadow that darkened an entire grove. As it moved over the ground, swallowing up in darkness everything below, its true shape took form: a colossal bug-like vessel, bearing a remarkable resemblance to fossil trilobites buried in the earth's rocks. In the meantime, the mother saw her chance,

gathered her eggs into her mouth and fled. Fleeing into the opposite direction, the tyrannosaurus rex was confronted at last with a monster even more frightening than itself.

With the planet's life forms moving as a pageant below them, the aliens witnessed, on their separate viewing screens, the progress of the duckbill as she darted around the thicket into the shallow water and ran to the other side. For several moments afterwards, while strapped in their pods, their attention was divided between countless other creatures fleeing the ark: flyers, runners, and crawlers—some of which were larger than trees.

As the crewmen, technicians and students chattered amongst themselves, Doctor Arkru took mental notes of this bounty, sharing his observations with the commander, his officers, and the ship's students and crew: "Look!" he exclaimed into his intercom. "Do you see? There are advanced plant and animal life forms on this world. I can see a large river flowing through the jungle, green forests, and fields stretching as far as the eye can see. There are herds in the distance, like the dakkas on Raethia and the samgar on Beskol. The sky is filled with flying creatures, similar but more plentiful than Beskol. The meadows are dotted with browsers and all manner of fluttering, darting, and scampering beasts."

As Kogin, the helmsman, sat in slack-jawed wonder, superlatives poured out of Zorig's mouth too: "Marvelous! Fantastic! Astounding!"

"Our main concern," clipped Falon, "is to find a place to land."

"Didn't our commander do splendidly?" chortled Remgen. "Found us an animate planet to explore—a brand new world!"

"Yes, splendid, indeed," Falon smiled indulgently, "a truly remarkable event. I'll take my bows when we've completed our mission on this world!"

"Splendid, marvelous and astounding are not adequate for what I see," grumbled Orix the navigator, removing his harness momentarily to visually scan the ground. "Impossible—nay *frightening*—is a better word!"

As they sat staring at their viewing screens, most of the ark's crewmembers and students felt excitement and wonder, but many of them were also filled with alarm. No one, even the commander and professor, truly understood the dangers ahead. The impact of the new world dazzled and beguiled their minds. Orix, the only skeptic on the bridge, sat back down, shuddering at what he had seen.

"It lifts the spirit," the commander whispered reverentially, "that one dull point could grow to be such a sight."

"Aye," the first mate nodded, "it boggles the mind!"

Orix sighed and shook his head. Now that Eglin had given the official prayer, the professor, in grandiloquent terms, gave them his impression of the new world.

"Imagine the discoveries to be made on this planet," his voice rang out over the ship. "We're witnessing only the *top* of this world. Consider its depth and unknown realms. Consider its potential for our mission: a vast resource for scientists, preserve for collectors, and reserve to replenish the ship's hold. We will, with great abundance and diversity, fulfill a mission goal to populate other worlds, but there is also food and possible fuel to be manufactured here. The opportunities seem staggering at first glance. Imagine, lads, what lies ahead when we lower the ramp and set foot in this garden. An exploration awaits our students and crewmen into a vast, unexplored unknown. Hundreds—nay thousands of species—await the cloaking field trap, dart and net. Millions of creatures lie hidden from our view!"

“To think,” he said dramatically, “this wondrous planet was not even listed on the star charts. It was, our chaplain might agree, godsent from Izmir, Himself, the great Celestial Father. Perhaps God directed our weary commander’s eyes to that distant point in space, or maybe it was blind chance, but it will, I’m certain, test us as scientists, crewmen, and students. It will expand our undertaking to heights undreamed of by the Fathers of Science, whose mission statement given at the beginning of our odyssey could not have imagined the life-forms glimpsed on this world!”

The ship’s company stirred, many from irritation. On and on Arkru rambled about the potential waiting for them. Nothing they had seen so far equaled what they witnessed this hour. This was a cosmic miracle, he believed. How else could you explain the fortuitous manner in which Commander Falon, among all the brighter and much larger phenomena, spotted this remote glimmer in the cosmos? Out of nowhere, it appeared. Now it must become central to their destiny as explorers and collectors—the most important discovery so far.

Following the professor’s long-winded oration, silence fell over the bridge. The entire ship had been spellbound by what they saw. In spite of Arkru’s confidence in them, however, everyone had their own private impressions. Orix, the navigator, typified many of his shipmates. Mingled in with great expectation was that unspoken dread of the unknown. Perhaps the most optimist of the ship’s company was the professor, himself. Overwhelmed with a sense of history, he now entered his thoughts into the ship’s database. Pecking his wrist communicator with inspiration, his message began his log for the new planet:

For the first time in many long months, a Revekian Ark searches for a place to land. What sort of world is this? The ground is crowded—nay congested—with flora and fauna. Because of this, everyone aboard the ark this hour is a scientist. Everyone is a poet at a loss for words. We’re all dreamers, awakening at times in dreamscapes, but this time we seem to waking up in a forbidden garden, I pray will not turn into a nightmare in our exploration of this new world. This morning, I see creatures that defy not merely description but categorization. How does one describe a world so green and teeming with life that there’s no end to it—only a mad, cacophony of movement and, I can imagine, sounds, unlike any world we’ve ever seen?

As the professor made his entry into his log, Orix sat in gloomy silence and Kogin continued, with the commander’s prodding, to search for a place to land. Strapped in their landing stations, shipmates chattered excitedly with their friends in other compartments of the ark. Following the commander’s order to prepare for landing, everyone, from the youngest student to the commander, himself, now held their collective breaths. With viewing screens over every station, everyone aboard ship, though not scientists as the professor would like to think, were spectators, sharing the same scenes. Everyone, however, couldn’t see the details in the scenery. This required a trained eye and the ability to adjust the viewing screen’s tracker and magnifier before a creature darted or skittered out of range. Doctor Arkru, as many others on the ship, had learned to use the viewing screen as a tool.

Smaller meat-eaters, at least three different species, including monsters similar to, but smaller than, the giant killer first glimpsed from the bridge, were recorded by Arkru in various clearings among the trees. Several species of large dinosaurs, including long-necked browsers, squat armored beasts and huge flying monsters, scurried, shuffled, waddled, or glided through the air.

He could also see, as everyone else, the more noticeable herds of monstrous three-horned animals in the distance, as well as more of the scoop-mouthed creatures in clearings below. But

the savage killer they had seen earlier had disappeared into the trees, frightened by the mere shadow of the ship. This, more than anything else witnessed this morning, had left an impression on the aliens' minds.

Doctor Arkru was overwhelmed with these scenes too, but he was also quite worried. He remembered Remgen's word for it: "mind boggling." Considering the monsters lurking on this planet, the task seemed staggering. Although the ark had much room left for specimens, it was apparent that only juveniles and infants of such giants could be trapped, unless they were still at the egg-laying stage on this world. On Revekia, his people were born directly from their mothers' wombs. Only the primitive creepers still hatched from eggs. Such monstrous creatures on this planet would still be too large to collect as juveniles if their infants were not born that way. He was concerned about the creatures' stage of development. Hopefully, they would still be laying eggs and would therefore be, as his planet's creepers, much smaller than juveniles or adults. If this were not the case, he would have to limit his collection to a select number of specimens in order to fit enough samples into the ship. They were limited only by the amount of space they had on the ark. The challenge was great.

A reminder for him that this was not just a dream, was the commander's resonant voice over the ark: "Attention all hands! Attention all hands! We've found a large meadow to land the ark. Remain secured at your landing stations until we've touched down!"

Toward the selected clearing, over the teeming jungle, the great ark drifted, its anti-gravity thrusters causing only a faint ripple in the trees below as it hovered momentarily above the ground. Then slowly and easily, as gently as smoke, the vessel descended, making contact at last with Earth: a scientific ark to be filled with specimens, shaped somewhat like a trilobite, larger than any single object in sight, except the volcano fuming in the horizon. Its great crustacean-like body, with its probes and special equipment protruding in all directions, was visible for miles around.

It barely made a noise now as it traveled across the sky and touched down. At that point, the commander called out dramatically, "Touchdown! Unbuckle landing harness and stretch your legs!" For several hours, as the ship's company mustered at their division stations, ate breakfast and then prepared Doctor Arkru and his students for their first footsteps upon the alien world, the ark's outer sheath and thrusters continued to smolder from its break through the planet's atmosphere. The natural ambience of the vessel and the electromagnetic field generated by its many probes had created a buffer zone around the ship. With the exception of insects buzzing mindlessly in the surrounding forest, the cacophony of noise had ceased, except for distant hoots and shrieks. The only sounds carried across the clearing into the nearby jungle were, in fact, the chirping of the collector and his students as they finally disembarked from the ark: thirteen cat-eyed aliens in cumbersome life support systems, with bulky helmets over their strange, simian heads. Unable to breath the toxic air of Earth, they communicated by radio inside their glimmering white suits in voices that sounded as if they came from frogs or crickets, rather than intelligent, bipedal beings.

In a series of whistles, chirps and croaking noises, the collector was busily ordering his students to set up their equipment not far from the ark. Since they all looked so similar to each other in their life support systems, each student and technician's name was stenciled on his or her back and chest in a writing system resembling both Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese. While

the student and technician's script was in black, the collector's was stenciled in gold to indicate his position and exalted rank.

Each of four volunteers selected from the twelve students now carried a pole several inches thick and almost as tall as themselves. In addition to these apparatuses, the collector had special gear, carried in a small satchel hung around his neck.

"Place the poles here, here, here and over there," he began barking out commands.

"Yes Professor Arkru," they chimed, as the other students and technicians looked on.

Arkru hovered anxiously around those students carrying poles. "Avoid touching anything until it's tested and placed in a protective environment," he directed anxiously. "We don't know how corrosive or toxic this planet is."

"Yes professor." They nodded in unison, intimidated by his gaze.

As one crewmember began fumbling with his pole, the collector clasped his helmet in disbelief then took the pole gingerly from his hands.

"What's the matter with you Rifkin?" he shouted into his face. "I pointed to there, near that rock, not here close to the mud puddle! You idiot! You bumbling fool? You're my brightest pupil. Have you forgotten everything you've learned? Don't you remember what happens when a force field beam gets near water?"

"Yes professor," he bowed his head as Arkru set down the pole.

"It's a disaster, that's what it is!" Arkru wrung his finger.

"I'm sorry professor," the embarrassed youth replied. "I'm just excited. It won't happen again."

"Excited? Is that what you call it?" Arkru shook his head in disbelief. "Listen to me—all of you!" He looked around accusingly. "Until you stop quivering like jelly, gently set down your loads. Get a grip on yourselves. The rest of you watching from the sidelines, stop cowering in the shadow of the ship. It's not just Rifkin who's sloppy today. He just got caught. Admit it, you're all frightened of this planet. I noticed how few of you volunteered to set up the trap!"

"Now keep the four poles on flat, solid ground." He looked over warily at Rifkin as he spoke. "Dig down and scrape away the top soil until it's level. Use your surface meters to make sure it's flat. All of the poles must be exactly the same height and the same distance from each other for the trap to work perfectly. We need a perfect square, not this jumbled mess. Above all students, move quickly but carefully. And don't dally. There's a million ways to die here. You don't want to wind in the bellies of these beasts!"

For several moments the student volunteers set and reset their poles until they were certain they were correct. For some reason, which they thought perverse, the professor did not interfere. He stood there alongside of his technicians quietly watching them as if he wanted them to bungle it badly at this stage, perhaps as an object lesson for the class.

The effort they had to expend in their bulky life support systems was much greater on this toxic world. They had to dig holes with tiny shovels supplied by the collector, anchor their poles so that they sat firmly in the ground and then make sure they were calibrated exactly with the other poles in the square. Arkru appreciated their efforts, but he did not trust their results. They were still children. They had spent much of their childhood in space being tutored by himself in the disciplines of science, but they had much to learn.

The trap they were using on this planet today had been used sparingly on other worlds. He had made major improvements on its design, which made it more difficult to calibrate after

stationing it in the ground. Today the revised version, which featured cloaking capabilities, would make its debut.

For the benefit of the younger students as well as the older students and technicians who may have forgotten the basics of trap operation, Arkru decided to give a brief summary of the Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap. As he talked, he examined with various meters, the height and position of each pole, whistling under his breath each time he found something wrong. He could scarcely believe how far off the student calculations were.

“To begin with,” he explained, “the four poles are not perfectly aligned with each other. Three of the poles were not calibrated correctly, although they were planted firmly in the ground.”

Rifkin, whom he had berated earlier, was the only student who had installed his pole perfectly into the ground. Arkru felt pride for his most gifted student but also irritation that he could do so much more. Why hadn't he seen that his perfectly calibrated pole was not aligned with the others? The trap still wouldn't work. Rifkin, the errant adventurer, was an underachiever, preferring childish exploits to true feats of science.

Rifkin, he noted with sympathy now, stood with his head hung low, toying with a stick, while the other three volunteers, Zither, Vimml, and Rezwit, anxiously waited for a sign of approval for their poles.

“Our first trap,” he said, looking in disbelief at Zither's calculations, “will be a test trap. It will capture anything tripping the beams as it passes between two of its poles. After activation, the poles change color automatically to match the setting so that creatures enter unaware into the trap. On this verdant world the poles will naturally turn green or brown to match the leaves and dirt below.”

“Theoretically,” he continued, shaking his head at both Vimml's and Rezwit's poles, “the invisible beams from pole to pole will, when tripped, become an impregnable force field, holding even large and unfriendly creatures briefly until they are tranquilized for transport to our ship.”

“Such a trap,” he said, nodding with approval at Rifkin's pole, “was not designed with this planet in mind. It was designed for swarms, hordes or packs of smaller animals moving mindlessly over the ground. Only occasionally have they been used for solitary captures of predators or larger animals stupid enough to pass between the poles. Until now, though, large has meant creatures only moderately bigger than ourselves. Until now our traps were designed for the relatively brainless slug-like and segmented creatures on planets less advanced than this world. More advanced species on previous planets could be lured into the traps by clever ruses and quickly tranquilized before they attempted to escape. But on this planet there are unbelievably monstrous creatures at every turn, and even the juveniles are probably too large to be taken in our traps.”

During his discussion, Arkru chose the key word “traps” to pause and field questions about the device's mechanics and operation.

Rifkin wanted to know how wide the trap's square could be made to encompass the most creatures. In answer to Rifkin's question, Arkru quoted Emgor's Rule: “The larger the square of a force field trap, the weaker will be its ability to act as a trap if the source of power remains unchanged. If there's enough power, such a field could entrap an entire world.”

“An entire world?” Rifkin looked back at him in disbelief.

“An entire solar system if need be.” Arkru gently laughed.

“But how would we anchor the poles?” Vimml asked, trying to fathom such a trap. “Where would you put them? There's no anchor point in space. There's no ground!”

As interest mounted for the trap, Arkru began recalibrating it, beginning with Zither's badly calibrated pole. Zither, Vimml and Rezwit were eager to redeem themselves. Rifkin, who saw his chance to upstage Zither, joined in Arkru's labors. To underline the older student's incompetency, Rifkin was already on his knees with his shovel digging out Zither's pole. Arkru said he would use Rifkin's pole as the standard for the other poles. The fact that they started at Zither's badly calibrated pole would demonstrate, Rifkin hoped, Zither's ineptness in the professor's mind.

Arkru, however, was not fooled by Rifkin's motives, and insisted that Zither do it himself. Each of the three volunteers would, in fact, with Arkru's guidance, recalibrate their poles. Together, Arkru promised, they would make the trap a perfect square. Rebuffed as Arkru's chief assistance, Rifkin found comfort as Arkru calibrated the others off of his perfect pole. During the recalibration, Rezwit was curious about the trap's cloaking abilities, and Alafa, a female student, wanted to know how easy it was to operate the trap. Arkru promised to let Alafa turn it on and off herself. He gave Rezwit an overly technical explanation about cloaking, but promised to give them both a demonstration when the trap was set. Zither wanted to know what type of tranquilizer worked best on the beasts, darts or stunners—a question Arkru could not answer until they tested out their guns. Rezwit and Alafa's questions would be answered during the demonstration Arkru would give today, but Rifkin and Zither's questions would have to be answered when the trap, darts and stunners were tried out on the beasts.

Arkru was happy that he had generated interest for the trap. He was, however, alarmed by Rifkin's attitude toward Zither and was concerned that the other students lacked Rifkin, Zither, Vimml, Alafa, and Rezwit's zeal. Arkru saw problems ahead in Rifkin's rivalry with Zither and the complacency evident in the remainder of the group. Unlike the students showing interest in his trap, Omrik, Grummel, Illiakim, Shizwit, Yorzl, Lumnal, and Zeppa stood on the sidelines and watched, content it seemed to bide their time until it was time for recreation and dinner on the ship. That complacent classroom mentality he had been unable to shake out of many of his pupils was still strong. It would not work on this world!

In addition to complacency, an unwholesome rivalry, at least on Rifkin's part, had grown up among the students, dividing them into three recognizable groups. Rifkin's colleagues, who admired his style, included Vimml, Rezwit and Grummel. Zither had attracted the scholarly Omrik and the introvert Shizwit, another female student, who shared his conformist traits. The two remaining girls, Alafa and Illiakim, and three youngsters—Yorzl, Lumnal, and Zeppa (also a girl)—comprised a group that had become the cheering section for Rifkin's clique. They behaved, Arkru noticed on Raethia and Beskol, as camp followers to this reckless adventurer. The spirited Alafa, had she not been a girl, would be part of the first group, but Illiakim and the children were too timid to join in themselves and were content to be spectators cheering him on. Rifkin was popular, but Zither was dependable. He needed both boys as leaders among the students; he didn't need adversaries in the group.

Arkru made a mental note to break up Rifkin and Zither's cliques and create three established teams before the expeditions began. There would be a youngster, such as Lumnal, and a girl, such as Alafa, in each of three groups. He would separate Vimml from Rifkin's bad influence and put him in Zither's presence to give the bookish Zither some grit. The reclusive Omrik and Shizwit, on the other hand, might come out of their shells around Rifkin. Grummel, whose behavior was erratic required a hard worker such as Rezwit, who would become the third leader in the group.

Stopping to type into a communicator strapped on his wrist his stream of ideas, Arkru added to this list the questions the students had asked about the trap. Inside his helmet his cat-like eyes seemed to be frowning, and his wide simian mouth appeared to be drawn into scowl as he looked up from his wrist. Organization and planning, as always, would be the key. There was great potential in these diverse personalities, he believed. He would make scientists and collectors out of them yet!

It had been a long morning for his students, he realized sheepishly. Many of them were excited by the new world, but they were obviously burdened, as he was, by the bulky life support systems they wore and having to breath from those heavy canisters on their backs. As he labored, himself, to breath the mixture flowing into helmet, Arkru took this opportunity to compliment the four volunteers for helping him to create a perfect square. They would do better on their own next time, he was certain. He gave Rifkin recognition for doing so well with his pole but pointed out quickly that the trap still would not have worked unless it was a perfect square. Now, because of their teamwork it was just right, ready to trap this planet's denizens when they stumbled in.

Pausing to scan the meadow on which their ship sat, Arkru led his students a short distance away before turning briefly with his controller to turn on the trap. At that moment, because of its chameleon-like characteristics, the trap became almost invisible in their sight.

In response to Alafa's questions about its operation, he let her turn it on and off a few times, its normally yellow sheen blinking on and off each time she punched its button.

Young Yorzl, Lumnal, and Zeppa screamed with delight.

"It's so simple," Alafa marveled, "like operating my viewing screen or setting my clock."

"In answer to your question about cloaking," Arkru turned to Rezwit, "the poles are light-sensitive so that when they pick up the emanations below them, they change chemically to match the ground."

"Like the umgi on Beskol?" exclaimed Rezwit, taking a turn himself.

"Exactly," beamed Arkru. "It works just like I planned."

Rifkin grabbed the controller out of Rezwit's hands. The girls jumped up and down with glee.

"You've done it," Zither formally congratulated his teacher. "Your Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap is a smashing success!"

Arkru could not help cringing as the controller was passed around the group. Each one of the twelve students had a chance to turn the trap on and off. When the youngest female student in the class, Zeppa, had her turn, Arkru took his controller back protectively in his hands. Making a shushing motion with his finger at his mouth, he playfully whispered to his pupils "Now let's see what we're going to catch!"

With the exception of Rifkin, who was big for his age, and Zither, who was taller and older than the others, the students following behind Arkru were at least a head shorter and much thinner than himself. Their bald, earless and almost noseless simian heads beamed with awe inside their helmets as Arkru looked ahead soberly at their task. Rifkin, who was also unusually husky and sure-footed for his age, lagged behind the others as he explored the ground for bugs and creepers slithering in the leaves. The centipedes, beetles and snakes he saw stirred his imagination as he contemplated this world.

Careful not to lead them too far into the forest, Arkru selected a point a safe distance from the ship. As the students gathered on a flat rock that rose ramp-like from the ground, Arkru looked back to count heads and motioned impatiently for the laggard Rifkin to catch-up.

“That daydreaming fool!” he murmured irritably as Rifkin played with a snake.

Rifkin dropped the snake at Arkru’s signal and trotted obediently toward the group. Looking beyond the rock at the edge of the forest where much larger creatures dwelled, his imagination soared. Arkru didn’t see the fear in Rifkin that he saw in the other students’ eyes. He never seemed to be afraid. He had, in fact, never seen the headstrong student so excited about a new world. Rifkin was a daredevil and troublemaker. Between reckless exploits and teasing his classmates, he daydreamed when he should be listening. He was often performing for his admirers instead of keeping his mind on his work. As he watched him take his place in the group, Arkru also recalled that he was a natural born leader who worked tirelessly to gather specimens on his own initiative and at great risk. Under normal circumstances the small snake he picked up and discarded would have been placed in a container and taken back to ship. But there was plenty of time to gather specimens, the professor thought. He had selected a vantage point on this ancient lava flow to both survey the activated trap and lecture his students on what lie ahead. With Rifkin in mind, he decided to caution his students against acting foolishly or being complacent on this world.

“This planet,” he began, looking askance at Rifkin, “is a hostile world, nothing like the planets we’ve landed on before. There are dangers everywhere we look. We saw this at the very beginning from our viewing screens. The fact that we can’t breath this planet’s air and have to wear these cumbersome suits makes it that much worse.” “I need your utmost cooperation and attention at all times.” He looked down on their upturned faces. “There can be no random walks such as the unscheduled nature hikes you’ve taken in the woods or deserts on other worlds. Until now, my students, you’ve been on one long, seemingly endless excursion. You’ve even been allowed to breath the atmospheres on most of the previous worlds. You’ve been allowed to play like children as you learned.”

“But the long vacation away from our dying planet has ended,” he continued sadly. “Here on this planet childhood’s end has come. We have both the honor and responsibility to gather specimens on this world. I have a feeling of destiny about this planet. It’s my opinion that this young world’s fate may be greater than our own. I’ve never seen so many incredible animals both large and small. Its flora is so thick and abundant it defies description, making it, as Eglin called it, a forbidden garden where explorers, such as ourselves, must carefully tread.”

“But here we are” he cried out dramatically, raising his arms as if in blessing, “in this forbidden garden—visitors from a dying planet, ready to steal life from its forests and disseminate it on another world. “Be careful my students!” he counseled huskily. “. . . Be ever watchful! May the great god Izmir and the spirits of the celestial lights protect us now in our mission on this world!”

In a more academic fashion, after pressing home his point, Arkru summarized his goals for this expedition, which he implied were preliminary at this stage.

“Although the first trap set so near the ship was only intended to be a test, I am planning in the near future to capture as many of the creatures on this planet as possible before reaching the maximum carrying capacity on the ship. Timing is an important factor. Exact planning at each step will be the key to our success.

“Due to the hazards we face, we won’t attempt to snatch offspring of the larger beasts or meat-eaters until we’ve learned about their behavior. Frankly, I’m excited but not encouraged by

what I've seen. Although some of them might not be the smartest creatures we've encountered, many of this planet's predators may be too cunning for our traps and might have to be tranquilized immediately after being caught. Other creatures, who are simply too large for our traps, will have to be netted after being tranquilized. Unless the parents are relatively small to begin with, I'm afraid our collection of monsters might be limited mostly to their eggs and hatchlings, which can be stolen by hand without the benefit of a trap since they are most often found in a nest. We will, of course, capture monsters with traps whenever possible if it can be safely done."

"In reality, however," he smiled crookedly, "smaller creatures can be stored more abundantly on the ship. Smaller creatures, after all, grow into larger creatures. Our ship, after all, *is not a zoo!*"

"In spite of the limitations they pose, our emphasis will, I repeat, be on the eggs and the offspring of the monsters, themselves: the great long-necked beasts seen earlier and perhaps a few assorted specimens of the horned and scoop-mouthed creatures spotted from the sky. But most of these creatures will have to be young juveniles that are captured by net and require heavy sedation and much more effort than smaller animals lured into our traps."

Arkru's unspoken hope was, in fact, to obtain a juvenile-sized collection of this planet's killers, including the monster seen from the bridge. No one spoke of the big meat-eater, itself, but the collector was certain that this was on all their minds. He could even hear Alafa and Illiakim murmuring excitedly amongst themselves. Zither, who was normally so circumspect, was also anxious to bag himself a beast. Even the reserved Omrik was excited now. During the lull in Arkru's conversation, Rezwit whispered with excitement with his previous team members Rifkin and Vimml. Rifkin's old teammates then surrounded their fearless leader listening to him boast of his accomplishment on other worlds.

Finally, after a slight motion of his hand, Arkru found himself leading the students back to the ship. His discussion and lecture had excited many of them, but their adventures today had worn most of them out. Setting up a test trap and listening to his long-winded lectures had been enough for one day. It was time to take off their cumbersome life support systems, eat dinner and maybe take a nap.

The boys, with their brave words, he realized with both amusement and alarm, were trying to muster up courage for the task. For the next few days they would all be lulled into a false calm as the planet's denizens left them alone. It was, Arkru sensed, their ship's startling appearance, which had made the jungle so quiet. The longer their ship sat unmoving in the meadow, the more the surrounding rain forest would come alive. It would, he was certain, get used to their presence. The normal ambience of the alien vessel and its gigantic shadow had given them a degree of protection on other worlds. He had hoped that the very presence of their monstrous ship might create a large buffer zone around its perimeter, but nothing could be certain on this mysterious world. The trumpeting of leviathans could be heard in the distance: creatures barely comprehensible to Revekian minds. Every inch of this verdant soil was covered with plants and crawled with all manner of scaly, fuzzy or segmented things. The rustle of these smaller creatures—lizards, small snakes and insects—grew increasingly louder, in and around the shadow of their ship. The clicks, squeaks and buzz of life were now accompanied by the eerie bleats and hoots and sudden screeches of more distant jungle leviathans as the forest awakened from its shock.

Chapter Three

Doctor Arkru's Plan

Guiding the children as they began their exploration, was Professor Arkru's sense of destiny and enthusiasm. Sharing his esprit de corps were most of the students and technicians and even several crewmen aboard the ship. They were, he made them believe, part of the great and glorious adventure to gather creatures from distant worlds. At this point in their long journey through the stars, however, the professor had brought them finally into harm's way. Not only could they not breathe its toxic air, which restricted them in their bulky suits, but they found the planet's gravity fatiguing for their delicate frames. It was clearly a hostile world, filled with monsters of many kinds. There was a mountain spewing fire and smoke in the horizon and sudden glimpses of the ugliest and, at times, most frightening life forms they had ever seen. And yet they were surrounded by a savage beauty like nothing ever witnessed at home. Their own drab desert-like planet was dying. Its sun would one day become a supernova, destroying their world and everything else in their solar system, including the holy planet of Orm. This planet, which Doctor Arkru christened "Irignum"—(literally 'Green World')—was still vibrant and new. Its younger sun would last billions of years before exploding or burning out.

In spite of the difficulties, the students looked forward to collecting specimens on this world. It was the professor's plan to stock the enclosures with as many juvenile monsters as possible. Great incubation compartments would also be filled with thousands of eggs and specially designed chambers would hold scores of hatchlings, a vast assortment of small creatures, and anything else worthy to be in the ark.

It was the most exciting enterprise of their lives. But there were risks in exploration Arkru was quick to point out. Ever since their odyssey began, they had been warned by the professor to be on guard and wary of the unknown. It was, in spite of all their classroom studies and lab exercises, on-the-job training each time they touched down on a new world. The student half of the mission—to gather specimens for the ark—depended on several factors, not the least of which were the enclosures that the technicians must build. While the technicians began their project, the students would learn to function in their cumbersome life support systems before they were allowed to strike out on their own. This meant learning to walk, breath and perform at maximum efficiency inside their suits, with the least amount of effort and without becoming unduly fatigued.

For the technician half of the mission, there was much to do. While the students collected their first specimens, the technicians must already have fabricated temporary enclosures to hold the creatures brought back to the ship. After gathering gas and chemical samples outside the vessel, Zorig and Urlum would create the atmosphere and special environment for this planet's life forms inside the ark. Ultimately, with the crewmembers' help, Ibris and Tobit would, under Arkru and Zorig's direction, build the permanent enclosures required for the life forms collected on this world.

From the beginning, Doctor Arkru thought he understood the magnitude of the mission, and yet he failed to foresee the potential disasters in the days ahead. He believed that the collection phase of the mission need only wait until the students themselves were up to the task. But the children and even the ship's crew might *never* be ready for this planet. Irignum's jungle

waited ominously at the edge of the meadow for the footsteps of the first aliens from another world.

After returning to the ship, the students and technicians chatted with each other about their experiences that morning, until one-by-one they retired to their pods for an afternoon nap. Many crewmembers had listened with interest to their stories of the new world, but few of them had any desire to leave the security of the ship until they were certain it was safe.

That evening after dinner, the professor, students, and technicians met with Commander Falon and his officers in the conference room adjoining the bridge. Zorig set up an easel with cardboard sheets on the tray outlying “Doctor Arkru’s Plan” and stood there flipping the sheets as the professor spoke. Before introducing the new teams, Arkru gave them a summary of their mission on this world. Pointing to Zorig’s easel, he briefly explained the mission’s objective and the construction underway inside the ark. Today’s success setting up the Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap was presented as a smashing success. Because of Irignum’s difficult atmosphere and gravity, there would be three additional days or stages for student adaptation before serious collection could begin. Today (day one) had merely been an introductory stage for the students.

On day two, the entire class would go out together on foot across the meadow but remain in the ambient zone of the ship. They would, of course, check the force field trap on the way. Many of them would be given target practice for the Class 4 Stunner. More importantly, the students would learn to move around with facility in their suits.

On day three, they would set out in the crawlers, those slow-moving vehicles used to carry personnel through the forest and haul specimens back to the ship. While fastened snugly inside their safety belts, they would experience the bumpy and unpredictable forest path and be introduced, for the first time, to what they had only seen from afar: Irignum’s jungle and exotic animals and plants.

On the fourth day, the children would travel a short distance from the ship into three sectors of the forest, monitored closely by adults from the bridge—an idea that made Commander Falon cringe. To many officers and crew members the rules of student collection set forth by the Scientific Fathers seemed unreasonable this time. Essentially, because of this long-standing tradition accepted by Professor Arkru, there would be no hands-on supervision. The student leaders would have full responsibility for their teammates. In theory, the powerful stun guns provided to qualified students should scare away dull witted beasts or stop them dead in their tracks. Judging by the reaction this planet’s creatures had to the ship’s thrusters, they might, as on previous planets, stay away from the Revekians altogether. Specimens found by students would be part of the on-the-job training for each member of the team. The animal trails created by the larger beasts, which had been evident in the viewing screens, would be used for travel. There would be no unnecessary detours from these paths, unless student leaders were given permission from the bridge. The crews would perform their collections quickly and expeditiously and return, when ordered by the bridge, back to the ship.

Corresponding to the three sectors explored by the students, in what was applauded as a good idea by Commander Falon and his staff, the professor would break up the cliques in his class and organize them into the three groups, instead of one large troop of collectors, to maintain discipline and provide good examples for members of the class. Each of the three

groups would have a balanced number of females and youngsters in it and leaders who would act as role models to members of the teams.

Collection Team 1 Rifkin: Omrik, Shizwit, and Yorzl.

Collection Team 2 Zither: Vimml, Illiakim, and Zeppa.

Collection Team 3 Rezwit: Grummel, Alafa, and Lumnal.

The new teams presented tonight would prove to be a mixed blessing in the days ahead. In spite of being separated from their friends, Rifkin, Zither, and Rezwit had been honored by the change. The remainder of the students accepted it as a fait accompli, focusing, with both fear and excitement, on the adventure ahead.

On the second day, as planned, after a hearty breakfast, the students suited up and followed the professor down the ramp and into the meadow beside the ship. It was the professor's intentions to lead his crew a respectable distance into the meadow yet remain in the ambient zone of the ship. Carrying two stun guns, one on each hip, Arkru led them through the grassland surrounding the ship. Technicians Ibris and Tobit, who would assist in training the students, carried the box of additional stunners for the group. Zorig, who was proficient himself in firing this weapon, did not want his little sister Urlum along, but Arkru wanted her to learn how to operate the stunner too.

On the way across the meadow, Arkru and his students first inspected the test trap. It was suppose to be empty of monsters. No one had been stationed to tranquilize its inhabitants once they entered, and the trap had been set for a light electrical shock that would intimidate very few beasts. Nevertheless, as they approached the trap and looked inside the enclosure, they saw three small scaly creatures huddled fearfully inside.

"Our first monsters!" Zither cried.

Arkru was visibly pleased. He stood there beaming with professional pride at the capture of the first aliens by the Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap.

"Yes, Zither, it works, the new model *really works!*" he exclaimed with exultation, while studying the amazing creatures inside.

"Ibris and Tobit," he directed congenially, "set down the box of guns. This is an important occasion for our expedition to Irignum. Let us rejoice and thank Izmir for this moment!"

He knew, of course, that even these unimposing creatures were too large for their accommodations inside the ship. By tomorrow, when the students went forth in their crawlers, the technicians would have improvised several enclosures from ones already fabricated in the ark. Everyone groaned to themselves or heaved a sigh when he ordered Alafa, the unofficial "button pusher" to turn off the trap.

"We're not ready yet," Rezwit explained to his young charge Lumnal. "But you just wait kid. Our team's going to bag us one of those leapers we saw from the bridge!"

"Stand back everyone," Arkru ordered the group, "we're letting these fellows loose!"

"They're so cute," Alafa hesitated. "They look like vraggas with their long-necks and legs."

The three small turkey-sized dinosaurs darted away as Arkru shooed them from the trap, running swiftly across the meadow and into the forest beyond.

“Great celestial lights!” Vimml cried.

“They run like the samgar on Beskol,” observed Omrik calmly.

Rifkin stopped caressing Urlum long enough to marvel at the escape, himself. “Urlum,” he cried, “look at those fellows go! I’ve never seen anything run so fast!”

“You can run faster!” She said adoringly, her eyelids at half-mast.

“Nyaa!” sneered Rifkin. “In these clunky suits we move as slow as worms!”

As the students sat down in their life support systems to whisper excitedly among themselves, Arkru commented on the creatures that had just been caught and released from their first trap. They were indeed, as Omrik suggested, similar to the willowy samgar of Beskol and seemed just as harmless as those brainless fellows were. Arkru felt emboldened by the fact they had been intimidated enough by the force field shock to remain huddled inside. This fact portended great things for the collections to be made in the coming days.

“With our weapons and our traps,” he boasted, settling down on a nearby log, “we’ll subdue this planet as we have all the others. The mere presence of our mighty ship has quietened it. We must be humble though. We must have reverence for its bounty and treat its creatures with respect.”

Everyone, including Rifkin, felt electrified by what they had seen on this planet. Arkru’s lofty tribute to “the majesty of the forest” and his comments on the eerie quiet caused by the landing of their ship served as a backdrop for the excitement they shared. It also made many of them sleepy. The strange quiet around the ship the professor alluded to made them feel secure but also lulled them into drowsiness in the pod-like coziness of their heavy suits, until several students were seen napping inside their helmets and had to be shaken awake by their classmates.

Paying the most attention to Arkru’s commentary was Zither, who now felt threatened by this world. For him, this planet offered the opportunity to prove himself at last to the professor, but also provided dangers everywhere he looked. Creepers, crawlers, runners, and flyers were there waiting in the forest. He could feel their eyes upon him. He could hear the distant honks, bleats, groans, and screeches of monsters gathering in the bushes and trees as the group said goodbye to the test trap and walked further into the meadow and away from the ship.

The only one not listening to the professor’s every word, yet too occupied to fall asleep, was Rifkin—the adventurer extraordinaire, whose own lofty thoughts continued to be divided between Urlum’s presence and the adventures ahead. In alien thinking Urlum was quite beautiful, unlike the tomboyish Alafa, who could run, jump and fight with the boys. All the boys, including Zither, envied Rifkin for Urlum’s affection. But it was Alafa, not Arkru’s lab assistant Urlum, who had found favor with the professor today.

Alafa, wide-awake and eager, held onto the controller with great pride. Lumnal showed great interest also by helping the professor and Rezwit recalibrate the poles, which had been knocked out of alignment by the escaping beasts. What was taking so long now was the professor’s decision to widen the square of the trap, which required more effort in the thick carpet of meadow grass. Even the normally lazy Grummel joined Rezwit, Alafa, and Lumnal in helping Arkru change the trap. In spite of Rifkin’s popularity and Zither’s personal efforts, Team Number Three shone brightly in the professor’s eyes. Alafa was certainly happy with her new team. Rezwit, Grummel, and Lumnal were roughnecks just like her. Like Zither, however, Rifkin was not encouraged with his team. He was expected to train Omrik, Shizwit, and Yorzl to become collectors, and yet Shizwit acted as if she was afraid of him and Omrik seemed addled in the head. Yorzl, the youngest student on the ship, appeared to be too immature for an expedition. In the days ahead Rifkin would miss romping around with his friends. With the

professor's cautious excursions, trap setting sessions, and organized teams, things were becoming too tame for him. He wanted his old gang of Rezwit, Grummel, and Vimml back. He wanted freedom to explore at-will and the old trust Arkru had in him to forge ahead on his own.

Vimml, who was on Zither's team, had also been disappointed with Arkru's changes. But, like Alafa, he could see advantages now in his new team. On Raethia, Beskol, and Orm he had been treated as a little brother by the older boys. He could never measure up to his idol Rifkin, yet Arkru had taken him aside on the ship this morning and asked him to cooperate with Zither and lend the older student his enthusiasm and expertise. Arkru had merely been using diplomacy on the dejected Vimml, but Vimml now reasoned that he, not Zither, was secretly in command of the team. He must not let on, of course. He couldn't even tell his best friend Rifkin.... But the professor would know. He would make sure he knew by upstaging his new leader every chance he had.

"Greetings!" He nodded to Zither, who stood alone on the fringe of the group.

"Vimml?" Zither looked with surprise into the helmet at his grinning face.

Something's not right here, he thought as Vimml approached. Vimml's not my friend. He's never shown me a shred of warmth or friendliness, and yet here he is extending his gloved hand in an offer of friendship. What's he up to? Is this not Rifkin's scoundrel-in-arms and best friend? Sensing that one more joke was being played on him by Rifkin, through the complicity of Vimml, one of Rifkin's pals, Zither's hopeful expression faded as he waited for the prank to occur. Perhaps Vimml had a ball of alien feces in his glove or would somehow trip him as Grummel or Rezwit knelt down behind him and Vimml, at Rifkin's signal, gave him a shove. But Vimml just stood there staring at him with his boyish charm. Zither glanced subtly at his glove and found it clean. Furtively, he looked around himself and also discovered that no one was lurking on all fours behind.... There has to be a catch, he told himself as he studied Vimml's face. Perhaps it would come later when he would be caught off-guard. The more he thought about it, the more he realized how paranoid he had become. In their cumbersome suits it was doubtful that even Rifkin would be able to pull such a prank. A faint, crooked smile broke Zither's simian face.

"Greetings, in deed." He belatedly shook Vimml's outstretched glove. "Welcome to Team Number Two."

For a little while Zither enjoyed his role as leader of Team Number Two. He had no illusions about Vimml's loyalties. It was obvious that Vimml was only pretending to be his friend. But Zither's goal was to be the best team leader in Doctor Arkru's class. This required unity within his team, and team unity required respect—if not friendship—for him and loyalty to the team. Somehow he must at least gain respect and loyalty from his team. He had made a good start with Vimml. Now he must work on the remaining members of his team: Illiakim and Zeppa.

There was a look of resolution on Zither's face, a side of Zither that Vimml had never seen. As he looked into helmets and searched the stenciled names on the life support systems around him, Zither appeared fearless and determined to achieve his goals.

"It's important that Team Number Two function smoothly as a machine," he declared loftily to Vimml. "That's why I must make peace with Illiakim and Zeppa once and for all!"

As they approached the two female students, however, Illiakim turned her back on him and folded her arms in a gesture of disapproval. Zeppa ran away to join the other youngsters in

the group. Vimml was embarrassed by their behavior, but not surprised. After all, they didn't like Zither. None of the students liked him, except, perhaps, Urlum, but then that silly girl liked *everyone* on the ship. He stood there with his leader, his head sinking into the depths of his helmet as Zither walked toward the pouting Illiakim, cordially extended his hand in greeting and read to her from his wrist communicator an abridged version of the Collector's Rules:

- There will be no thrill-seeking detours off our assigned path.
- There will be no teasing or pranks played on team members.
- There will be no talking in the forest without permission.
- There will be no unauthorized collecting of specimens.
- There will be no firing of the stunner without permission.
- You will follow strict orders, without question, at all times!

The Collector's Rules were, Zither informed Illiakim afterwards, the same rules Arkru had given them on other planets, but here on Irignum they were especially important. Irignum, after all, he reminded her, was a particularly dangerous place. She and Zeppa couldn't run back through the forest to the ship every time he did something they didn't like. They must work as teammates and not as rivals or foes, since their very lives depended upon their cooperation on this hostile world. Illiakim and Vimml exchanged dubious looks as Zither elaborated on the dangers of this world. They were the same dangers that Arkru had warned them about earlier but Zither had taken it to heart. Toxic air, poisonous life forms, and excess gravity, taken together with the dangers of Irignum's many monsters, Zither concluded, made this planet's exploration both hazardous and overwhelming. It seemed very clear to his teammates, he was becoming an alarmist. They had seen nothing here to warrant such concern. Had not the very landing of their mighty ship silenced the forest? Was not their trap successful in capturing creatures with a minimal electrical shock? And what about the professor's box of guns? If a mere jolt of electricity could keep them at bay, what would a stunner set for full force do?

A false calm pervaded Doctor Arkru's class. The shadow and ambience of the mighty vessel seemed to act as a sentinel for them as they moved further from the ship, reinforcing the complacency the students already felt toward this world. The only two members of the group not calm right now were Zither and the professor, himself. No one else believed that this verdant paradise around them could really be hostile. Who would dare come near their mighty ship or challenge their traps or guns?

Their first trap was now larger, though less powerful than before. The amount of creatures caught versus the trap's original power seemed a worthwhile exchange if the professor's hunch proved true. As it had been demonstrated so expertly today to his students, it took only a small shock to spook most of these dim-witted beasts. In actuality, though, the traps would have no effect upon the giants of this world. All they had between them and the leviathans out there were their stunners, which had never been tested against such beasts.

With his hand resting on one of his guns, Arkru looked back at the ship, whose monstrous shadow was not far away. Weighted down in their bulky suits, breathing from the heavy canisters on their backs and feeling the drag of Irignum's gravity upon their delicate bones left all of the aliens physically restricted and limited in their activity. In their life support systems with their intercommunication links with each other and the bridge, an emotional as well as physical umbilical cord tied them to the safety of the ship. They would need the ship's warmth, comfort, and nourishment more than ever now because they would, except for their life support

systems, find none of these necessities on this world. They were trapped inside their suits and, in a very real sense, cut off from this world. Here on Irignum they would always need a constant supply of breathable gas flowing into their fragile lungs. Their contaminated suits would have to be disinfected before they re-entered the ship. They would never be able to feel the texture of animals and plants nor smell the planet's flowers and taste the nectar of their fruits without being poisoned by the attempt. Even the most adventuresome of the students, Rifkin, must feel his lifestyle hampered greatly here. And yet Irignum's mysteries and beauties offered Arkru and his students the greatest opportunities of their lives.

On the slanted rock used for Arkru's lectures yesterday, the professor reminded his fidgety students "Tomorrow, we'll take the crawlers into the jungle. We might even bring back a few small specimens to the ship. For now we need to find a clearing large enough for a target range in which to fire our guns."

The twelve students and four technicians cheered this suggestion, hoping that the professor would find the clearing soon, before they were too far from the ship. So far in their clunky suits and with Arkru using every opportunity to expound on this and that, they hadn't even traveled a mile from the ark. And yet it felt as if they had traveled further.

On the way from the rock, seventeen aliens in awkward beetle-like life support systems plodded onward and outward. Arkru stopped occasionally to point to a plant or small animal scurrying on the ground and compare it to a life form on their home planet or on one of the many worlds explored in space. So far the large denizens they had seen from the bridge seemed to shy away from the ship. But this was, Arkru was quick to point out, an aberration in this jungle. How many times did an alien space ship land in such a forest? It must have been a tremendous shock to have seen it plunge suddenly from the sky.

As they ambled on ever so slowly in their life support systems, the professor would give an opinion on why a creature behaved or looked as it did. To Arkru, all creatures of Irignum were important for their collection, from the smallest bug to the giants lurking in the forest. As his students and colleagues, they would, he promised them, learn on this planet how to become collectors just like him. Most of them would become good marksmen with the stunners. Here, more than any other world they had visited, they would learn to be brave, patient, and wise, like himself, so that someday they too would travel to faraway planets on different ships, gathering specimens to bring back and populate compatible worlds.

"Someday," Arkru spoke ruefully as he searched the meadow ahead, "as our planet dies, the entire universe will become one great zoo."

"Wonderful!" Vimml clapped his hands.

"Do you think we'll live long enough to see this happen?" Rezwit asked, trying to envision this wondrous age.

"No," Arkru shook his head in dismay, "perish the thought! As a scientist and collector, I was given a mission that seems impossible for even me to fulfill. As our own solar system circles its collapsing sun, there is a strong likelihood of one day being marooned as wanderers in space. You boys would like that wouldn't you? It has been a long time since you've walked beneath our planet's reddened sky and over its hot, endless sands. For you, my students and technicians, home must seem like a distant abstraction—the place where you were born, nurtured and taught the basics of life. After light-years and endless prolonged slumbers, home became the mother ship, as it gave orders and a sense of security in the darkness of space."

Most of the students nodded their helmeted heads. They seemed unmoved by the loss of their planet. Arkru was not surprised but disappointed with this reaction.

“With so much space separating us from the mother ship,” he confided to them, “I feel as if I’ve become more than a professor teaching you the lore of science and life; I feel as if I’ve become a father figure to you.”

Again they nodded, this time vigorously, except Rifkin, who had found a tiny skull that occupied his time.

“The team, of which we are all a part, has become our family,” Arkru said, as the inattentive Rifkin made the tiny skull’s jaws move up and down, “just as home is now the ship’s corridors, compartments and the warmth of our sleeping-pods at the end of the day.”

“This world,” he looked around the field on which they stood to the forest beyond, “nightmarishly beautiful as it is, can never be our home, and yet we envy its youth and vitality and the unknown course of history lying in its path.”

To emphasize what he was saying or simply to get their attention, Arkru pulled out one of his stunners and fired it into the air. A crackling that was similar to the sound of lightning now startled his students. The smell of ozone, created by electron bombardment of oxygen, filled the air.

“There!” he murmured to Zorig, his chief lab technician, “That got their attention!”

Fired in spirit by the professor’s energy if not his eloquence, eleven of the twelve students and the three remaining lab technicians jumped up and down in their clumsy suits with glee. They wanted to learn to be marksmen and collectors now, this very moment, with no more delays. They could care less about the integrity of alien life or the majesty of the forest. He had but to say the word and the collections would begin this very hour.

Rifkin had managed to entertain himself independently as the professor talked. He had created a bracelet for Urlum, his favorite female student: a strand of grass woven into a band with the tiny skull fashioned securely in its midst.

Once again Zither, listening more intently than any other students, had been pecking notes furiously into his wrist communicator as Arkru spoke. Nowhere in the database of the ship in which he inputted notes and his private thoughts could he find a file labeled ‘Courage’—the one thing he needed most now. His intellectual airs, which had impressed Omrik and Shizwit, were becoming quite boring to his team. The sudden discharge from Arkru’s gun now jolted him back to reality. He could not find the answers he wanted on his wrist. He must find them here with his comrades, who were primed and ready to go.

“I love the smell of a stunner,” Illiakim thrilled, as little Zeppa looked on. “It’s like lightning but in broad daylight. You can’t see its discharge until your target drops dead!”

“Just you wait,” Vimml shouted to Illiakim, looking out into the jungle. “I’m going to get me one of those leapers and maybe one of those long-necked monsters too!”

“Those stunners aren’t set to kill monsters,” Zither informed them, as the professor drew the group to a halt.

“This is perfect,” the professor announced, raising his arms to signal them to stop. “We’re far enough away from the ship and will not be firing directly against the trees.”

Somehow, Zither thought to himself, he must steel himself against cowardice and share their mindless courage and disregard for danger... but he didn’t know how.

In his search for a perfect target practicing area, Arkru had taken them over a mile from the vessel—the furthest they had ever gone. Anything could happen out here so far from the ship. The professor, pumped up greatly by the camaraderie of the group, seemed to be discarding his own concerns for Irignum’s dangers. He was obviously in no hurry to have Ibris and Tobit distribute weapons so that the students and technicians could be armed. Zither was

beside himself with fear. The two technicians, now thoroughly exhausted, lowered the box to the ground and sat on its lid as the professor looked around the immediate vicinity for just the right spot. This time the group groaned with disappointment because it was taking so long. Arkru motioned for them to sit down again as he walked out several yards and signaled the technicians to open the box and bring him the targets that lie on top of the guns. It was the two technicians turn to groan amongst themselves as they unlocked and then pried open the lid. Nine poles, each with a circle similar to a bull's-eye nailed on top, were carried gingerly to the professor.

The Professor, Ibris, and Tobit had to space each target perfectly from each other and pound them into the ground. Zither leaned against a solitary tree growing in the field. Feeling some comfort that he could scramble up its low-lying branches if trouble came, he wondered why his teammates were so brave. Were they merely too stupid to realize the dangers on this planet? Or were they relying on the crackle of their stunners to give them daring and power?

He looked at the eager faces of Vimml and Illiakim. Zeppa was also excited, although it seemed doubtful that Arkru would assign her a gun. Everyone, except him, had the fire and zeal of the Old Ones in their veins. *It was time to bag some beasts!*

Rifkin, who excelled at everything he did, had plenty of courage and yet he still found time to charm Urlum by putting a necklace around her neck. Zither hated Rifkin. It came to him slowly now, as he waited with the remainder of the group, that it wasn't Rifkin's continual teasing or efforts to make him look foolish in Arkru's eyes that irritated him so much but Rifkin's unbridled energy, undisciplined courage, insufferable arrogance, and most of all the fact that *he didn't care!* It seemed as if the professor, in spite of his knowledge and ability to inspire minds, was blind to Rifkin's faults. He favored Rifkin above everyone else. Urlum, Illiakim and even Shizwit favored him too. Everyone favored Rifkin. . . except him. He would like to use Rifkin for target practice right now!

After they arranged the guns neatly on the box, Ibris and Tobit stood back to await further instructions. The professor, who carried his own weapons on each hip, paused to inspect the stunners on the lid. There were twelve students, but only nine targets in the meadow and nine guns lying in a row. This concerned the students far more than anything he could say.

"Nine guns?" they murmured in disbelief. "There's twelve of us. Why are there only nine guns?"

The professor had the remarkable ability to talk and think on two different levels without losing his train of thought. As he stood there directing the installation of the targets, he lectured the students and technicians on when to use and when not to use the guns. This lecture turned into a moralistic sermon on the sanctity of alien life—a concept that the Old Ones had forgotten in their lust for conquest. Sometimes in this duality, Arkru failed to see what was right before his nose. Perhaps due to the camouflage of their life support systems, he failed to gauge their mood. While he pontificated so eloquently, he caught what he thought were the polite and attentive expressions of his students and was lulled by the monotony of his words. He was pleased that Zither took voluminous notes and that Alafa was taking such good care of his controller. The much older Zorig, who would act as his second-in-command, was showing great patience now. The students were not fidgeting very much... except Rifkin, he realized, his eyes stopping cold. As he flirted with Urlum, Rifkin was faced the wrong way!

Zither smiled with mirth. Several more students tittered with laughter as they realized what was wrong. Arkru's train of thought was suddenly broken, crashing mutely down to earth. With the exception of a distant trumpeting, there was silence again in the meadow.

“Great Izmir!” he groaned to Zorig. “What am I to do with him? Everyone pays attention except *him!*”

He whispered something into the chief technician’s helmet. It was obvious to everyone what it was about. Rifkin had gotten himself into trouble again. This time he had done it standing right where he was and without making a sound.

“This has got to stop!” Arkru was saying to Zorig. “I want you to take your sister back to the ship. She doesn’t really belong out here; for that fact neither do you. You can gather more chemical and gas samples tomorrow. Right now she’s too great a distraction for the boys, especially Rifkin. Look at that young fool!”

“Oh, I’d like to hit him,” blurted Zorig angrily. “When he’s out of his suit I’m going to pound that stupid grin off his face!”

“No, no Zorig, none of that.” Arkru waved his hands. “I don’t want dissention. I’m going to punish him, but right now I’m just going to set him straight.”

“All right professor,” Zorig replied with disappointment, “you know what’s best.” “Urlum,” he shouted rudely to his sister, “we’re going back to the ship!”

“Rifkin, I want to talk to you,” Arkru called irritably as Zorig grabbed Urlum’s wrist.

Zither was gloating unabashedly now. Everyone else were either snickering amongst themselves or feeling sorry for the pair. Holding securely to Urlum’s gloved hand, Zorig pulled her indelicately from the group, until he heard the professor’s voice. To his great surprise, Arkru handed him one of his own guns.

“Take this Zorig,” he spoke severely, sticking it into the technician’s belt. “Don’t argue. This is just a precaution. You and your sister can train more with us tomorrow, during our excursion. My stunner is armed and ready to fire. In case you’ve forgotten, release the safety on its handle, point, and shoot.”

“It’s so peaceful here,” Urlum pouted. “I thought everything is afraid of our ship.”

“The professor wants us to go back to the ship,” Zorig informed her, as he led her through the meadow. “Your friend Rifkin’s in big trouble now!”

Rifkin was pulled aside discretely by Arkru and taken to task. The admonishment sounded like many of the reprimands he had received before, except this time it involved Urlum. He felt bad about this. It was all his fault; Urlum had done nothing wrong. It was also occurring during an important occasion for the other students and himself, which seemed to make it that much worse. For the first time in a long time, he felt embarrassed in front of his peers. He could see Zither gloating on the sidelines and Alafa sneering at him now. He would get even with Zither and Alafa. He would show them all!”

“You’ve got to stop playing these silly games.” Arkru was scolding him. “You have such promise, but you never pay attention. You’re never focused! I want you to promise me that you’ll focus on your new teammates Omrik, Shizwit and Yorzl and teach them how to collect. Pay attention to me, not Urlum, during our classroom excursions. Stop this stupid rivalry with poor Zither too. Let him do his job!”

“All right, Doctor Arkru,” Rifkin sounded meek enough, though he was seething inside.

He had no intention of not competing with Zither. He simply wouldn’t let on that he was. He wouldn’t have time for Urlum during the days ahead anyhow, except on the ship. What would be difficult for him to comply with would be teaching his new team to be collectors. This worried him most of all.

The professor walked back to the target range and raised his hands dramatically up to the sky. Rifkin swaggered behind him with a defiant look on his face. With this interruption out of

the way, he ordered Ibris and Tobit to pass out the guns. For the time being, he explained, only he was certified to use the Class 4 Stunner. Everyone else, except the ones who were too young, had to be trained in the handling and firing of the weapon. The stunners would remain deactivated this morning until Arkru was satisfied each student was familiar with the mechanics of the gun.

“We will discuss the mechanics of the Class 4 Stunner, modified by myself,” he began, holding up one of his guns. “Ibris and Tobit will walk down the firing line checking your weapons. They will activate them only at my command. Activation requires a special key that I have not distributed to any of you yet.”

“Is the Class 4 as good as what the Old Ones used?” asked Rifkin, inspecting the small, unpretentious-looking gun.

“Yes,” Arkru nodded his head with irritation, “but I modified the gun so it would only stun creatures, not necessarily kill them. That’s why it’s called a stunner.”

Amazed at what Arkru just said, Rifkin inquired. “Shouldn’t we have a gun that can kill if need be? Who knows when we’ll be attacked or how long a creature will be stunned?”

“I didn’t say it wouldn’t kill creatures,” Arkru explained tutorially, “but a sufficient shock should incapacitate one of these creatures for a significantly long time. Remember students and technicians: we come as friends and not destroyers!”

The professor looked around the group for agreement, and was disappointed. A collective gasp rose up among the children. For once, Zither and Rifkin were in total agreement, as was Rezwit the third leader in the group. Even the toadies Ibris and Tobit found this hard to accept.

“What if the gun doesn’t kill them?” Ibris frowned down at his weapon.

“Shouldn’t we use the kill frequency for a planet like this?” murmured Tobit. “I see no friends on this planet. That big meat-eater we saw in our viewing screens is certainly not our friend!”

“I knew it,” Zither turned to his team. “The Old Ones ghosts are haunting us again!”

With the three youngsters, Lumnal, Yorzl and Zeppa pouting in the background, the students and technicians were mustered onto the firing line: nine children in beetle-shaped life support systems holding small silver stunners that flashed jewel-like in the sun. The two technicians lined up to fire would probably not be required to use the weapon, but they would, by taking turns with the professor’s second gun, be tested too.

“Students, after I pass them out, you’ll insert your keys into the handle of your guns,” Arkru ordered gently. “You’ll turn the key but once, remove it and place it in your life support pouch. I’ll retrieve it when we’re finished. You’ll not fire until I give you the order to do so. Do you understand?”

“Yes, professor,” most of them chimed.

A few grumbles ricocheted down the line.

“Now wait until I show each one of you individually,” he instructed them. “We don’t want anyone misfiring or shooting his neighbor.”

Several students groaned out loud as the process dragged on. Rifkin kicked a dirt clod into the air with his boot. Because of his surliness, the professor began at the opposite end of the line, which made Rifkin the last one to fire his gun.

Alafa had the honor of being the first student to take aim through the gun sight and gently squeeze the trigger. The crackle of her weapon was followed by a faint thud on the corner of her target.

“Very good Alafa,” the professor nodded with approval. “Now give me five more!”

Alafa managed to hit the target all six times. She showed great promise, as did Rezwit, her team leader, who placed all his shots in his target except one. This shot worried the professor greatly since the discharge of electrons continued on through the grasses to Izmir-knew-where.

“You did well Rezwit. This cannot be helped,” he said with a shudder. “We don’t know yet how our guns will effect life forms here or how far the invisible beam travels. The Class 4 Stunner has never been tested before.”

Evidently the range of the gun and its effectiveness were not clearly understood even by the professor. “It’s as if he’s afraid that we might accidentally shoot something here!” Rifkin quipped to Omrik while waiting on the line.

After Doctor Arkru’s favorite team members had finished, the quality of marksmanship seemed to go down hill. Tobit and Ibris did very well, but Zither only hit his target twice. The remainder of the students, except Rifkin, missed the target entirely, their shots coursing through the meadow into the unknown. Rifkin, the last to shoot, not only hit it six times but concentrated his shots in the center of the target. Clearly, Rifkin was the best shot, though the most immature marksmen to send into the forest with a gun.

Arkru realized how fatigued many members of the group had become. The fact that they were not used to their new environment as well as their heavy life support systems might help explain their poor performance, but didn’t explain members of Team Number Three’s outstanding performance or why Rifkin had done so well.

The professor’s technicians, Alafa, and the team leaders were now certified to carry stunners in their life support system belts when they disembarked from the ship. Grummel, a member of Rezwit’s team, had done well, but was seriously reprimanded by the professor for taking aim on a flying reptile overhead. The older students, except those certified, would have to prove themselves during the excursion and the expedition that followed. Doctor Arkru warned the team leaders once again, as he retrieved the stunner keys, not to allow the youngsters to shoot the guns.

Rifkin, Rezwit, Vimml, and Grummel, who comprised Rifkin’s old gang, were impatient to be free of Arkru’s control. They could not wait for the expedition to begin. Of all the students, it was duly noted by Arkru, Zither seemed the most happy under his supervision. Until the formation of the teams, he had hung back on the sidelines as an intellectual loner and misfit. Though his mind was sharp, his hands were shaky with both the trap and gun. He appeared to be the least promising of the team leaders, and yet he was the most diligent and would undoubtedly work the hardest of any of them. In addition to worrying about Rifkin’s behavior, Arkru could not help being concerned with Zither, who had tried so hard today but seemed to have the least chance of success.

Chapter Four

Alien Safari

Upon closer inspection, there were subtle differences between the shape of the ark and the sea-going cockroaches fossilized in the earth's crust. The vessel, which looked like a monstrous trilobite, was based upon a more recent denizen from their own solar system: a colossal, yet harmless creature who could live for centuries, burrowing and rising periodically as a Phoenix from the sand.

In the universe they were exploring the beasts they had seen on this planet were quite unique. New and totally different orders of life had been observed on this world, the strangest and largest animals they had ever seen. They could not imagine what other diverse horrors lurked in its forests, slithered in its waters, and flew in its toxic air, but a clear and dreadful picture of the great meat-eater was imprinted on their collective minds. They had all witnessed from their viewing screens its exit during touchdown on this planet. The questions plaguing some of them now were "Would he come back?" and "Would the great meat-eater or the other denizens of this planet leave them alone?"

In spite of the awe-inspiring and terrible appearance of tyrannosaurus rex, the students, technicians, and ship's crew had seen it flee before the shadow of their ship. The symbolism of this event, which the professor tried to downplay, had given most of the children and crew a feeling of superiority over the quaking life forms running from the advance of their ship. The aliens had also experienced the calm around the vessel, and were certain that their successful trap and stunners, which they were being trained to use, would make them invincible against this planet's creatures, when the professor knew very well that traps would never capture really large creatures and that their weapons had not been tested enough to make such a claim. Both Doctor Arkru and Falon, the ship's commander, agreed that the quiet surrounding the ark was a physical not an emotional phenomena, caused by the massive electronic devices attached to the vessel and the homing device continually sending out coordinates to the mother ship in space.

As they made preparations to disembark, Falon scolded the professor for his optimism: "You have much faith in your students Doctor Arkru, but you forget that they're still children. Their parents, who stayed behind on our dying world, want them to be educated by the great scientist and collector Arkru. They didn't expect them to be risking their lives this way. Though you arm them for their own protection, most of them are too immature to handle this responsibility. I see the spirit of the Old Ones burning in Rifkin and Rezwit's eyes. I see disaster in this unknown world, if these children are not supervised by adults."

"You'll see how capable my students are, Falon," the professor replied amiably. "They'll be in their crawlers most of the time. I can't imagine our stunners not protecting them against these dim-witted brutes."

"Those crawlers move like sand bugs over the ground," Falon chided him gently. "You're relying on one test trap and the apparent success of a stunner that hasn't been tested on this world." "This isn't Raethia, Beskol, or Orm," he reminded Doctor Arkru, "this is Irignum—a planet the likes of which none of our people have ever seen!"

Falon made the professor promise to scrap this entire mission if it proved to be too dangerous for his students. It was a promise that the professor did not want to share with the

students but admitted to Zorig, his second-in-command, as he and his technicians prepared the vehicles in the ship's hold for today's expedition.

"Ibris and Tobit," he ordered his technicians, "place the extra air canisters and emergency equipment in Crawler Four's hold. Crawler One, Two and Three's holds will be used for small creatures, if we catch any today."

"Will we really have time to capture animals today?" Ibris inquired, as he and Tobit began loading canisters into Crawler Four's hold.

"Yes," answered Arkru, watching them at their work, "if the opportunity arises. But the students actually start collecting tomorrow. They'll concentrate on walking around in Irignum's jungle and will familiarize themselves more with the stunner today. That's why you and Tobit are coming with me. Don't forget, you're both being trained too."

"Why do we have to be trained?" asked Tobit, his face drawing into a pout. "We're technicians, not explorers. Why can't we stay on the ship?"

"I explained that to you, Tobit." Arkru said with a flicker of irritation. "I need help controlling the students. I can't do this by myself."

"You'll drive my crawler." He turned to Zorig next. "Give me your oath," he said, taking the chief technician aside, "that if something happens to me today or tomorrow, you'll make sure the students and technicians return safely to the ship."

"But this world's safe," Zorig replied in disbelief. "Nothing dares approach our vessel. We were unmolested in the meadow surrounding the ship."

"Trust me Zorig," Arkru patted his head. "It's our ship's electronics that keep creatures away, not the magic of the Old Ones or any other mystical nonsense filling my students' heads. If the creatures grow used to these vibrations, we'll lose the protective buffer around our vessel. There can be no lasting safe zones on this world."

The technicians, under the professor's supervision, continued loading the crawlers with the equipment required for a day's trip into the jungle. Traps, calibration tools, darts, nets and various sized containers for small animals and plants were placed into each vehicle's hold. The crawlers' control panels, batteries and headlights were checked, the vehicles' tracks were greased, and, as an afterthought, general first aid kits, that would be useless for aliens wearing airtight life support systems, were placed into each hold.

During the technicians' labors, the students began suiting themselves up in their life support systems with the aid of the ship's crew. Their life support systems had all been cleaned and supplied with fresh canisters of air. The professor and Zorig were not able to join them in the decontamination chamber until the students were almost done. Rifkin, Rezwit, and Vimml already had their helmets fastened on. Zither, as the helpful team leader, had assisted Illiakim and Zeppa into their suits but was having trouble with his own. Only Urlum, among the technicians, looked forward to the excursion; Zorig, Ibris and Tobit had mixed emotions about today.

Because he had gained so much weight those long months in space, the suiting-up procedure took longer for the professor. After they stuffed him into his life support system, his face was flushed and he was perspiring greatly inside his suit. To revive him, the crewmembers hastily turned on his air-conditioning system. Arkru's helmet fogged up momentarily but quickly cleared as the system began to work.

As a sudden rush of cold air dried his face, the professor gave the students and technicians last minute instructions on reading their gauges, a lecture they heard yesterday when they first set foot on this world. The most important gauges for survival, he reminded them,

were the indicators for system integrity, gas level and vital signs. If there was a problem with their readings, a student would be taken immediately back to the ship. Doctor Eglin, the ship's medic and Varik, his assistant, entered the chamber during Arkru's lecture to check their life support systems and make sure their vital sign monitors were hooked up. Between the professor's babbling and the doctor's dabbling, the students became a captive audience. They were especially trapped now that they were weighted down in their cumbersome suits. Locked in the decontamination chamber, they had no place to go. Those not dozing or grumbling irritably inside their helmets were clunking around nervously in the chamber as they waited to disembark.

Although the jungle appeared beast-free on the aft viewing screen, Commander Falon remained apprehensive about today. An unimpressive assortment of lizards and insects had ventured up to the ship as it sat idly on the meadow. A trio of small, long legged scaly creatures, the students recalled, had stumbled into their trap. But no large creatures had approached them, and there was no sign of beasts even distantly in the meadow surrounding the ship. Nevertheless everyone, including the professor, was jittery about this trip.

At the last moment, almost as an afterthought, today's history-making safari into Irignum's jungle was announced from the bridge. Even though Commander Falon mentioned the event grimly over the intercom, the children cheered the sudden announcement. Yorzl, Lumnal and Zeppa jumped up and down with glee, clapping their gloves together as children often do, squealing with delight. Most of the older students, Zither included, displayed a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and fear. Rifkin, Rezwit, and Vimml, of course, could not wait to bag themselves a beast.

For their first excursion in the crawlers, Doctor Arkru's class would proceed down the ramp on foot. While they waited beneath the ship, the technicians would bring the crawlers down one-by-one. Doing it this way reduced potential stress on the ramp. In reality, however, all the stress was placed upon the professor as he maintained order among the group. As they stood below the belly of the ark in expectation of the adventure ahead, the students became unruly. As usual Rifkin, was at the center of the rowdies, with Rezwit, Grummel, and Vimml following his lead. Zither could not control Vimml, but Illiakim and Zeppa, because of their anxiety, hung close by their leader, each one latched onto one of his gloved hands.

Rifkin was so busy showing off he ignored his team entirely. Arkru found Yorzl huddled with Zither's team members. Lumnal hovered anxiously around Omrik and Shizwit, who were not even on his team. Alafa joined in with the boys as they pretended to fire off their deactivated stunners at imaginary enemies among the group.

After coaxing and threatening his students, Arkru managed to separate most of them into their designated teams, but virtually all of them continued to fidget, complain, and tease each other or jump and down with glee. Rifkin was taking aim at the back of Alafa's head, and Vimml, who borrowed Rezwit's assigned gun, was shooting at imaginary monsters as he stood with his team. Falon, who sat on the bridge beside Orix, his navigator, watched the ramp monitor, dismayed by what he saw.

"What sort of nonsense is this?" Orix observed in disbelief. "They're playing games with their stunners!"

"What else do you expect, Orix?" Falon sighed, zooming in on Rifkin's face. "They're children. Nothing can change that fact. I don't care *what* the professor says!"

As the first crawler was driven down the ramp by Zorig, the group cheered loudly and wildly. The professor walked forward, arms outstretched, clunking as would a twentieth century moonwalker in his gear, as he welcomed the first vehicle for the teams. Doctor Arkru was in an ebullient mood. As before, he carried a gun on each hip and a pouch around his helmet to place samples in. After climbing out of crawler number four, which was the professor's vehicle, Zorig plodded on foot back up the ramp. Soon the remaining crawlers were driven down the ramp, one-by-one by the technicians—Zorig bringing down the last—and parked side by side below the ship. Once more the students cheered and bounced up and down with excitement as the procession was brought to an end. Rifkin, who had the loudest voice, began singing a bawdy song. Vimml and Rezwit were at this minute boasting to Shizwit how their teams would bring back the most beasts.

“Students,” Arkru shouted testily, “I’m losing my patience with you! This will all be done orderly. As I explained on the ship, all team leaders will drive the vehicle with his team’s number painted on its hood. You recall that two students sit in the front seat and two in back. I want no mischief on this trip!”

Crawler Number One was correspondingly filled by Rifkin and Team Number One. At a point, indicated by the professor’s outstretched arm, Rifkin drove a short ways from the ship and sat there excitedly, waiting with his team. Crawler Number Two and Three likewise followed, with Zither and Rezwit’s respective teams filling them quickly and the team leaders parking beside Crawler Number One.

The last vehicle, Crawler Number Four, though the last numerically and the last one down the ramp, would lead the caravan into the forest. The professor climbed in next to Zorig, the driver. Urlum, Ibris, and Tobit squeezed into the back seat, which the professor had said was intended for only two. After making sure they were all clear of the ramp and ready to go, Falon pressed a button on the control panel. The ramp rose slowly back up into the belly of the ship.

“Izmir go with them!” he murmured to Orix.

“Izmir go with us *all!*” replied the navigator with a sigh.

Standing vigil with the commander, the officers and crew members, who were important members of the mission, themselves, watched through the ramp monitor and the aft viewing screen, as the safari, earth’s first alien explorers, headed toward Irignum’s dark mantle of trees. A haze from the northern volcano had begun to drift over the sky. After emerging from the shadow of the ship and turning due west, the safari was directly visible from the bridge. It struck the adults as preposterous that children were up to such a task. As tiny silhouettes seen in the vast dark body of the ark, the officers of the ship stared out upon this alien world, both envious and fearful for the young explorers heading into the unknown.

That moment, as he settled back in this seat, the professor declared stout-heartedly “We’re on our own now!” “Onward Zorig,” he barked excitedly, “I will point to you where to go!”

The caravan, at Arkru’s signal, stopped at the test trap. The professor stood up precariously in the vehicle and motioned back at Alafa in Crawler Three to turn on the trap. Alafa jumped up excitedly and punched the controller button to set the trap.

“All right,” he motioned to Zorig, “let’s see what we’ll find in our test trap when we return. Onward, outward, to the jungle we go!”

When they had driven across the meadow part way, the professor fired a couple of practice shots into the air. Because an electronic beam dissipated into empty space, it was the safest direction to test a stunner, he explained to his startled students. No one else could do the same, of course, since the professor had not passed out the keys, but Alafa pretended to fire her gun at victims along the way, since Rezwit, her team leader, was occupied driving the crawler.

As they reached the edge of the forest, the professor spotted a beaten animal path wide enough for the crawlers and motioned for Zorig to proceed. To a modern earthling such a beaten path would have been reminiscent of the sort of paths created by the passing of herds of American buffalo on the Great Plains or herbivores traveling through the African savannah. Over a period of years such a natural road offered passage to all of the forest's large creatures. In the coming days the aliens would be able to use the animal paths as thoroughfares through the meadows and forests of Irignum. Everything seemed to be going their way, Rifkin and his colleagues believed. Not only had their mighty ship frightened the inhabitants of the surrounding forest away, but there were ready-made roads laid out by the creatures, which made the conquest of Irignum that much easier to do.

Zorig was terrified as he led the safari into the forest. Everyone shared in his fear, except Rifkin, Alafa, and Rifkin's friends. Rifkin was certain that when their stunners were activated, nothing would dare challenge their passage through the trees. After driving over a mile into the jungle, Zorig was ordered to halt. The professor again stood up. Shielding his wide feline eyes from the glare of the morning sun flashing on his helmet, he searched the open space ahead. The clearing in the jungle, with an inactive cinder cone in its midst, stretched out endlessly in front of them. The path they had been traveling ended abruptly at an ancient lava flow. It would be a rocky ride ahead if they attempted to negotiate the clearing. The professor climbed out of his vehicle and motioned for everyone else to do the same.

"What are you doing?" Zorig asked, fearfully clutching the steering wheel with both gloves.

"The crawlers can't go any further," the professor explained calmly. "This should be an excellent place to test out our stunners and begin collecting small creatures. We won't have to go far from our vehicles." "Come-come, Zorig," he motioned congenially, "you don't expect us to get anything accomplished sitting in our seats."

"Yes-yes, I think we should stay in our seats!" a wide-eyed Tobit declared as he followed Urlum hesitantly out onto the ground.

"Don't worry students," the professor consoled them, "my stunners are armed and ready. In addition to your guns, three of my technicians were issued weapons too. I'll give each of you a chance to fire your stunners. Nothing will harm us with our Class 4 Stunners pointed their way."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," Tobit murmured to Ibris. "What if these puny little zappers fail to stop one of those big fellows? What will we do then?"

"Run!" Ibris declared with great conviction in his voice.

From the gently sloping hill on which they halted, the group could look out on the jungle below and see several startling sights that seemed too far away to be a threat. The heads of great long-necked beasts poked up from the distant trees. They could also see strange squat-looking armored dinosaurs ambling through the meadow eating the grasses here and there and several of those duckbills they had seen in their viewing screens on the edge of the forest reaching up on their tiptoes to snip off leaves.

The professor realized it was time to pass out keys to students and technicians issued stunners. The other students knew that their chance would come, but Vimml felt cheated that the much inferior Zither carried the weapon and not he. Had not the professor secretly given him charge of Team Number Two?

Bravely it seemed to many of his students, Arkru took the first step down the hill toward the jungle clearing below. Though weighted down like themselves, he carried an armed stunner on each hip, reminding Rifkin and Rezwit very much of the Old Ones of yore. No one had noticed the small, wide lens video camera on the rim of his helmet that would capture all of today's events in front of him: a one hundred and eighty degree arc of activity larger than his range of vision. None of them, for that matter, were suspicious that he was being particularly dramatic and long-winded at this time. The professor was in excellent form as he lectured them on the grandeur of the jungle they passed through. With his own magnificent voice narrating in the background, it was a perfect time for him to record for the ship's data banks their first exploration of Irignum. They need not know what he was doing; he wanted them to act naturally and not posture in front of the camera.

This time the group was much closer to the creatures' habitats. They were, in fact, squarely in the jungle. As they trekked beneath its boughs, the forest's denizens peeped out at them: reptilian, bird-like, and dark disembodied beady eyes in foliage, as if wondering if the aliens were a threat or sizing them up for a meal.

During the Late Cretaceous of Northern Arizona, the air was thick with flies and gnats. All manner of serpent and insect crawled on the ground. The humid breeze, which they could not smell in their airtight suits, carried the unmistakable odor of the first flowering plants and the buzz of the first bees. In the clearing on which they had landed, the aliens were witness to the first grasses of earth. They would soon glimpse the ancestors of mice, kangaroos, and men, for unbeknownst to them, as they explored this transitional world, were the furtive encroachment of Earth's dominate orders. Mammals and birds snuck through the forest, sometimes hiding in flowery bushes or eating the pollen carrying flies, wasps, and bees.

In the twilight of this primeval garden, ancient conifers, and cycads stood alongside hardwood trees. Oak, maple, and palm grew amidst giant seed-bearing ferns. The earliest roses grew wild alongside a myriad of other flowers and more primitive plants. Ancestral wheat and barley, which provided fodder for the herds of horned dinosaurs, now carpeted all the meadows and fields on earth. Swarms of bees, wasps, and butterflies, which had evolved to pollinate the earliest flowering plants, flew past the slower moving dragonflies, who survived as relics of the past.

By far the most interesting creatures Arkru had seen and captured on camera were the furry and feathered ones, who seemed so much smarter than the dim-witted brutes. Not for a moment would he have believed that these creatures were more important than the monsters that ruled this world. Although he admired their beauty, he would never have guessed the significance of the flowering plants sprinkled throughout the jungle green. The more advanced plants and animals were eclipsed by the sheer size and numbers of the monsters and primeval trees. As the mammals moved furtively in the shadow of the dinosaurs and flying reptiles and the delicate flowers grew in spite of the press of primordial plants, the newer species of fauna and flora were nevertheless poised to inherit the earth.

The early mammal's descendants would one day give rise to bipeds much different than themselves. New foods, undreamed of by the current herbivores, omnivores, and carnivores, would radiate and transform life. But for now, in the eyes of the aliens and in the brutish minds of the monsters, the dinosaurs reigned. Most of the great forest was a dull, unchanging green. As unwelcome guests in a forbidden garden, the aliens must contend with a planet defying all their scientific rules.

Flying over their helmeted heads, casting its great shadow on their path as they skirted the trees, was a giant bird-like reptile, which Arkru compared for the record to the desert flyers they had discovered on Orm. Both species were carnivores, but the flyers here on Irignum were at least ten times the size of the flyers found on that other world.

A much smaller flyer could be seen perched on a flowering bush, a sapling in its beak, its large crested head and multicolored feathers a sharp contrast to the dull, silvery sheen of the scaly pterodactyls and their kin.

"It is clear," Arkru told his students with amazement, "the flyer is taking the twig to its nest. Like the mother scoop-mouth it has a maternal instinct toward its young, which many of the forest denizens probably don't possess. If this is so, what sort of parents will the intelligent furry ones prove to be?"

Many of the students, he sensed, didn't care, but it was a matter of record now. Everything, from this point on, that he taped in the forest, was, in fact, part of the research and general knowledge of the ship's database. Suddenly, as Arkru's thoughts were divided between intellectual curiosity and the search for an area to fire their guns, he froze in his tracks. His voice likewise froze in mid-sentence. Something all too familiar loomed in the distance: a great leaping killer similar to the one everyone saw that first day below the ship. Not suspecting that their leader had seen a monster ahead, his students also stopped and looked trustingly up to Arkru, everyone that is except Rifkin who was taking a practice aim at a small rat-like creature peering down from its perch.

"Put that in your belt at once!" Arkru snapped irritably at him.

Rifkin, who had been walking alongside of Urlum instead of his own team, was quick to respond.

"That's not a toy!" Arkru chided him. "Put your curiosity to work finding me a good rock for us to climb so we can get a better look at the forest!"

An uneasy silence descended upon the students, as the professor appeared hesitant and unsure of himself. As he pulled his scope out of his belt and held it shakily up to his eyes, he could see, with magnification, what he had only glimpsed before. The image was close enough for his mini-camera to capture and, in fact, could be magnified when presented as a hologram for the crew. With the sudden cessation of narration into the data banks and the restive quiet, punctuated by the hoots, whistles, and bleating of the jungle, it would seem especially dramatic to an audience witnessing this part of the tape.

Through the lens, the professor observed a distant gargoyle's head, identical to the one seen on their viewing screens. His first concern was for the safety of his students. Regardless of what they had been taught, the students normally panicked when they were afraid, everyone except Rifkin, who plunged recklessly ahead. They would probably be too petrified to shoot at a monster, where Rifkin might shoot without hesitation if he thought something was a threat. He must therefore teach them not only how to shoot their stunners well but when to shoot them and, in Rifkin's case, when not to open fire. He tried not to show alarm as he looked into his scope, but his students now sensed something wrong. Hands reached out impulsively to grab the

scope. He could also see fear on his technicians' faces. Even on Rifkin, Rezwit, and Vimml's faces, in fact, that boyish lust for adventure was mixed with flashes of alarm.

Carefully he brought their bulky-suited little bodies into a huddle to count heads and also keep them from running back to the crawlers on the rim of the hill. All of his students and technicians huddled close to him, all except Rifkin, who was straggling behind the others again, playing with a dead bird.

"Put that down," he barked at Rifkin. "Stay with the group! All of you—that means you Rifkin—walk hand-in-hand, two abreast. I have to check something before we continue. Stand firm a moment!"

Urlum immediately took Rifkin's hand while he dangled the dead bird, his attention divided between science and the 'fair sex.' Scanning their trusting faces, his camera capturing it all, Arkru now held up his fingers, motioning for the team leaders to be ready. In this way, he was asking them to use their influence to keep the others together, but in effect he was alerting them all to prepare for a hasty retreat. Zither, like Zorig, was terrified.

Through the scope, Arkru saw the gargoyle again. It was no closer or any further away than before but seemed to be lurking in the same spot, waiting for its next prey. The professor looked straight out upon the scene, hoping that his camera would adequately record what his eyes could see. It was difficult for him to believe that such a brute was capable of such clever thought, and yet, judging by the way the beast cocked its massive head and hung expectantly in the shadows of the trees, it almost appeared to be planning its next move. If that was so, what could that be? Arkru wondered with dread. Could the monster smell them this far away? Would he turn around suddenly and charge down this animal-beaten path as he had the previous day?

Arkru's stoic calm in the face of danger only convinced the junior leaders and the others that something was wrong. Hands reached out again for the scope, but this time in earnest. Several of the students were looking longingly in the direction of the crawlers waiting for them on the hill.

"Lemme see!" "No, lemme see!" Several of them demanded, jumping up and down excitedly and reaching out with their little arms.

"Stop that, all of you. Let's keep our heads," Arkru said, holding the scope protectively in the air. "Rifkin, Rezwit, and Zither," he motioned irritably with his free hand, "we have to find a hill or unoccupied tree to climb up onto for awhile."

"I saw a rock back there," Rifkin pointed calmly. "Let Rezwit and me check it out. We'll call back from our radios if it's all right."

"All right, we'll be right behind you. But be careful boys," Arkru called anxiously, as Rifkin pulled out his gun. "You haven't mastered that yet."

As quickly as possible, the professor checked all of the students' stunners to make sure they were activated. He knew that Rifkin's gun was ready, but Zither had not yet inserted his key. An incredible record of student cooperation was being captured right now. Watching Rifkin's face brighten and Urlum's grow pale, he realized how much of an understatement his warning to the boys had been. Arkru trusted Rezwit the most right now. He knew that Zither would probably freeze before firing his weapon, whereas Rifkin would love to bag himself a beast. Urlum knew this too. In this case, it seemed obvious who to trust most with a gun, as he watched Rifkin race toward the rock.

"Rezwit!" he called hastily to Team Three's leader. "You stay here with me to guard the others, and let Rifkin and Zither go ahead. Your team did the best on the target range. You and Alafa walk behind the others with your guns and give them cover until we reach the rock."

He wished he had not recorded this in his video journal. It would only antagonize Rifkin and make Zither feel more inferior than he already felt.

There had always been something different about Rifkin. It is what Urlum loved and what once made Arkru, as a teacher, so proud. He had never been like the others or himself. A trace of the Old Ones lurked in his mind. A recklessness that could be heroic or place them all in danger was always there burning in his eyes. Now it might be a liability.

Rezwit and Alafa helped Arkru keep order as the group trudged to the rock. His technicians were as fearful as his students, and yet Rezwit and Alafa were acting as protectors of the group. Although he was not a member of Team Number Three, Vimml displayed a brave face now too. He would show everyone who was the *real* leader of Team Number Two.

Arkru hoped that there would be safety on the rock, until the beast was out of range, but there were countless other horrors in the forest watching their every move. As Rifkin climbed up the rock, the stunner held carelessly in one hand, Zither was so far behind him that he panicked and began whimpering to himself as he plodded up its face.

“Damn Rifkin!” he swore into his helmet. “This was *his* idea. I didn’t want to do this!”

Anything could happen in this nightmarish paradise, Arkru realized. A new type of monster could suddenly grab Zither as he cowered at the bottom of the rock. One of those mysterious flying giants might swoop out of the sky and nab Rifkin too. Although there should be safety in numbers, they all seemed so insignificant against the terrors of the jungle—everyone except Rifkin, who stood like a conqueror upon the rock.

“Calm down Zither,” Arkru called over the radio and into the record. “We can see Rifkin from here. You can make it too.” “Ho! The young fool is already on top! Rifkin, watch yourself up there!” he shouted into his radio, as the remainder of the crew approached the rock.

Zither was a poor example to follow. It was an easy rock to climb, but it was jagged and threatened the integrity of their suits. Arkru had trained them to be careful with their equipment and outfits, but they had never had to climb rocks to stay out of harm’s way. They were beginning to panic now, which made them clumsy inside their cumbersome suits.

By now Rezwit and his able team were behind Zither, egging him on.

“What’s the matter Zither?” Alafa sneered. “Is the fearless leader of Team Number Two scared?”

Rezwit felt sorry for him and uttered encouragement to the overly cautious Zither: “There, that’s it, slow but steady—you can make it!”

“I’m not afraid!” Vimml boasted to Omrik, who followed him up the rock.

“I can see them! I can see them!” Rifkin was shouting, waving his weapon in the air. “A big leaper! A bunch of those horny-heads. I bet they’re going to fight! Hurry! Hurry! It’s about to begin!”

Zither emerged finally beside his adversary, too relieved that he had made it up the rock to be annoyed with Rifkin now.

“That wasn’t very scientific Rifkin,” Zorig puffed and panted, as he helped his sister to the top.

“Yes,” Arkru, the last to arrive, said wryly to himself as looked back down to the ground. “There’s established rules of nomenclature.... But *none of us* are acting very scientific today!”

As they gathered shakily on top, with a growing awareness of how vulnerable they were to the flying predators or any other monster able to scale this rock, the students and technicians huddled close to the professor. The team leaders, Alafa, and the technicians held their guns ready to protect the group from sudden attack. The professor grabbed Rifkin’s gun hand and

pointed it to the ground, motioning for the others to do the same. He wasn't sure what frightened him the most now: armed students or predatory beasts. There were enough hazards on this precipice without being shot by one of his own students, and yet he realized it was absolutely necessary that they were brandishing weapons when danger struck.

The group peered down at the forest almost reverently now. It was the most solemn and silent moment so far. The professor, like the others, was filled with the mixed emotions of fear and awe. He was totally mute for the only second time since they had landed on this world, both occasions generated by the great predator first seen from the bridge. Arkru was glad that the creature was in close enough range for the camera. Nothing could have prepared them for what they saw this moment in the jungle. Already, Arkru had seen in his scope the outline of the beast stalking his prey. Rifkin had actually seen the tyrannosaurus stumble into a triceratops herd. Now, for the benefit of the crew and the professor's hidden camera, the horned dinosaurs closed ranks, as would a circle of wagons, around their young, and, by lurching forward as a group, drove the giant killer away.

Nothing could have prevailed against such an assembly. There must have been several dozen of them, Arkru determined. But this was only a small part of the vast herd stretching like modern buffalo across the more distant fields. When the collector looked beyond the circle of horned dinosaurs to the great assembly on the plain, he could scarcely believe his eyes. Not only were they the most numerous dinosaurs on this planet, but they were obviously the most successful. They reminded him of the dakka herds that roamed Raethia, with the exception that the alien herbivores all had eight legs and would have looked more like giant centipedes swarming on the plain.

During the twilight of the dinosaurs in Northern Arizona, savannas and prairies had begun to replace lush stands of forest. Flowering plants and grasses, Arkru had already noted, were growing in clearings and meadows, clashing with the primal forest. The jungle was speckled with a myriad of colors and deepening shades. From their vantage point, they could detect different ecological systems in the distance, including snow capped mountains and a wide, treeless grassland between.

The great meat-eating machine, who could care less that he was trampling the ancestors of modern emmer and corn, trumpeted his outrage but was clearly outmatched by the triceratops herd.

"We have to get one of those horny headed fellows!" Rifkin was now squealing with delight. "Magnificent beasts! Splendid fellows!"

"That might be difficult," Zorig snorted sarcastically. "If that monster can't get 'em, what makes you think *we* can?"

"Nonsense!" replied Rifkin, as he peered through the scope. "Those are gentle beasts. We'll cull one from the group, like our ancestors, the Old Ones, did with the dakkas. They remind me of the herds back on Raethia, except that the dakkas have many legs."

"The dakka were much more stupid than those fellows," Arkru observed, handing Zorig the scope. "Look closely at the way they behave. With their young in the middle, they know they are safe from the killer, and yet they are not so stupid that they'll break ranks and charge. The leaper must be hungry to try that!"

"We could use one of our trap poles as a bomb to scare them," Rifkin now suggested. "After tossing one of those in the middle, they'd scatter like dakkas. We could trap one of the babies while they were in flight!"

“Listen Rifkin,” Arkru wagged a finger at him, “I know you love saying outlandish things you don’t mean, but we don’t randomly use weapons on alien life anymore, unless we’re threatened. That’s the way of the Old Ones, not students collecting for science!”

“Well,” Rifkin replied defensively “it would only be used as a last resort! We needn’t harm them; all we need to do is make a noise.”

“We have no idea yet what our weapons might do to creatures here.” Arkru admonished. “Our stun guns might kill them outright or have no effect at all and only make them mad.”

“Well, I’d like to blast him!” Vimml declared with boyish enthusiasm, taking his turn with the scope.

“Yes,” Alafa boasted, “we’ll teach them not to trifle with *us!*”

Remembering the history of his planet, Rifkin began chanting, “We’re the master race! We’re the master race!”

“Yes, we wiped out the Rimmi!” Rezwit joined in, taking his turn with the scope now. “The Rimmi were intelligent like us, but we destroyed them too!”

“And the Furzi and the Modrit!” Rifkin added buoyantly. “We blew up their planets—all of them. Now there just meteorites and solar dust!”

“The master race!” chanted Vimml. “No one trifles with *us!*”

“The master race?” Arkru retorted scornfully, shaking his head in dismay. “We were *never* the master race. Have you boys forgot *everything* you’ve learned?”

During their discussion, the predator turned away from the meadow. As it spotted prey in the distance, it was soon in action again leaping through the forest with an unbridled and reckless haste, momentarily blocked from their view until another, much smaller clearing, came in sight.

A wounded bonehead, a large plant-eater similar to the duckbills they had seen but with a massive bony outgrowth on top of its head, stumbled into view. In a terrible and brutal moment, as the tyrannosaurus bent down, bit down on its neck, and shook it violently, the smaller dinosaur was dead and lying motionless at his feet.

Since nothing dreadful had happened to them yet, the students and technicians had all calmed down greatly on the rock. Even Zither had relaxed his trigger finger and was totally engrossed in what he saw. Although they were close enough to see without it, the scope was passed continually back and forth by several of the students. The aliens now had an excellent vantage point for what lie ahead and could zoom in on the gory details of the kill. Whispering to each other, as if the giant killer might overhear, they stood transfixed as the drama unfolded, their faint murmurs becoming gasps as intruders entered upon the scene. Those who held guns placed them temporarily in their belts as the professor and Zorig stood guard. Rifkin wanted now, more than ever, to bag himself a beast.

“Look Illiakim,” Zither tried warming up to one of his team members, “the leaper has company. I’ve never seen those fellows before!”

Illiakim, who had accepted his leadership, gave him a wan smile.

They now saw other meat-eaters approach the kill site, creatures that would one day be identified as the more intelligent dromaeosaur, a much smaller, more agile carnosaur with a long stiff tail, modest set of jaws, and long stabbing claws on its kangaroo-like arms and legs. Also in the foreground of the clearing were swarms bird-like and lizard-like scavengers that flew or darted around the larger carnosaur’s kill, waiting for the crumbs. Several of the four-foot tall spike-toed predators were now attempting to take the giant killer’s meal, but were finding the larger predator unwilling to yield.

A frightening scene followed, in which the dromaeosaurs and trumpeting carnosaur were locked in mortal combat: an entire pack of dromaeosaurs against one stubborn giant. The odds seemed to favor the pack, and yet the larger meat-eater would not give ground. With its massive legs planted firmly on the ground, its gargoyle head opening to expose six-foot spanning jaws, the tyrannosaurus grabbed the first attacker in his mouth, while the second, third, and fourth tried to jump onto his back. A fourth and fifth attempted to bite its legs, tail, and side, while trying to avoid its jaws. It was clear to the aliens that the pack hunters had given up trying to frighten the big killer away from his dinner and would be satisfied with eating it instead. But the tyrannosaurus rex shook off the attackers on its back, banging one senseless against a nearby tree. It had bitten the first dromaeosaur almost in half before another one was caught in its jaws. Soon, a pattern developed that the aliens would see later in their exploration, in which a second and third wave of the spike-toed predators were drawn as were sharks to injured prey.

The sound of opportunity filled the jungle. The smell of blood and death were pungent in the air. An incredible array of flesh-eaters and scavengers waited on the sidelines or flew overhead in anticipation of the end. But something remarkable began happening that reminded the aliens and the other dinosaurs who ruled the forest. Apparently given a second wind, the great meat-eater, though torn and bleeding, began killing its attackers one-by-one. After dispatching a frontal attacker, it shook one off its back, held it down with his mighty foot, and continued to lunge at attackers approaching from each side. The last one to be killed was the hapless dromaeosaur under its foot. When it had killed six members of the pack, the remainder fled, along with the newly arrives dromaeosaurs and other predators still hovering around the kill.

It was the most brutal example of survival the aliens had ever seen, and it was also a reminder of how much danger they were now in.

“Students and technicians,” the professor turned dramatically for the camera to face the group, “it’s time to hike back to the crawlers. It seemed to be fairly easy to climb up this rock. It should be even easier to climb back down.”

He knew, of course, that the opposite was true: going down a summit was always more difficult than going up. One by one the aliens descended the rock. This time to protect his students and technicians the professor went down first, so he would be at the bottom to guard them as they made their descent. It was also an excellent time to record his students’ success in climbing Irignum’s jagged rocks. Rifkin and then Rezwit followed, both boys promising to blast an attacker to cosmic dust if it dared approach them now. Grummel was the next, his own courage fortified by Rezwit’s promise to make him a sharpshooter just like himself. Vimml, though weaponless, eagerly followed his old gang down the rock. Lumnal, Yorzl, and Zeppa who wanted desperately to be like the older students, picked up sticks to frighten away the beasts but stood closest to the professor after reaching the bottom.

“Next time we should bring the proper equipment for this sort of thing,” Zither suggested petulantly, as he followed Omrik back down.

The technicians, Urlum at the forefront, now followed Zither. Shizwit was the last and the most nervous of the students to make her descent. The professor reached up to assist her as she approached the base of the rock. He was not so sure that forcing her to be in the ultra-extrovert Rifkin’s team was such a good idea. Of all his students, she was the most timid. She seemed even more withdrawn now than when she had been in Zither’s group.

Recalling Alafa and her simple delight at pushing the button on the controller, Arkru decided to make a similar gesture to Shizwit. No matter what the crisis was or how exhausted or

overwrought he might be, the professor always had time to give personal attention to one of his students or technicians. Now, as his mind raced ahead to plan their retreat, he must appear confident and unflinching to the children, especially to those fainthearted students, such as Shizwit, who had little confidence in themselves. The electronic shield that had seemed to protect them near the ship did not reach the forest. There was nothing stopping those pint-size killers he saw unsuccessfully attacking the giant leaper. Perhaps, after such a failure, their attention would be more easily turned toward them. The appearance of so many killers barely a mile away from the ship had convinced the professor that there was, in fact, a buffer zone surrounding the ship. Between where they stood at the base of the rock and the crawlers on the hill, however, was a significantly long interval of travel before they could feel safe.

“Shizwit,” he said, handing her his pouch, “in the future I want you to protect the keys. This is where the students will drop them when they’re finished for the day. Don’t let anyone have a key that hasn’t been certified. Count them carefully when the day is done!”

“Oh thank you Doctor Arkru,” she replied, hanging the pouch around her neck.

The fact that Shizwit, herself, was not yet allowed to shoot a stunner didn’t matter to her. Using psychology, as he had on Alafa and Vimml, Arkru had made her the Key Master, a title that would one day make her a legend among her people. For now, on the planet of Irignum, Shizwit was a frightened child, playing out a fantasy that would give her courage in the days ahead. As the students clumped together in an anxious knot at the base of the rock, Shizwit, Keeper of the Keys, clutched her pouch for strength, a secret smile playing on her face.

Confident, after his successes with Alafa, Vimml, and Shizwit, that he could inspire the children, Doctor Arkru decided upon a plan. They would make a show of force to the surrounding denizens lurking in the bushes and trees. Already, he had armed, against all his instincts, several immature students and martially inept technicians in order to protect the group from imagined dangers in the trees. Now, after seeing how real these dangers were, it seemed to be a fitting time to give them target practice in the field.

Also important, he thought to himself, was how it would play in the ship’s record. What would the doubting Falon think of his students and technicians now?

“When I give the signal,” he ordered the weapon-bearers, “you will fire over the trees around us to let our friends know that we, the Revekians, are passing through.”

“What is the signal?” Alafa asked, jumping up and down with glee.

“B-b-but this’ll give us away,” Zorik sputtered in disbelief.

“I say professor,” Ibris discreetly inquired, tapping the professor’s arm, “shouldn’t we be exiting quietly, instead of making so much noise?”

“If it wasn’t for these plodding suits we could run for it,” Tobit said with a groan.

“We’re the conquering race, the master race!” Rifkin, Rezwit, and Vimml chanted.

“At the count of three,” Arkru cried, “raise you weapons, aim above the trees surrounding us and fire a volley of shots until I say stop! One. . . Two. . . *Three!*”

Streams of invisible electrons, heard as a crackling and hissing after each shot, bombarded the humid air of the forest in a most unspectacular pyrotechnic display, and yet the audible effect, Arkru noted, was instantaneous. All sounds—hooting, whistling and trumpeting—ceased immediately. Except for the slow, squat armored dinosaurs too slow to flee, the meadow remained clear.

“We’re invincible! Invincible!” sang Alafa.

“Nothing dare cross our paths!” Rifkin shouted exultantly, firing madly at flyers in the sky.

When the professor realized that his marksmen were shooting at the flying creatures of the forest, he called an immediate halt to the demonstration.

“Rifkin,” he scolded the mischievous student again, “once again you’re setting a bad example to the others!”

But Arkru could not stay angry at such a time. It appeared as if the Class 4 Stunner, like his trap, had some effect upon the creatures of Irignum.

“The shock factor is stupendous,” he told Zorig in confidence. “I wonder how long it will last.”

“It seems effective enough to me,” the technician shrugged, marveling at his own weapon.

“We scared the dakka droppings out of those beasts!” Rifkin crowed, waving his stunner in the air.

“But we haven’t shot anything,” Ibris observed, shoving his gun into his belt. “What if this has only temporary shock value for the forest creatures? We need to try our guns out on a live target.”

“Yes, an Irignian in the flesh,” Tobit nodded in agreement.

“You mean randomly kill an alien,” the professor gasped, shuddering at the thought.

“Well,” Rifkin shook his helmet in disbelief, “that’s the general idea, isn’t it. How else are we going to test them?”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Rezwit joined in the debate.

Always the voice of reason in concert with Doctor Arkru’s wishes, however, Zither demurred: “We shouldn’t be so hasty. One of our mottos is ‘never needlessly destroy Alien life.’”

“What if they destroy *us*?” countered the sneering Rifkin. “Irignum isn’t like Raethia or Beskol. The professor said so himself. We have to be a little bit like the Old Ones. Their motto was ‘if it growls at you, stun it. If it moves one inch toward you, blow it to cosmic dust!’”

“I like that motto better,” Alafa nodded pertly.

Symbolically scratching his helmet, Zither scanned his communicator a moment. “I can’t find that motto in our database,” he concluded looking up from his wrist.

“You can’t find it because I erased it from the ship’s memory,” Arkru exclaimed irritably. “Please,” he implored Rifkin, “no more of this martial Old Ones’ claptrap. I’m sure your father has told you all about the Dark Days and the Solar Wars, but that’s precisely why the Reverend Doctors sent us on our mission to undo the planetary destruction of our forebears.”

“That was Modrit,” Rifkin spoke brazenly “This is Irignum!”

“Doctor Arkru?” Omrik, of all people, finally spoke.

“Yes, go on Omrik, this *is* an event,” the professor said wryly. “Do you agree with these warmongers?”

“No,... but I agree that they must experiment with their guns. They have no other choice,” Omrik hung his head in dismay.

“Good boy,” Rifkin nudged him on.

“Well,” Arkru laughed bitterly, “I see you’ve corrupted another one of my students. If anyone shall undertake this undesirable task, though, it shall be someone with the right attitude, not a warmonger like our young Rifkin. Someone who, like myself, takes no pleasure in this task.” “.... Who shall it be?” He looked around the group.

That very second sixteen hands, including both of Rifkin’s, shot up excitedly into the air, sad proof for Arkru that the Old Ones spirit lived on in his people. Everyone, except the faithful

Zither, wanted to bag themselves a beast on Irignum; even Zorig and his sister Urlum were excited by the thought. That's why Arkru motioned for Zither to step forward now.

"Zither, pick your target," he ordered solemnly, pointing to the student's gun. "You shall shoot the first beast!"

"Very well," Zither swallowed, raising his gun and pointing to the sky. "... I'll try to hit one of those flyers."

Rifkin was outraged by Arkru's choice. Vimml felt a surge of jealousy too, now that his leader was upstaging him. Urlum, to add to Zither's feeling of triumph right now, gave him a smile of approval as he looked down.

"Here goes," he murmured, holding his breath.

Unlike his target practice yesterday, which left a lot to be desired, Zither's blast hit a flyer at the first try. The unfortunate creature dropped instantly into the field ahead of them, "deader than a meteor," Illiakim marveled, giving it playful kick.

"I don't approve of this," the professor grumbled, pushing Illiakim out of the way. "You all act like this is a game."

"It *is* a game," Rifkin murmured under his breath.

"No, it's not!" he heard Urlum say.

It seemed as if there were at least two students who disapproved of Revekia's savage past. Zither was visibly shaken by what he had to do. But, with the exception of the professor and Urlum, it appeared as if no one was very moved by the unfortunate flyer. An ugly creature resembling a bird only in body type lie stricken on the ground. It had a large, reptilian beak, filled with teeth and a long lizard-like tail. It's tiny body was tangled in its long, leathery wings and seemed to be quite dead, until one of its large eyes opened and it began jerking around on the ground.

"It's alive!" Lumnal cried happily, clapping his gloves.

"Yes, it's trying to get away," Alafa was suddenly compassionate.

"Poor little flyer," Illiakim said, bending over to survey the carcass she had just kicked, "he's all busted up."

To everyone's amazement the little flyer actually stood up and flapped his wings, indicating that no damage had been done to this part of its body. It's inability to remain on its tiny legs for very long meant it was obviously injured and would require convalescence on the ship, but the blast from the gun had only knocked it out.

"Ibris and Tobit," Arkru barked excitedly, "go pull off one of those large leaves by the forest edge and carry this little fellow back to the crawlers. We just made our first official collection. I shall dub him entrippas vladmian, which means 'large wing and tiny body'—the first of its kind to be named."

"Shouldn't Zither name him?" Urlum asked, appearing suddenly by Zither's side.

Zither felt weak kneed, and his helmet felt as if it wasn't big enough for his head, but he remained modest even now, a trait that Urlum marveled at but Rifkin saw as weakness, as did most of the other boys. By now Ibris and Tobit had devised a makeshift gurney from a jungle leaf and the little flyer lie snuggled in its midst.

"I will defer to the professor," he looked down at it and smiled. "Entrippas vladmian sounds fine to me."

As they began hiking through the meadow, the surrounding forest began to stir with its familiar sounds. Hoots, whistles, and chirping noises, they never heard before, filled the air. After the irresponsible attitude demonstrated by the children, Arkru was convinced more than

ever to keep careful inventory on the stunner keys. No one else could fire without his expressed permission, he reminded them. Weapons were a necessary evil, and they were not toys. Almost as an afterthought, as the group plodded toward the crawlers, he signaled to Shizwit, by making a locking motion with his fingers, to deactivate the stunners and gather the keys. This delighted her immensely. Approaching her team leader first, she reached out and timidly motioned for Rifkin's gun. Seeing the professor's stern expression, Rifkin reluctantly pulled it out of his belt, slamming it rudely into her tiny palm. Shizwit inserted her key into the handle of the stunner, turned it once, then handed back the deactivated gun.

"Is this really necessary, professor?" He fumed, as she dropped the key into her pouch. "What if something attacks our crawler? What're we suppose to do—wait for Shizwit to give us our keys while they tear us to shreds?"

"He doesn't trust us," Arkru heard Rezwit mumble to Alafa. "I thought our team was special. Why must she hold our keys?"

No one else seemed as bothered by the move. Zither had already pulled out his stunner and stood ready for his turn. As the professor listened to Rifkin, Rezwit, and Alafa grumble about the action, however, he decided it was time to remind them all why they were here.

"Listen my students and technicians. I don't like the warlike attitude growing in our ranks. You're not children of the Old Ones. You're part of a greater destiny than theirs. I believe that Izmir, the great Celestial God, is punishing our world for what the Old Ones did in the past. Our sages tell us that our sun is dying and soon our entire solar system will be destroyed by Izmir's wrath. We must not take pleasure in using weapons, as did our forebears. We're scientists and collectors. That's not our way. I want you to learn to use your stunners responsibly. You can't fire your guns every time you hear a twig snap. That would be dangerous for both ourselves and our hosts. Be vigilant with your weapons, but don't overreact. Cherish the sanctity of all life, not just our own."

"Psst, professor," Zorig touched his arm, "you really think that's a good idea? What if those spike-toes attack us this time? Shouldn't we present a united front?"

"Don't worry," Arkru said under his breath, "My weapons are ready. When we're under way, I'll let you, Ibris, and Tobit re-arm. I can't watch the others in back of us, but I can keep my eye on you. It's as important for all of you to know *when* to use your stunners as it is to learn how to shoot your guns. That young Rifkin wants to bag himself a beast. I think his attitude is spreading through the group."

"He's trouble," Zorig nodded vigorously. "I don't care how well he shoots!"

As they climbed into their respective crawlers, Arkru listened to his students chatter amongst themselves. He had almost forgotten about the camera running constantly on the rim of his helmet. His video journal of today was showing both the light side and the dark side of his students' behavior. Thanks to this record, Zither's cowardly performance by the rock seemed overshadowed by his noble attitude as he fired upon the flyer. As expected, the only students upset about the guns being deactivated were Rifkin's circle. Alafa had been influenced by her team leader Rezwit. Everyone, however, was so excited about today's sights and sounds that the mood grew festive on the way back. Several of them sang their favorite songs or boasted of their bravery that morning. Even Rifkin would not let anything spoil his general mood. Arkru was filled with love and pride for the students and the technicians sharing this day with him.

While Zorig took the steering wheel and Urlum tried to get comfortable between Ibris and Tobit in the back seat, Arkru inputted several ideas into his wrist communicator, including

Zorig's unwitting nickname of the predators they discovered today. These diversions made it sound like he was muttering to himself on tape.

"Spike-toes," he mumbled to himself. "Divit mugzian. . . That's a good name for those little leapers. It suits them. I have a feeling we'll see them again!"

Idly now, as he strapped himself in, he looked down at the guns in his belt. Again he tapped ideas into his computer:

Create holsters for students, technicians and myself. . . . Give each of them special training on when and when not to shoot. . . . When team leaders appear responsible and show reverence for alien life, allow them to carry their own keys to activate stunners.

With that last word inputted into the computer, the professor did a double take and looked back at his gun. Just as they were all seated and ready to return, a realization swept over him that caused him to bolt in his seat.

"Listen my students and technicians," he held up his hands, "I just looked at my two stunners and discovered that they were on the lowest setting, which should just shock its victims, not knock them out of the sky." "What setting were you all using?" he shouted back to Crawlers One, Two and Three.

"Low!" Rifkin gasped. "Great Cosmic Ghosts, I just remembered; there are three settings on our guns!"

"What about you Zither, our little hunter?" Arkru called back excitedly to him.

"Mine's was on low too," Zither replied, whistling under his breath.

"Not bad, not bad at all," Arkru turned triumphantly to the doubting Ibris and Tobit, who had doubted their efficiency before. "What about the rest of you when we were giving our magnificent display. Were yours also set on low?"

Everyone who had been issued a gun nodded. Arkru now motioned for Zorig to lead them back to the ship. Vimml, in spite of not having a gun himself yet, was so excited about these implications he swallowed his resentment toward Zither and began babbling about the possibilities of this weapon now.

"Imagine what you'd have done to that flyer if you had it set on three?" he crowed.

"That might have carbonized him," Zither frowned. "Would good would that have served?"

Zeppa made a face inside her helmet. Illiakim was looking at Zither in a slightly different light since he had found favor in the professor's eyes.

"It sure would come in handy if we meet one of those lepers," she chattered. "I'm glad the flyer's all right, but it was a good thing you shot it down. Would you teach us to shoot like that?"

"Yes," he nodded, his alien heart swelling with pride, "I'll do my best."

"Me too? Huh-huh?" Zeppa bounced up and down with excitement in her seat.

"Yes," Zither promised dubiously, "... all of you, even Zeppa. The professor doesn't have to know."

Chapter Five

Aboard the Ark

The trip back to the ark provided the professor with an opportunity to show off the Class 4 Stunner again. As they reached the edge of the forest, a trio of predators similar to the ones who attacked the leaper had furtively peaked through the foliage of the forest and startled Arkru half out of his wits. Because he deliberately fired above the spike-toes' heads, there were no fatalities, so he couldn't be certain if their weapons were really effective against the dinosaurs' thick hides. But he felt vindicated once more. And it was all on tape! Just like the trap, in which a minor shock wave had kept creatures inside, their stunners need not hit or harm their targets to have an effect.

Fortifying Arkru's iron will was the professor's natural aversion against needlessly killing alien life. "Guns are not toys!" he once more reminded them as the spike-toes fled into the trees.

After seeing their collective bloodlust when Zither shot the flyer down, he felt justified in controlling their use. "Only I can fire at-will and decide who will shoot," came the familiar refrain, as he stuck his weapons back into his belt. "Everyone else must wait for my command!"

Rifkin thought his caution both foolish and unnecessary, clinching the steering wheel with irritation as he listened to the professor's words.

"Wait? Wait to be torn to pieces?" he murmured to his team. "The Old Ones would've incinerated those fellows to ashes if they'd crossed their path."

"The Old Ones had more powerful weapons," Omrik said thoughtfully, looking over at Rifkin's gun. "...What if the third setting on the stunners is not enough?"

"Well, there's only one way to find out," Rifkin gave him a crafty look. "You just wait until we begin collecting in the forest. We'll see how much damage setting three can do!"

Shizwit, who now carried the keys, was tempted to tell the professor what Rifkin had in mind. The keys, she was certain, had given her great power.

"You're not an Old One," she spoke to him for the first time. "You must show reverence for alien life."

After parking their crawlers beneath the ship's hold, the professor and his team leaders climbed out of their vehicles with the team members to stretch their legs and wait anxiously for the ramp to open. As they waited to enter the ship, the students appeared to be too exhausted to talk very much, everyone that is except Rifkin. He took this opportunity to discuss with Rezwit Zither's behavior this morning. He did not publicly call Zither a coward. Shizwit and Omrik would have censored him for attacking their old friend, and the softhearted Urlum would surely have disapproved. In a less than discreet whisper, however, he told Rezwit exactly what he thought of Zither's actions below the rock and the cowardly look he saw on his face. It didn't matter that the professor had given him the honor of shooting the first beast, as Rifkin reminded him, Zither would prove to be spineless when he took his team into the jungle. Alafa, who had no quarrel with the well-mannered Zither, managed to overhear this slander. Without hesitation, she shuffled as quickly as possible in her ponderous suit to the professor with this information in the hopes of ingratiating herself with him again.

"Thank you, Alafa." He smiled tolerantly at her disclosure. "I'm well aware of Rifkin's feelings toward Zither. What did Rezwit say?"

“Rezwit has no opinion of his own,” she replied contemptuously. “He believes everything Rifkin says!”

“Keep this between us Alafa.” Arkru affectionately patted her helmet. “It’s been a long morning. We’re all tired and hungry. At least those boys kept it between themselves.”

Agreeing reluctantly to his request, Alafa walked covertly over to Shizwit and Omrik and told them exactly what she had overheard, spreading Rifkin’s slander even further among the group.

When the ramp was finally lowered to the ground, most of the students and technicians filed impatiently up into the decontamination room of the ship. This chamber was centered between the engine thrusters and was on the same level as the engine room of the ship. Not long afterwards, as the group stood there waiting for decontamination to begin, Zorig, Rifkin, Zither, and Rezwit drove their crawlers up into the chamber. As soon as the ramp closed behind the last crawler, the group and their vehicles were bombarded with a cleansing mist that killed all forms of microscopic life and cleaned away the toxic chemicals clinging to their life support systems and the surface of the crawlers. Following the decontaminating mist, there was a detoxifying gas that cleaned off the poisonous mist and allowed them to safely remove their suits and hang them onto the bulkhead encircling the room.

During this ordeal, the students and technicians assisted each other in removing their life support systems. It took Zorig’s entire team to help Arkru out of his suit. The youngsters Lumnal, Yorzl, and Zeppa also required special assistance in climbing out of their life support systems. After hanging up his own suit, Professor Arkru walked up and down the line prodding everyone to finish before the medics arrived. To an observer looking on, the bipedal gestures and facial expressions of the children would have seemed quite natural at this point. Except for their cat-like eyes, which blinked inexplicably at times, they smiled, frowned, nodded, groaned and yawned like humans. The movement of their arms and legs was quite human-like too.

Physically, however, the Revekians had no equivalent on earth. They were bald-headed, flat-faced, earless and lacked bodily hair. Their smooth, unblemished skin was a ghastly shade of pink. The females had two rows of breasts—three on each side—outlined provocatively in the inner garment they wore. The males exhibited a more robust physique in their shoulders and limbs. All of the Revekians, regardless of age or sex, had arms that appeared to be too long for their long-trunked bodies. They had unusually large feet for their small size and four sucker-tipped fingers on each hand. Despite these common features, there were, as in human populations, variations in their facial structure and the shape of their heads. Among Arkru’s students, these differences could be illustrated in Zither’s long, scholarly skull, Urlum’s heart-shaped noggin, and Rifkin’s square, athletic cranium and jaw. Except for the Professor and the chief technician Zorig, the students and technicians of the crew were between one and one and a half meters tall. Zither, the oldest student in his class, was naturally the tallest, though Rifkin and Rezwit towered over their teammates too.

As the group stood there waiting for the hatch to open, they welcomed the cleansing air blowing from the ship’s vents. They were liberated from the restrictions of their life support systems and the poisonous atmosphere of this world. A sudden feeling of pride swelled Professor Arkru’s chest, and yet a pang of conscience, even sadness, followed for the difficult path lying ahead. Today was a great milestone in their lives. They were more than just students to him now; they were his colleagues. Most of them were already his friends. After everything

they had gone through together, they had become his family. He had tried to make the ship their home. As a result of his efforts, he was becoming a father figure to many of them, acting as a teacher and disciplinarian when they needed guidance but trying to give them comfort when they grew heartsick for home.

After shedding their cumbersome suits, everyone, the Professor included, emerged from their life support systems wearing a light-weight inner garment intended for modesty more than effect. None of them seemed to care at this stage how their thin garments clung to their perspiring bodies and revealed the contours of their frames. They stood there those moments in the decontamination chamber with haggard faces, collectively shivering and staring mutely at each other, their large feline eyes blinking half mast with exhaustion and their simian faces still benumbed by the wonders of today.

Suddenly, as the hatch flew open and warm air from the corridor flooded in, Eglin, the chief medic, entered the room. Close on his heels, his assistant Varik carried the equivalent of thermometers, a stethoscope and equipment to monitor breathing, toxic levels, and the pressure of the blood. With Eglin inputting data on his wrist, Varik began checking the vital signs of the students and technicians, stopping for a longer period of time to listen to Professor Arkru's ancient heart. A cheer went up when the professor received a clean bill of health.

Having completed the examinations satisfactorily, Eglin and Varik bowed politely before exiting the room. Another cheer went up from the students when the professor motioned for them to leave. Upon receiving a signal from Arkru, Ibris and Tobit hoisted between them a small box, which was essentially a miniature life-support chamber, containing the flyer shot down by Zither today. Arkru, Zorig, Urlum, the students, and the two technicians filed out of the decontamination chamber into the corridor, crowding into the large cargo elevator on level one. There was not enough room in the elevator, especially with the container on the floor. When the elevator lights lit up at level two, the group collectively groaned. The professor looked anxiously down at the box, punching the level twelve button several times in order to cancel out the delay.

"Someone pushed the up button," he said wearily. "It must be one of the storage clerks. I'll shoosh them away!"

"Are they deaf?" Zorig asked in disbelief. "The bridge announced our arrival to everyone. Why couldn't they just take the stairs?"

As the elevator doors opened on level two, they were greeted by the ship's storage clerks, Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep, whose job it was to manage the food supplies, materials, and general repairs necessary for running the ship. Later, when the decontamination chamber had aired out enough, the life support system suits they left on the hangers would be picked up by the clerks and carefully inspected for possible repairs. Each suit's battery level would also be checked. The air canisters would be topped off with the correct blend of oxygen, helium, and argon gas. The clerks would then drive their vehicles one-by-one from the chamber, up the cargo elevator, for inspection in the crawler bay of the ship's stores, located on level two of the ship. For now, however, there was a festive note in Hobi's voice as he informed them that, thanks to Commander Falon, everyone was going to a fabulous banquet within the hour to celebrate this extraordinary day.

The students and technicians cheered this news. The professor felt honored that Falon had done this on his own without being asked. Several of the students now volunteered to use the staircase rather than endure the crowded elevator again.

To an observer inspecting the ark, the entire vessel would have seemed quite cramped and was, in many places, eclectic, eccentric, and even a little mad. Almost every inch of space not used for storage or official functions was utilized for aesthetic or scientific displays. Despite the strict conduct demanded by Falon to run his ship, the narrow corridors connecting each room were painted garishly and gloriously to please the eye. Revekian art, after thousands of years of cultural evolution, had become complex and thematic and was so politically and socially motivated it told a story and presented a message to the onlooker everywhere one looked. Epoch themes of early Revekian history leading up to the Old Ones destruction of the colonized planets in their solar system melted into impressionistic scenes of Revekian society and wildlife from their world. There were no guidelines whatsoever for artistic renderings. Doors were painted along with walls and floors, and at several points even the ceilings were splattered with pictures of the Old Ones, ancient Revekian heroes, or the once verdant forests of Revekia now withering beneath a gasping sun.

The professor used every vacant space available on the vessel for trophies and oddities from the home planet and those artifacts gathered from other worlds. Among the countless scientific curiosities and treasures taken with them on their mission were meteorites and exotic minerals from the home planet now setting along various passageways, while large, enigmatic fossils from Beskol, Raethia, and Orm were found along other corridors of the ship. There were Revekian plants in pots at almost every turn to compliment the murals painted throughout the ship. The professor didn't want the students, technicians, or ship's crew to forget the greatness and wonder of their own world. Everywhere they looked on the ship was, in fact, a constant reminder of home but also a showcase of what they had collected so far in space. In many respects, the ark seemed like one great, continuous museum. In many more ways, an observer would conclude that it was really a great arboretum and space-going zoo.

Looking through the elevator window, the students had fleeting glances of various levels of the ship. Through the window, level three, the first enclosure area for life forms, dropped from view. On this level amphibian-like creatures and other life forms from their own dying world would one day be deposited on a compatible planet, which had not yet been found. On the next level, specimens from Revekia's own solar system, which were also in danger of being wiped out in the coming supernova, had been carefully collected and placed in enclosures. The larvae of giant sand bugs and other strange creatures of the holy planet of Orm were the most important specimens on level four. Before being destroyed by the Old Ones in the Solar Wars, representative life forms had been captured from Furzi, Rimmi, and Modrit, while the intelligent beings of their civilizations were resettled on Revekia, Oritzim, and Orm. The captured life forms were displayed in large enclosures, smaller cages, and glass containers: walking, waddling, slithering, and flying creatures—all much smaller than the life forms on Irignum but more precious to Professor Arkru because of what the Old Ones had done.

On level five, the life forms of Tomol, which was several billion miles away from Revekia, might have been disappointing to an observer who had just witnessed Irignum's animals and plants. And yet Tomol's primitive life forms were quite fascinating, offering a menagerie of filmy, will-o'-the-wisp creatures from its primeval seas. Its many aquatic animals and plants, after being scooped out of Tomol's oceans, were placed in a carefully prepared solution and supplied with synthetic food through special tubes—an entire level of aquariums for Arkru's zoo.

On level six, Beskol, light-years away from the Revekian solar system, exhibited several animals as strange as Irignum's scaly creatures and furry beasts. The willowy, long-legged and almost brainless shamgar and the umgi, which would have looked much like the sea urchins inhabiting the earth today, had become two of the Revekian's favorite foods. For that matter, on level seven, members of Raethia's flora and fauna provided the ship with much of its weekly fare. The hideous looking dakkas, in particular, who looked like giant centipedes, had to be killed regularly and eaten because they grew to be giants on their world.

From Raethia's enclosures on level seven, the elevator passed four levels that had been reserved for additional worlds, such as Irignum, but because of the bounty found on the current planet, Irignum would probably require level eight, nine, ten, and eleven as well to accommodate the flora and fauna of this world. There were no specimens taken from Lorg, the planet on which the Old Ones had been exiled. Only microscopic organisms lived on this primitive world at the edge of the galaxy—a fitting place for the Old Ones to live.

The elevator now stopped at level twelve on which the ship's scientific laboratories and infirmary were found. The professor motioned impatiently for the others to continue up to their quarters. Trembling from exhaustion, he wrung his hands nervously as Ibris and Tobit carried the flyer to his lab and lowered the container shakily to the floor. With Ibris' assistance, Zorig placed the container into an enclosure he had set up yesterday after he had taken Urlum back to the ship. Arkru complimented Zorig on his workmanship; the enclosure was a miniature of the larger versions being constructed for the ark. Irignian air was now pumped into the enclosure. Using the robotic arms the professor designed, Zorig removed the container lid, lifted the flyer out, and sat him gently on a bed of synthetic moss. Genuine Irignian moss would replace his bed when the expeditions began. To Arkru's joy, it opened its large reptilian eyes almost instantly and began flapping its leathery wings, feebly trying to escape the environmental enclosure that would become its home.

Satisfied that it would not die if properly fed, the professor ordered the technicians to find out exactly what the flyer ate. Until they knew what its diet was, they would leave it some of the leafy foliage they found near the ship. After leaving the flyer in its controlled environment, the professor and his technicians re-entered the empty elevator. Arkru was light-headed with exhaustion. His great feeling of accomplishment was dulled by hunger and fatigue. Again the elevator doors opened up, this time at the students and technicians' quarters on level thirteen, to let Zorig, Ibris, and Tobit out. Passing level fourteen where the ship's crew slept, the professor was soon exiting the elevator onto level fifteen, which was provided for the ship's officers and himself.

"I'm ready to drop!" he mumbled to himself. "... Give me a bowel of dakka porridge and a full night's sleep!"

After showering and putting on his finest clothes, however, the professor felt as if he had been given a second wind. No sooner had he left his quarters, than he was walking alongside of Remgen, Falon's first mate, who was on his way to the feast. Suddenly, to his annoyance, another one of Falon's chief officers joined them in the corridor. Remgen and Chief Engineer Dazl chatted with him about the adventures he and the students had today, but they might as well been speaking Furzian to the professor as Arkru contemplated the feast.

His mind now in a happy fog, the professor found himself traveling by stairs this time with Remgen, Dazl, and Communications Officer Abwur, who joined them at the stairwell entry, which led to the destination of everyone on the ship this hour: the ship's dining hall, on level sixteen of the ark. As a convenience to overstuffed diners and overworked members of the crew,

a recreation room was situated across the corridor from the dining hall that contained all manner of exercise equipment and entertainment.

Above this level, where Abwur, the communications officer, spent most of his time, were the control centers of the ship. On level seventeen the massive ship's computer and communication equipment took most of the space on this deck. Level eighteen, where Falon, the ship's commander, now stood, was the most important deck on the ship, for, in addition to a large conference room aft, the forward portion of level eighteen contained the bridge. Sitting between two observation domes of the vessel that resembled two monstrous eyes, was the control console for navigation and the main communication link between the explorers and the mother ship in space.

Falon, who also acted as watchdog for their mission, looked out from the warm ambience of the bridge upon Irignum's meadow and to the forest beyond. He was only a child when the Doctors of Science wrestled control of their planet from the warlike Old Ones. His own father had been among those good doctors who took control of their world. The Old Ones had been exiled to Lorg for their actions in the Solar Wars. He fully supported the peaceful policies of the new regime and yet, because of the attitude of many of his officers and his crew, had allowed his ship to be painted with murals of the Old Ones exploits and deeds. The spirit of the Old Ones lived on even in the young students. He was afraid now that the daredevil attitudes of students, such as Rifkin, Vimml, and Rezwit, would bring great misfortune to the rest of their group.

In addition to being responsible for the operation of the ship and assisting Arkru in the mission to collect specimens to populate other planets, Falon was answerable to the Mother Ship for the safety of the personnel who would brave the current world. If they failed in their objectives, he, not the good professor, would be blamed. If students or crewmen died, he would be held accountable for this too. He had the greatest responsibility aboard ship and therefore the final say. He should, he told his navigator, never have agreed to Arkru's plan for using students to collect specimens, especially with Rifkin running amuck. Now that the collections were so imminent, he was not sure if they should proceed. He wanted adults to accompany each team, but the professor saw this as a betrayal of trust toward his class. How could I have allowed this to happen? He asked himself as he stood gazing out the window of the bridge. Why couldn't I have just said No?

Looking back to this morning's discussion with Arkru, Falon remembered scolding him for his optimism. There was a dangerous complacency among Arkru and his students that had begun that first day their ship touched down on this world. Orix, the navigator, and Remgen, his first mate, were aware of this too. Because of the homing signal of their ship and the ambience of the vessel's antennas and electronic gear, it appeared as if there was a buffer zone that extended up to a mile around the ship. This had happened before on Raethia and Beskol. He and his officers, after much discussion, however, were convinced that this "ambient effect" in the meadow would fade with time as the creatures became adapted to this zone. More important for the students' safety than even the buffer zone in the meadow was the effectiveness of their traps in holding creatures at bay in the forest and the question of whether or not their weapons would function adequately if put to the test.

So far the limited testing of their Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap and Class 4 Stunner had been successful, but the real test for these devices, he was certain, would come deep in the forest, itself, when the students were on their own. The trap's success in the buffer zone meadow and the group's unproblematic venture into the fringes of the forest did not count as far as he was

concerned. Tomorrow would be a most crucial day; he dreaded it more than any other time in their long odyssey through space.

After one last meditative look at the meadow and forest below, Commander Falon exited the bridge and walked down the stairwell, the last member of the ship's company to enter the dining hall for the feast.

Everyone displayed various stages of fatigue after their excursion into the forest. No one appeared to be more exhausted this hour than during those first two days on Irignum. The students and technicians had been given an emotional, if not, physical boost by their first adventure into the forest. The youngsters, who had required naps after yesterday's trek into the meadow, were much too excited this time to sleep. Even the male technicians, who had been the least motivated of Arkru's group, were jubilant this afternoon and mingled with the students as equals as they filed into the dining hall and chatted about this morning's events.

The professor, whose old bones had felt the weight of Irignum's gravity and labored in his life support system until he thought he might drop, had been invigorated by today's wonders and the success of the Class 4 Stunner. He was pleased that the little flyer, their first specimen from Irignum, was enclosed satisfactorily on the ark. More important than even this event, of course, was the fact that no one had been injured or killed. So far their mission on Irignum had been a success. He was troubled by the continued enmity between members of the class and the influence Rifkin had on members of the group. Even Alafa, his most promising female student, appeared to be intriguing against Rezwit, her team leader, now. Putting these troubling thoughts out of his mind, he sought out the officers' table and settled down for a well-deserved feast.

During their festive dinner, in which all the favorite Revekian foods were served, Arkru and Falon brought their two groups together in the ship's dining hall as they had done during the festive occasions on other worlds. Falon, who entered the dining hall last, warmly shook the professor's hand before he seated himself. For the first time in many months, the ship's schedules were organized so that all of the commander's officers and crew would dine with the professor's students and technicians at the same time. Even the cooks, who were setting up the buffet table, would join the feast.

The enmity between some of the professor's students seemed to disappear now. The traditional separation between military and civilian crewmembers was abandoned completely in wake of the momentous discoveries on this planet. All barriers, in fact, between crewmembers vanished this hour. The commander, navigator, communications officer, first, second, and third mates, chief engineer, ship's doctor, and general crew marveled at the stories the students told. Arkru was encouraged by this camaraderie but not fooled. Irignum was proving to be an extraordinary planet, which made this a very special hour. Everyone was in the best of moods this afternoon. Whether or not this harmony would last or, more specifically, Rifkin would put aside his rivalry with Zither and stop sowing dissention among the ranks, remained to be seen. But it pleased Arkru immensely to see everyone getting along so well. So much hinged on his most brilliant student. Rifkin's previous exploits on Raethia, Beskol, and Orm had made him a hero to the students but an oddity to the ship's crew.

Omrik, Shizwit, and Yorzl did not know what to make of him at first. This afternoon in the dining hall, however, they appeared to be caught up in the spirit of their new team as Rifkin recounted his brave ascent up the rock and the wonders he witnessed at its peak. Rifkin had set a

fire in Omrik and Shizwit's imaginations and—for good or bad—given the youngster Yorzl a dynamic role model to follow.

A much more reliable role model, Arkru believed, was Rezwit, who led Team Number Three. At this very moment, he could hear Alafa and Rezwit bragging about how the professor asked them to guard the group as they ascended the rock. As team players, they used the term “we” instead of the egocentric “I” used by Rifkin when describing their exploits on this world. Arkru watched Rifkin's reaction closely as they boasted to Falon's shipmates that they were the best team. He had thought the same thing yesterday when they performed so well with their stunners and behaved so well this morning in the forest.

Fortunately, for the sake of peace, Rifkin was too busy bragging about himself to overhear what they said. The room was buzzing with different discussions about their first expedition into the jungle. The ship's crew wanted to hear about Irignum's strange and wonderful beasts. For most of those fortunate enough to have fired their weapons in the jungle, the topic was also the Class 4 Stunner. Rifkin, having run out of subject matter for this morning, began talking about his personal exploits on past worlds and what he planned on achieving on this one too.

“I'm going to trap one of those three horns,” Arkru heard him declare. “Those scoop-mouths will be easy pickings and so will those dumb-looking things with clubs on their tails. You just wait and see, I'll get me one of those leapers too.”

“Leaper?” First Mate Remgen shuddered at the thought. “Is that what you call them?”

“Uh huh,” Rifkin nodded enthusiastically. “The professor named it *Irufum rizolum* which means leaping killer, like the leaper we saw on our viewing screens, only bigger, like the one we saw from the rock!”

“Now Rifkin,” Chief Engineer Dazl shook his head in disbelief, “your professor would not send you children out to nab one of those beasts. The good Doctor Arkru wouldn't do a thing like that!”

“It's true,” Rifkin grew defensive. “We're going to start with hatchlings and eggs. Later we'll be able to catch juveniles if we widen the perimeter of our traps.”

“Those juveniles better be pretty small,” Dazl scoffed derisively. “That leaping what-you-may-call-it wouldn't fit in the ship's hold if he was *one half* its size!”

“Ho-ho!” First Mate Remgen slapped the table with glee. “A baby monster would be too big for you whelps!”

“I'm not a child,” Rifkin shot back in a challenging voice, “I'm a collector! Someday I'll have my own ship!”

At that point, the shipmates surrounding Team One's table broke into laughter at Rifkin's spirit, but Arkru was dismayed by Rifkin's boasts, and Falon seemed vindicated in his distrust of Rifkin now.

“There,” he murmured to Arkru, “you heard him say it. His own ship, in deed! He's not a team player, Arkru, not like the others. He's a leader, all right, but a reckless leader whose courage might become a liability to his team!”

“I have faith in Rifkin,” the professor replied unconvincingly to Falon. “I know he's headstrong and stubborn, but he's dedicated to our mission. He'll get the job done.”

“You mustn't laugh at me,” he heard Rifkin protest to Remgen and Dazl. “It's not polite!”

It was always difficult to know how serious Rifkin was. Now that he had gotten himself into this controversy, Arkru was curious to see how he would get himself out. Rifkin was

defending their mission to the first mate and chief engineer, but he seemed to be going about it the wrong way. He reminded them how important their mission was on Irignum, but he could not help defending his own importance in it to them. It was still, Arkru noted with disappointment, “I’m going to do this” and not “We’re going to do this.” As Falon had sensed, Rifkin had little faith in his lackluster team, though he was totally confident in himself. What began as gentle banter between Rifkin and the officers had begun sounding like sheer impudence to many listeners because of the haughty tone he used.

“Rifkin,” Arkru called to him finally, “that’s enough. Calm down boy. They’re just having some fun.”

“Yes, Rifkin,” Shizwit whispered into her leader’s ear, “stop trying to defend our mission by bragging about what you’ve done! You, Omrik, Yorzl, and I are a team. I’m sick of listening to your insufferably childish exploits. Our mission on Irignum is not just about *you!*”

Rifkin, suddenly self-conscious after the professor’s censure, lowered his voice and sat there glaring at Shizwit. “... You little *bitch!*” he growled under his breath. Snickering amongst themselves, as Rifkin’s own teammate—Shizwit of all people!—took him to task, Remgen and Dazl discussed this observation with their friends.

With several conversationalists competing in the room, Falon pointed to Zither who sat quietly with his team talking in a low voice about what was expected in the days ahead. As in the case of Shizwit and unlike Rifkin, Zither didn’t blare his exploits to the entire room. In the peaceful demeanor of this student, a greater contrast could not be found to Rifkin on the entire ship.

“That’s the kind of leader I like,” he informed the professor. “I’ve talked to that young fellow on the bridge. He has a clear perception of what our mission is. He’s the most mature student you have—certainly the most responsible in the group!”

“Awe yes, the noble Zither,” Arkru noted with sarcasm, “the most conscientious leader I have. I put Vimml on his team, hoping Zither would tame him down. He’s got his hands full with Vimml and Zeppa. I just hope he can do the job.”

As the professor waited anxiously with everybody else for the food to be brought in, he listened to Falon and Orix’s views on student collecting. Falon continued to believe that an adult should accompany each team. Navigator Orix and Doctor Eglin went one step further and advised Arkru to put the whole affair into military hands. According to Eglin, only a seasoned team of adults should even be in the forest. In their collective view Zither was a model student: a well-behaved pupil and hard worker, who knew his place. Rifkin, on the other hand, was a troublemaker and glory-seeker. The ship and its mission in the galaxy, they agreed, needed precision and professional teamwork that immature students like Rifkin couldn’t provide.

The professor tried not to listen to their critical remarks. He was still quite proud of all his students and the success of his revised stunner and trap. The dissention in the ranks, especially between Rifkin and Zither, seemed forgotten after their success today. He didn’t hear Rifkin’s anger at Shizwit for taking him to task. Nor was he aware of Vimml’s resentment for his new leader or did he realize that Alafa and Rezwit had an ongoing rivalry amongst themselves. Arkru was just glad to see the standoffish Zither socializing with his new team instead of his old friends Shizwit and Omrik, who were learning to function now as members of Rifkin’s team. He was also heartened to see the normally introverted Shizwit actually talking to the loud-mouthed, overbearing Rifkin, her spirits now buoyed by her new role as Key Master of the guns. He didn’t know what she was saying in response to Rifkin’s boasting, but just to see her so animated warmed his heart. Shizwit had come out of her shell, Zither had gained the

respect of crewmen, and, with the apparent exception of Rifkin, an esprit de corps was growing in the student teams.

It seemed only appropriate to him that his newly organized foursomes sat with each other today. The students could socialize with their old friends any other time on the ship. Tomorrow, he reflected indulgently, as he and his technicians turned their attention to creating the environment for Irignum's beasts, Teams One, Two, and Three would go out together into the forest to collect specimens for the ark. Falon and his crew would have the mundane task of running the ship, while his students had the privilege of exploring this exotic world.

As the ship's company waited for the cooks to finish bringing out their food, an excited babble of discussions filled the room concerning both the aromatic smells and the events of today. A sumptuous feast, wafting from the ship's galley into the dining hall, waited to be devoured. An informal signal given by Wurbl, the chief cook, caused an undisciplined rush to the food. Rezwit, Grummel, Alafa, and Lumnal, who were closest to the buffet table, reached the dishes first, followed by Rifkin, Yorzl, and Omrik, as Shizwit sat in meditative silence in her chair. Zither was able to restrain Illiakim and Zeppa, but could not stop Vimml from racing to be next. Ibris and Tobit had likewise been prevented by their leader Zorig from charging the table too. The remainder of the ship's company sat politely in their seats while the seven students heaped up their plates with roasted samgar and umgi stew.

Nodding with approval at Zither and Zorig, the professor signaled them to let the females go next. Illiakim and Zeppa stood up eagerly and made their way to the table, followed by Shizwit who saw this as the proper time for her to take her turn. Urlum had sat patiently with her brother and the other technicians waiting eagerly for her chance. Only when the female team members had begun filling their trays did Zorig and Zither and the remaining technicians move hungrily toward the food. At that point, after Falon gave a congenial nod, members of the ship's crew converged in an orderly but rapid step to the buffet table behind the last member of Arkru's group. Falon, who sat with his officers at the professor's table, gave the seven impulsive students across the room a disparaging smile. The professor shook his head with disapproval at the students who rushed ahead of the others, embarrassed that they hadn't shown good form.

"They're behaving like dakkas today," he quipped to Falon as the commander's officers stood up to join the line.

"By Izmir, I've never seen your students move so fast!" The commander gave him a playful nudge.

The navigator Orix and the ship's doctor Eglin laughed indulgently at the professor and Falon's observations, for no one could seriously blame the half starved students for behaving as gluttons today. Showing the greatest restraint of anybody, as was Revekian custom, the professor and commander were the last crewmembers to load their plates. Even the cooks, who followed the engineers and general crewmen, preceded the leaders of the ship. By the time the professor reached the table, the main entries had disappeared entirely from the platters. A look of horror fell over his simian face. His great mouth opened to expose his long quivering tongue. His large feline eyes seemed to bulge out of his wrinkly head. Wurbl, at Falon's signal, rose up from his tray and raced to the kitchen to fetch more samgar roast and umgi stew. The sound of munching food and slurping of beverages seemed deafening in the famished professor's ears.

"I'm as hungry as a dakka, myself," he confessed as Wurbl returned apologetically with more roast and stew and began heaping it generously onto the professor and Falon's trays. "The truth is," he admitted to Falon, "I've never worked up such an appetite."

“That’s why I ordered the cooks to make us a proper feast,” Falon replied, amused by how much food the old professor had on his tray. “Our fat Wurbl enjoys eating, so he will always make enough food for an army to eat!”

Falon, Arkru, Orix, and Eglin sat down finally with their trays. Mugs of beer, brought hastily from the kitchen, waited for them on the table. Just as he had stuck his two fingers in Revekian fashion to scoop up a mouthful of stew, a thought came to Eglin that stopped him cold.

“For shame,” he said, looking sheepishly around the room. “I was so famished I forgot to give the benediction. You’d think that after such a morning, I could have at least given our explorers a proper prayer!”

“Too late, you have mouthful of food!” Orix teased in singsong voice as he lifted up his mug.

“You’re a wicked rascal, in deed!” Arkru chortled, shoveling in a mouthful of stew.

“Don’t worry Doctor Eglin,” Falon laughed heartily, fingering a morsel of roast, “our Celestial Father won’t mind!”

For several moments, everyone ate heartily and, between mouthfuls of food, exchanged small talk amongst themselves. Abstractedly as he chewed his food, the professor listened to the conversations in the room. The adults, including himself, were growing tipsy on Revekian beer. Several of the students were talking to the ship’s crew, almost drunk, themselves, with the heady reminiscing of today’s events and fine food. The old barriers were breaking down. Shizwit, who had blossomed from a pale flower, herself today, was now complaining to Rifkin about his bad manners. Rifkin, while boasting more quietly this time to Omrik and Yorzl about his exploits on other worlds, stopped during Shizwit’s protest to open his mouth and expose half chewed up food. This caused everyone around them, including the chief engineer and first mate and their teams, to erupt in laughter. Rezwit, Grummel, Alafa, and Lumnal, who were in high-spirits themselves, had already been chuckling at something Wurbl had said. Suddenly, to the professor’s dismay, everyone around Rifkin, including Rezwit’s team, began imitating his revolting behavior, except poor Shizwit who looked with great loathing at the group.

The different personalities in the dining hall were typical of any festive occasion and yet there was that added element of diversity that could not help, even now, to grate on the professor’s nerves: Rifkin—always performing and always attempting to be the center of the group. At Zither’s table, the team leader displayed perfect manners for Illiakim and Zeppa, while Vimml ate with undisciplined gusto in imitation of his old friend. In the midst of the technicians’ table Zorig was politely chiding Urlum about her behavior with Rifkin, while Ibris and Tobit calmly conversed about today’s events with the ship’s cooks nearby. Not everyone lacked the proper manners and good form, the professor noted, as he licked his fingers clean.

When it appeared as if everyone had finished eating their meals, except the corpulent Wurbl, who was still eating his third dessert, and the room had settled into a soft, pleasant hum, Arkru stood up quietly, pulled a remote control device from his jacket and pointed it randomly to a spot several feet above the room. Those shipmates unable to leave the vessel yet, who included all of Falon’s officers and crew, were able to view, along with the actual participants in the adventure, the students and technicians’ first trip into the forest. In response to where he pointed his controller, a chronological video of today’s excursion flashed as holograms onto various points above the tables—visual and audio data from Arkru’s hidden camera now part of the database of the ship.

The professor had always felt that the students and technicians should be able to learn by their errors and laugh at the mistakes they made. Falon and his crew found this to be great

entertainment. It would, however, prove to be a tactical blunder by the professor that he had forgotten how negative and unflattering much of their actions had been. The overhead projection of themselves pinpointed here and there, as life-like holograms, was not entertaining to many of the students and technicians, who at times, appeared quite ridiculous in front of their colleagues and Falon's crew. From the moment the professor activated the small camera inside the rim of his helmet, the scope of what he taped depended on where he was directly facing at the time: a one hundred and eighty degree arc of activity larger than his range of vision was presented to the audience now. Such a camera range captured virtually all of his students when he looked their way and a large segment of the surrounding scene. Unfortunately it also captured many things that even the professor had not seen from the corner of his eye, including the misadventures of members of his teams.

The professor now randomly pointed his controller to the table where Wurbl and Imyor, the cook's assistant, sat. A breathtaking panorama of the primeval forest caused everyone to gasp as it appeared suddenly over their heads. Across a narrow meadow that led to an outcrop of igneous rock, they were taken. The cooks, who sat beneath the hologram, thought it was great sport to have their table used as a stage. Tiny little holographic images of squat armored creatures with club-like tails munching grass and duckbilled monsters nipping leaves off of pines hovered above their heads as the professor, always unseen in the video, led his group toward the rock.

Over the bulbous helmet encasing the students' baldheads, numerous flyers filled the sky. In the horizon and over the tops of tall trees a cinder cone poked out of the trees, emitting an ominous trail of smoke, accenting the forbidding nature of the scene. Insects flew thickly over the grass and crawled over the professor's helmet, startling the audience in the room, as they appeared as giant segmented monsters on tape. To everyone's amusement, Wurbl and Imyor ducked their heads under the table as a beetle walked across Arkru's helmet and took flight.

Doctor Arkru began his narration just as the great multicolored insect flew away.

"That was but a minor monster you have witnessed in the forest," he began, after taking a long swig of beer. "Already you noticed our club-tailed and scoop-mouthed friends and the varied assortment of flyers in the forest." "Wait until you see *this!*" he added dramatically, aiming the controller at the opposite corner of the room.

Rezwit, Grummel, Alafa, and Lumnal clapped their hands with delight as the hologram now hovered over their heads. Arkru was slightly tipsy, Falon realized with amusement. His gestures were progressively more dramatic as was his normally pompous voice, as Wurbl continued to refill his mug. The hologram was too small for the audience to see the many reptilian, bird-like, and dark mammalian eyes looking out of the surrounding forest at them as they passed through, so the professor punched the zoom button on the controller until they could see what the explorers had seen as they crossed the meadow. Zooming in on the video made these beasts appear much larger than life. To the inebriated minds of some of the crewmen, they loomed out in frightening variety and consistency.

"Great celestial lights," Eglin cried out candidly, "look at all those beasts peeking out of the woods! What are they Doctor Arkru? I've never seen such a variety of monsters in one spot!"

"Well, they're a mixture of scaly and furry beasts," the professor tried to explain. "The segmented creatures you see crawling on our suits and swarming in the air are similar to ones we encountered on Orm."

"Wonderful! Magnificent! Unbelievable!" Dazl, Abwur, and Remgen cried.

The room was abuzz with superlatives. Everyone, even the students who witnessed much of it first hand, had an opinion or observation about the images hovering in the room. The truth was, Arkru could scarcely explain the creatures, himself. He was seeing many things captured by the camera his range of vision had missed. They were, as they had experienced on other worlds, learning about Irignum's life forms together, with nothing but Professor Arkru's previous knowledge to highlight what they could see.

"Yes-yes, the good doctors on the Mother Ship won't believe this," First Mate Remgen was muttering, quickly draining his mug. "Tell me, are they dangerous doctor? They look quite large to me."

"Wait Eglin and Remgen, you don't understand the mechanics of this device." He pointed to his controller. "I've just zoomed in on some of these fellows. They're not *all* big. Some of them, such as those segmented, multi-legged fellows, are actually quite small."

There was so many people commenting this moment, no one could hear Arkru's explanation. Everyone in the dining hall, in fact, were oohing and aahing so much that Falon rose up to quieten his crew. Turning to his students and technicians, Arkru did the same, a tipsy grin betraying his state of mind.

As he asked them to keep their voices down and raise their hands to speak, the monstrous shadow of a flyer fell over Team Three. Alafa ducked her head this time, Lumnal clapped his hands with glee, and Rezwit and Grummel whooped with delight, until once again, the professor shushed them amiably into silence with his free hand. This time he was laughing uncontrollably himself. Just for effect, he moved the controller around to make it seem as if the creature was flying around the room. An awed silence, broken by the youngsters Zeppa and Yorzl squealing with delight, fell over the audience as the hologram circled the room. The imagery in the hologram changed, as the flyer disappeared into the forest, only to be replaced by something far more frightening than anything coming before. When it appeared that the excited babble had abated completely, something utterly momentous appeared in the hologram over Team Two.

Leaving the focus setting on zoom so they could make out its gargoyle head, Arkru exclaimed, "Behold the king!" as the ruler of the forest displayed its hideous head. Zither felt uncomfortable a moment but laughed softly as Vimml, Illiakim, and Zeppa reached out as if to pat the monster on its nose.

"A leaper in the distance," Arkru announced, as theatrically as possible, a telltale slur in his voice. "This stopped me cold! Whoa! I mean to tell you!... He-he, I knew I had to find shelter for the students, but I didn't want to alarm them, until the moment was right."

"It's him again," Dazl murmured to Remgen.

"Great celestial ghosts!" The first mate nodded with awe.

"Yep, it's him all right," the professor pursed his lips, looking quizzically at the scene. "I dunno, on this bizarre world, it could be a *her*." "Ha-ha-ha!" he giggled, switching the hologram to Rifkin's table and startling Shizwit half of her wits."

"What do we call your beast?" asked Remgen, smiling at Falon across the room.

The professor took another long swig beer then wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Lemme see, what'd I name that beast?" He gave him a blank look.

"Irufum rizolum!" Rifkin, Rezwit, and Alafa chimed at the same time.

"Exactly!" Arkru bowed with respect. "Irufum rizolum, which is Ilderan, our scientific language, for 'leaping killer' (hiccup!)... I'm proud of you children. I'll make scientists of you *yet!*" "... Humph, I daresay." He squinted, as if seeing the monster for the first time. "That's the biggest, ugliest killing machine I've ever seen!"

The room erupted in laughter, as he began making the image dance around the room. “Weeeeeee!” squealed Zeppa.

“Make it come back!” Yorzl whimpered, reaching out as if to grab it in mid-air.

The audience clapped, as he turned the controller upside down to make it look as if Irufum rizolum was standing on his head. Then, in the middle of the dining hall, the image plunged suddenly to the floor as the professor’s arms dropped to his side.

“Burrrrrrp!” He belched loudly, reaching for his mug. “Had too much beer... or *not enough*.”

The hologram flashed eerily on the floor as the controller dangled in his hand. The audience responded this time with a mixture of laughter and groans. Recalling the danger his students faced, the professor, as the proverbial drunk crying in his beer, muttered huskily, “There’s a lot a beauty on this planet; let’s not forget *that*.... There’s flowers growing in the jungle like the herzols of Beskol, the veches of Orm, and those mumzies my mother loved back home. I saw fruit growing on Irignum’s trees and grasses like the ones once carpeting our world.” “But we can’t smell’em,” he informed his audience sadly. “That’d poison us. We don’t dare tast’em, either, for that would be toxic and turn our blood green.” “.... We’re trapped in our life support systems,” he added sadly, looking around the room. “In the most incredible world we’ve ever seen, the animals and plants are as poisonous to us as it’s air. The logistical problem of building containments and transporting these monsters to other planets would seem like a fools errand if it wasn’t for the sheer bounty of this world!”

Sporadic clapping erupted in the dining hall but also grumbling from the crew and more sighs and groans from the children, as they waited for the show to resume.

“I think the professor has had too much beer,” Falon whispered into Orix’s ear.

“I fear sir, that you and I have had to much too,” Orix grinned sheepishly, looking into his empty mug.

Unable to stand without wobbling, the professor lowered himself into his chair. His inebriated mind now wandered as he searched for his train of thought. Eglin reached over and felt his pulse to make sure he was all right but then smiled knowingly at Falon and Orix when he had verified that the good doctor was drunk.

With less energy now, the professor muttered “Oh yes, Irufum—the leaper,” raised the controller up with a limp wrist and projected the hologram where it had left off. In the hologram playing over Team One’s table, which caused the show-off Rifkin to stand up and punch at it comically with his fists, all of his students came together in a frightened huddle except Rifkin, himself. On the periphery of the panorama, in the portion of the hologram that moved in front of Yorzl’s face, Rifkin was seen pulling out his stunner and taking aim at something in a tree. In imitation of his team leader, Yorzl reached out to the hologram and pretended he was punching the leaper too, when, in fact, his tiny, holographic image revealed a terrified youngster clutching Shizwit’s hand. While the others stood by the professor for protection, Rifkin lagged behind them, aiming his deactivated stunner at various trees. The other members of Team One burst into laughter as the professor was heard shouting to Rifkin “Put that in your belt! That’s not a toy!” Many of the onlookers could not help applauding this young explorer, but the professor wasn’t amused.

As Rifkin sat in the dining hall with his team, he recalled with alarm that, while Arkru’s back was turned this morning, he mimicked the professor after his scolding. The action was almost second nature for him. He had not given it a second thought until now. As Arkru turned back to check his wayward pupil, however, the edge of the one hundred and eighty degree

panorama caught Rifkin on tape moving his mouth wildly and gesturing dramatically as the professor often did, yet too late to be caught in the Professor's visual range. Although Rifkin had stopped just in time when they were face to face, the camera had caught him in the act and betrayed him now to the professor and everyone else in the room. Again there was laughter but this time from everybody, except the professor, himself. Rifkin was not sure whether to stand up and take a bow or hide his head. The professor made his mind up for him with a stern rebuke.

"So-ohhhh," his voice began slurring more distinctly after so much beer, "this is what you do behind my back!"

"He does it all the time," Zither whispered into Illiakim's ear.

"I-I," Rifkin started to stammer.

"Uh oh, he's squirming now," Remgen guffawed, slapping his knee.

"The little blighter finally got caught!" Dazl crowed.

"Let's see that again," Arkru snorted, pressing the rewind button on the controller.

"Impersonating the good ol' professor, eh?... Humph, that was pretty good!"

After seeing Rifkin mimic him again, the professor began laughing himself. Rifkin looked foolish now in the hologram, his childish antics forever recorded into the database of the ship. Urlum was the only one in the room who did not display mirth in her eyes. Everyone else was laughing so hard that the professor once again called order to the room. This time, he sounded unmistakably drunk and could not rise up from his chair.

Falon, in high spirits, stood up and did the honors, pointing the controller this time at his crew. Over the tables of enginemen, mechanics, and various other specialists, he swung the beam playfully back and forth. Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep, the storeroom clerks, now clapped their hands with delight as the beast made its rounds to them. Second Mate Imwep and Third Mate Kogin, who would both play major roles themselves, roared with laughter, as it paused over their heads. The contrast between the terrified holographic image of Yorzl and the fearless Yorzl punching the hologram with his little fists caused the greatest mirth. The panoramic hologram had, of course, captured the gargoyle again lurking in the trees. This was, the professor neglected to explain, the second time he saw the leaper and the point when he decided to take his group to safer ground. The students, Arkru recalled with a shudder, had not suspected that a monster was directly ahead, but then he pulled out his scope, holding it shakily to his eye, and true terror, not mere child-like fear, gripped everyone... everyone that is except Rifkin. Once again, to the audience's amusement, the young explorer marched to a different drummer. This time he straggled behind the others, playing with a dead bird.

"Put that down!" the professor barked at Rifkin. "Stay with the group! All of you, that means you Rifkin, walk hand-in-hand, two abreast."

For the fourth time during the hour, the audience broke into laughter at Rifkin's antics. Rifkin was embarrassed but also relieved that the professor was too drunk to be properly upset. The hologram, a real life drama for onlookers, showed Doctor Arkru at his bravest, but, even as a small luminous set of images hovering in the room, the alarm was evident in his voice and the look on the simian face inside the bulbous helmet. The panic in the students and technicians now sobered the audience and embarrassed many members of the group who appeared as cowards to Falon's crew. Zither, in particular, looked utterly petrified in the hologram as he was asked to accompany Rifkin up to the rock. It was Rifkin's turn to snicker at his adversary, and he looked across the room with a mixture of amusement and contempt. Falon, who, as Arkru, was having difficulty standing up, handed the controller to Eglin. The professor frowned with dismay as Eglin switched the scene back to Zither's table, so the audience could compare his terrified

holographic expression with the real-life Zither squirming in this chair. Again everyone laughed, except Urlum who hid her eyes against Zither's humiliation.

"Doctor Eglin, ple-e-ease push fast forward!" Arkru pleaded feebly, tugging on his sleeve.

Eglin did as he was asked, but there was still several seconds left during this interval for Zither to reveal his fear. Not only did Rifkin present a heroic impression of himself for the audience as he began his ascent, but Zither was shown at his worst as a whimpering coward below the rock. Several of the students, for that matter, including Urlum's brother Zorig, showed shades of cowardice as they followed Zither up the rock. Now, as the students began their ascent, the audience watched Rezwit and his team upstage the other teams in the group. Rezwit, Alafa, Grummel, and Lumnal laughed delightedly when the hologram appeared once more over their heads. Zither was relieved that the subject had been changed, but Rifkin pounded his table in a jealous rage.

"Rezwit!" the audience heard Arkru call out in the hologram. "You stay here with me to guard the others. Your team did the best on the target range. You and Alafa walk behind the others with your guns and give them cover until we reach the rock."

Rifkin was so beside himself with anger his teammates had to restrain him. Shizwit scolded him under her breath. The vista at the summit, which was given a long-winded and rambling narration by the professor, now served to divert all their attention back to the expedition. A few members of the crew, who had been drinking beer, actually fell asleep. It was a testament to Doctor Arkru's persistence and great fascination for Irignum that he didn't fall asleep, himself. The audience now had the opportunity to see the great herds of three horns and then the battle between the leaper and spike-toes commence. Unfortunately, the scene, which the professor, students, and technicians remembered all too clearly was too far away for Arkru's camera to capture adequately. Once again, in command of the controller, he attempted, on his wobbly legs, to zoom in on the scene, but this time it was a blur of motion and muffled sounds.

"What's that supposed to be?" Dazl frowned. "Is that him again?"

"Yep, that's him all right and a bunch of smaller ones, Zorig nicknamed 'spike toes.' They're too far away. The leaper won. He's the ruler—the king (hiccup!)... We had to use a scope to see it." "Here," he muttered, adjusting the controller, "let's find something we can see."

"Professor," Falon commented, as the scene changed, "we couldn't see it clearly, but that seemed quite dangerous. It's too bad it's out of focus. Couldn't you get a better shot?"

"Nope." Arkru replied, his eyes at half-mast. "... Saw it with the scope, but it was beyond camera's range." "These shots are much better," he added with a loud belch. "Ho-ho, look at my little collectors."

The remainder of the presentation was anticlimactic after what they had seen, and yet the audience, particularly Falon's crew, sat in anticipation of more to come. There were a few more laughs as the students climbed shakily down from the rock and began plodding across the meadow, but the only surprises for Falon's crew were when the professor designated Shizwit as Keeper of the Keys and shortly afterwards when the students were ordered to shoot their guns wildly into the air. The fact that Shizwit was made Keeper of the Keys merely generated more laughter from the audience. This term had been used by the Old Ones to designate leaders with prophetic powers. Obviously the professor had forgotten they were being taped when he promised her this. What bothered many of Falon's officers was seeing the professor order his students to fire their weapons to let the aliens know they were here. This was done very irresponsibly, they believed. Seeing the professor scold them for firing on alien life seemed

irrelevant to them. What bothered them was the wild and reckless manner it was carried out. To the veterans of the ship there was nothing wrong with such sport, but it required the expertise and wisdom of adults.

“Great Izmir!” Dazl pounded the table with his mug. “Let me go with them next time! You need adults out there commander, not these wet-behind-the-ear whelps!”

“As a matter of fact,” Falon took the opportunity to announce, “the professor and I have discussed the possibility of adults leading the students into the forest.”

“Well, of course,” Arkru nodded dubiously, not sure who he said “of course” to, Dazl going with them into the jungle or Falon’s insistence on using adults as leaders of the teams.

Virtually all of the students, who were too young to drink spirits, understood this error in judgment immediately. Their leader was intoxicated; he had just given Falon and Dazl permission to interfere. They looked at each other in unity now, wondering what they should say.

“I think all of the ship’s crew should have a chance to go into the forest,” Orix declared boldly. “I want to go on an expedition, myself!”

“Me too!” Dazl and Remgen cried raising their mugs.

“No,” Rifkin cried, jumping up from his chair, “part of our mission is learning to be collectors. We must do this ourselves, without any interference. We don’t need your help!”

Since Arkru was too tipsy to respond adequately, Zorig rose up benevolently as his spokesmen. The commander gave him a polite nod.

“In all due respect sir,” he addressed Falon with a bow, “I think we should trust our students. After all, they’re qualified to use the stunner and are trained to set traps.”

“Only a select few of the students are qualified to fire the stunner,” Orix corrected Zorig. “On the other hand, all of us professionals are qualified to shoot. As far as the trap is concerned, it hasn’t been tested in the forest, only in the meadow. Frankly, I think you’re rushing this matter. At least, for a few days, let responsible adults go along on their trips.”

“No,” cried Rifkin, “we *are* responsible. We’ve collected on other planets. Why can’t you trust us *now*?”

“Because,” Remgen snorted, slamming down his mug, “you whelps are too immature for such a responsibility.” “Especially you!” He pointed accusingly at Rifkin. “After watching how you behaved in the presentation, I can’t believe they would let you carry a gun!”

“Our guns require a key to arm them,” Zorig explained patiently, displaying one such key to make his point. “Rifkin’s gun must be officially armed.”

“Nevertheless,” Dazl challenged, scoffing at the key, “we just saw several of your students shoot indiscriminately into the air.”

“That was to clear a path,” Zorig replied, bristling under the chief engineer’s stare. “They weren’t supposed to shoot at alien life. You noticed they were scolded promptly afterwards and only Zither was allowed to test out the gun.”

Zither, who didn’t think it was such a bad idea to have adults present on their expeditions, had remained conspicuously silent until now.

“I only did what I was told,” he explained softly. “All of the students, except the youngsters, will eventually be certified to shoot.”

“No offense Zither and Chief Technician Zorig,” Dazl replied condescendingly, “you both seem to have level heads, yourselves, but I don’t believe mere children should be trusted with those weapons in a place like this. Personally, I could care less how many alien life forms you killed. Against some of these beasts, however, those stunners might not be enough. You

need adult guidance. There's a distinct possibility out there that some of you might end up shooting each other!"

"We don't need adults!" Alafa shouted defiantly.

"We can do it by ourselves!" spat Vimml, looking to Zither for support.

Zither said nothing. He knew that the officers were right. As Rifkin, Alafa, Vimml, and Rezwit protested to their leader, Arkru groped through a drunken fog, dimly aware that matters were getting out of hand. It was time for him to take control.

"Why can't you trust us?" Rezwit was asking, looking over to the inebriated professor for support. "Doctor Arkru trusts us. *Why can't you?*"

"Silence, everyone!" Arkru waved his arms querulously in the air. "Tell'em what we decided Zorig. Go ahead lad. You're supposed to be my second-in-command."

Arkru's head was throbbing with pain. He felt queasy after drinking so much beer.

"Plan? Oh yes the plan," Zorig frowned, annoyed by the professor's condition.

To his disappointment, Doctor Arkru, in spite of his fine words against imbibing, had broken his own rule. He was behaving like an old fool. Prodded by the professor's gaze, Zorig searched his memory for what he had been told about this morning's activities. Once more, as he stood between two crosscurrents of opinion, he found himself, as Zither, in sympathy with the officers of the ship. Based upon his experience on more gentle worlds, the professor had decided to trust his students. This didn't mean he *could* trust them; it meant he *wanted to*.... And yet that wasn't the problem, he thought, glancing around at the students in the room. It was much more basic and obvious. Though many of them considered themselves to be collectors, they were still children. Zorig was still a youth, himself. Several times—in both word and deed—the professor expressed his doubts about them going out alone. This was Irignum, not Raethia, Beskol, or Orm. It seemed obvious to Commander Falon and his staff that Arkru was in a state of denial. This was plain to all of his technicians too. He must rethink his game plan, Zorig had pleaded this morning. The actions of the students now justified his fears. For all his good intentions, the professor's trust had been misplaced in students such as Rifkin and the combative Alafa. He was taking too much on faith!

With these thought in mind, he blinked several times (a Revekian way of showing embarrassment), muttered an apology and returned to his train of thought.

"Oh yes,... I remember the plan." He snapped his fingers. "According to Doctor Arkru, there'll only be limited expeditions tomorrow, closely monitored by the professor and our commander. Our students won't go far into the jungle and will be in constant communication with the ship. They'll travel in the three directions or zones we've selected. The three zones of collection, 1, 2 and 3, will correspond to the western, northern, and eastern sectors of the jungle surrounding the ship. At the first inkling of trouble, all three teams will be called in. Each team leader will be responsible for training the older students to use the stunner properly in the forest. Lumnal, Yorzl, and Zeppa are too young to be trained. We'll be taking roll and keeping tabs on team members at all times."

"Very good," the professor mumbled, his chin dropping onto his chest.

By now, the controller was held loosely in his hand and the holograms were projected blurrily onto the floor. Zorig took it out of Arkru's hand and pressed the button twice. With that action, the projection disappeared and the presentation ended. Not used to seeing their professor inebriated, the students sat in sleepy silence. After the presentation, there was much to think about. A low, barely audible murmur from students and crew followed, as Arkru plopped down into his seat. Dazl, Remgen, Imwep, and Kogin, who drank heavily themselves, stared slack-

jawed at the professor's table. Falon was the first to rise from his chair and exit the room. It was no secret that he was a critic of professor's plan. Orix, his second-in-command, who was even more critical than the commander, followed him to the bridge. For the remainder of Falon's staff, though, friendly pats were given to Arkru's back as they departed. To fill in this gap of silence, Remgen told anyone listening a bawdy tale about the Old Ones sacking of the planet Furzi. The story reminded everyone why the Old Ones had been exiled to Lorg. The veteran officer laughed foolishly when his story fell flat. With Dazl's coaxing, he wobbled cheerfully behind the engineer out of the room. Eglin, knowing he was in his cups too, motioned to his assistant Varik to accompany him back to the infirmary. Second Mate Imwep, Third Mate Kogin, and Communications Officer Abwur, who sat in various stages of drunken comportment, took the cue from their fellow officers and likewise staggered away.

The remainder of the crew, from the lowliest deck hand to Wurbl, the cook, followed the example of the ship's officers. One by one they departed, slowly, as would earth-like zombies returning to their crypts. A faint ripple of laughter from the students and technicians followed as this parade of drunken crewmen filed out. Hobi, Jitso and Gennep, the last members of the crew to leave, turned and bowed to the students and technicians as they departed.

"And they think *I'm* immature!" Rifkin spat contemptuously as he watched them exit.

"This is the first time since our discovery of advanced life on Raethia that adults on this ship got this drunk," Zorig commented to his team.

"It's disgraceful!" Urlum shook her head with dismay. "What kind of leaders do we have?"

"Drunken leaders," Ibris observed with mirth as Arkru lie peacefully on his arms. "The professor told me that drunkenness is forbidden by the Doctors of Science. Now, here on Irignum, even the commander's drunk!"

"The professor's *smashed!*" Tobit declared, chortling under his breath.

"We've been in space too long," Zither gave his own opinion quietly to Illiakim, who was, herself, falling asleep. "If only we could return to Raethia or Beskol... They were a safe distance from our solar system. We can breath their air and walk unharmed on their soil..."

"Yes... Raethia and Beskol," Illiakim murmured, her eyes opening at the thought "we were safe and secure on those worlds."

"I wanna go home," little Zeppa murmured from her twilight sleep. "... Please let me go home!"

When the last member of Falon's crew had departed, Zorig yawned expansively and called out to the students and technicians in the room: "All right, it's time to leave. You students must rest up for the big day tomorrow. We technicians have lots to do!"

In spite of being tipsy themselves, Wurbl and Imyor returned suddenly with cleaning equipment and a cart. Zorig was aware that the students and technicians, including himself, were overstuffed and exhausted after today's efforts. Within the last few moments his own team had dropped off one by one. His first concern was getting them on their feet, so they could help him get the professor out of the room. Not one of them, including the hyperactive Rifkin, were sitting straight and alert in their chairs. The cooks worked around them all for the time being. As they began dropping the dirty dishes from Arkru's table into a cart, the professor, who had been sound asleep, came suddenly alive.

"Way-da-minute! We gotta finish our preshentashun!" His groggy voice rang out as Wurbl tried prying the mug out of his hand.

His head was still lying limp on the table as Imyor continued to clear the table.

“It’s all over,” Zorig informed Arkru gently. “Commander Falon’s crew has gone.”

“Aw right, . . .we sheen enough,” the professor’s tongue rolled around thickly in his mouth, his head rising slowly, as would a tortoise, from the table. “. . . You peeble know the resh. . . .We pudda poor lil’ fellow in a box and take him back to the shib. Turn id off Zorig. Theez children are gedding cranky. Let’s all go take ourshelves a lil’ nab!”

“Go back to sleep Doctor Arkru,” teased Wurbl as he wrestled his mug free. “You’re having a bad dream! The nightmare comes tomorrow when you send your students into the forest!”

Ibris was able to rouse himself in order to help Zorig drag the professor out of the room. Urlum had been sound asleep, but, after being nudged by Tobit, began helping Arkru too. All of the technicians then assisted the stocky professor to his pod. For a few moments, Vimml and Omrik remained lying on their arms, snoring softly as were Zeppa, Yorzl, Lumnal, and almost everyone else in the dining hall, including Rifkin, who had finally fallen asleep.

Doctor Arkru now whispered something noisily into Zorig’s ear as Zorig and Ibris lugged him across the floor.

“Oh yes, thank you for reminding me professor,” the chief technician said amiably. “For you team leaders,” he shouted less congenially over his shoulder as they entered the corridor and headed toward officers’ quarters, “at breakfast the professor will go over your expeditions tomorrow. Get some rest and clear you heads of its foolishness. You have serious business ahead of you; there will be no more childish behavior out there tomorrow!”

“I din’t shay thad,” Doctor Arkru protested feebly as the technicians guided him to his pod. “. . . I wan to thang them for wud they did today.”

“Those were your thoughts professor,” Zorig cajoled him gently. “They know you appreciate what they’ve done. The important matter is for you to get some rest.”

Zither, who was blurry-eyed and wobbly-legged, assisted Vimml as Illiakim helped Zeppa out of her chair. Rezwit had three team members to wake up now that Alafa had drifted off. Rifkin had to join forces with Shizwit to help Omrik and little Yorzl to their feet.

It had been a laborious day in their cumbersome life support systems. Irignum’s gravity on their delicate bodies and the fatigue generated by having to breath from heavy canisters on their backs, hiking across the jungle meadow, and climbing up the rock had taken its toll on everyone, especially the professor who, on top of everything else, had drunk too much beer. As soon as the professor, his students, technicians and the relentless Rifkin had tumbled into their sleeping pods and shut their eyes, they were falling into a deep, exhausted slumber, their minds swimming with the sights and sounds experienced today.

Chapter Six

The Collection Teams

The aliens slept in the same chambers they had been encapsulated in during hibernation in deep space. The lids, which had been closed over them through countless light years, were now open, and the pods beneath were thought of as ‘sleeping pods’ instead of stasis chambers, which, in fact, they were. The same leafy beds they nestled in on Revekia awaited them each time they turned in. For pillows they had homegrown moss and for a cover, when the air conditioning of the ark would chill them, they had a blanket woven of Revekian grass.

As Rifkin, Zither, and all the other students and technicians arose this morning, they were filled with excitement, fear, and misgivings. For Doctor Arkru there would be the added discomfort of a hangover after drinking so much beer. The wake up call from the bridge sounded as if it came within his nightmare.... He was alone in Irignum’s terrible jungle without a stunner or trap, strangely enough running as he had as a child through the forest, only this time it was not his pet vrungy chasing him to his home; it was none other than the great leaper they saw in their viewing screens and from the rock. The ground shook from beneath his sandals, and the air was filled with its awful roar. A call very much like Falon’s deep voice carried god-like resonance to it—“Doctor Arkru, this is Commander Falon giving you the wake up call you requested!”—but to the dream child it sounded muffled and indistinct as voices often do in dreams.

Hearing the deep, resonant voice of Commander Falon, the dream child wondered why anyone would call out such a strange name. Doctor Arkru, indeed! His parents had nicknamed him Mooksy, which meant little hopper, because he was always hopping from one thing to another. “Save me Izmir! Save me from the leaper!” he called out to the god-like voice above, until he could clearly discern the message being conveyed.

“Doctor Arkru! Doctor Arkru!” the voice came from his private intercom. “This is your last wake up call. I must assume you’re up and simply not responding. Please meet me on the bridge.”

Arkru awakened, though his large, feline eyes remained at half-mast. The professor’s head bumped the bottom of the lid of his pod as he bolted from his bed of grass. As he stumbled from his pod, he realized that the ringing in his skull was not just from the bump to his noggin. He had been very foolish at the feast yesterday. He had been barely cognizant at dinner for that matter, and Zorig had to take over his role as the students’ leader. Hopefully his second-in-command had said just the right words, for Arkru’s memory was muddled this morning. Today was a big day for his students.... Today they would be on their own!

“I’m a blundering fool!” he cried out, struggling into his clothes. “How many times have I preached on the evil of strong drink?”

The bright yellow pants and green tunic laid out by Ibris or Tobit the night before belied the mood he actually felt this morning, but was a façade he must somehow convey to his students who needed all the inspiration they could get. After the students begin their expeditions, he must also motivate his technicians, for today they would, with the help of Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep (on loan from the commander) begin in earnest building the enclosures and creating the atmosphere

for the alien species brought back to the ark. He must, as the leader of the students and technicians, be up to the task.

“Oh, why did I make such a spectacle of myself at dinner?” he muttered with self-recrimination. “I set a dreadful example for my pupils and technicians. I’ve got to make a good showing of myself today. I must not fail them now!”

But it took all of the professor’s effort just to get dressed and drag himself to the dining hall. The thought of mustering with his students in the ship’s hold after breakfast and putting on that hideously overweight life support system depressed him greatly now. Even worse was the realization that he had to take it off again and go through the process of decontamination before he could sit comfortably at his chair in the laboratory and do his work.

During a modest breakfast for the students and technicians—Falon and his crew had breakfasted at dawn and were already about their duties—the professor began feeling a little more like his old self. This meant that he still felt all of his one hundred and twenty-seven years this morning, but he felt a little more confident he would not collapse before he sent his brave students off into the unknown.

Of all the students assembled in the dining hall and chattering about the imminent collections ahead, Arkru worried about Zither the most. It was easy enough for a stouthearted fellow like Rifkin to take risks or a rascal like Vimml who did not know any better. But for someone as frightened as Zither to put on such a good face and strike out into the unknown required true courage. At least this is what the professor told himself as he looked at his bowl of breakfast mush and listened to Zorig go over the laboratory assignments his technicians were responsible for today.

“You really think we can get the enclosures done on time?” Ibris was asking Zorig, as the chief technician paused to drain his cup.

“Of course,” Zorig replied in a cheery mood. “Falon promised us all the crewmen we need, just like before. Frankly I don’t think Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep will be enough. This time we have the advantage of using the abundant flora growing here on Irignum for each enclosure.”

“Yes, Zorig, my thoughts exactly,” Arkru said, rubbing his temples, repulsed by the sight of food and drink. “The students will begin collecting plants, but I want my technicians to concentrate on the synthetic portion of the enclosure. We have enough plasmodex for the environmental chambers; we will turn them into proper living quarters for Irignum’s species later when the collections are being done. For now, I’ve instructed the students to bring back plant stuff with their specimens that can be used in recreating their respective habitats in the forest.”

Feeling much better mentally if not physically, the professor forced himself to eat as much breakfast as he could, knowing he would need his strength for the long hours ahead. As he talked idly with Urlum and listened to the hum of the room, he allowed his students and technicians as much time as possible to dine and bond together before the designated hour. In addition to the hearty mush of Revekian cereal and berries, Wurbl had prepared sweet cakes, umgi sausage, and plenty of hot, spiced vragga milk.

Doubt had begun creeping into the professor’s mind as he studied their childhood gestures and listened to them chatter while they gobbled down their food. Disaster, though he wouldn’t admit it, stared him in the face as he scanned the faces of the students scattered around the room. Most of them had been pumped up by Rifkin, Rezwit, and Alafa’s enthusiasm, but he could see doubt and misgivings in the youngsters, Yorzl, Lumnal, and Zeppa’s expressions. Zither was talking to Illiakim, perhaps giving her a pep talk, while their teammate Vimml sat with Grummel bragging to his friend about his future exploits in Collection Team Two. They

were, all things considered, a mixed bag of overachievers and more timid souls. Although his students had not failed him on the mission so far, there was much about this planet they hadn't learned.... Questions now stabbed him. What if Zorig was right? Was he placing too much trust in his students and taking too much on faith? Could it be that, after the progress he had seen on previous worlds, he expected too much of them?... Or was he just having the jitters now that departure was so near? Had he lost his courage? Where was his faith? He had taught them everything he knew. Both the trap and stunner had great potential. There was nothing more he could do. He had divided them into solid teams with responsible leaders (except perhaps Rifkin) and would, along with the commander, monitor their activities in the forest. If the least sign of danger occurred he would call them in.

In spite of his misgivings, as the student body rose up at Zorig's signal, Doctor Arkru felt immense pride for his pupils and for his technicians too. They were, he continued to believe, his greatest class. He knew how much Rifkin wanted to prove himself and was aware of Vimml's wish to upstage Zither and Alafa's desire to show Rezwit that female collectors were as good or better than males. He could not believe, after the show of camaraderie he saw yesterday and this morning, that the problems between his students were insurmountable, even though it was plain to many of those around him that these rivalries were disasters waiting to happen in the days ahead. It was, in Falon and his officer's thinking, just a matter of time.

This morning Zorig, Ibris, Tobit, and Urlum would not have to put their life support systems on and go into the forest. This suited the more cautious technicians just fine. Only the professor, for moral support more than anything else, would have to put on his life support system. It required two students to help one student put on his or hers suit, but all four of Arkru's technicians were necessary to help him put his suit on. Under normal circumstances, the students would step into their cumbersome suits from stools and have them pulled up over their scantily clad bodies by classmates tugging on each side. Ship's crew members were standing by this time to assist them and make sure that everything was fastened correctly and airtight. The relatively lightweight helmets were the last item fastened to their suits. Air would be turned on from the canisters and monitored carefully by Eglin, the ship's doctor. The students, their simian heads glistening with sweat, would start breathing the mixture. Their vital signs would be checked by the doctor and his medical assistant Varik to make sure the canisters were functioning properly and their helmets were circulating enough air. Everyone, from the commander on the bridge down to the medic reading the gauges, had to be satisfied that each student was suited up properly and ready to disembark.

For Doctor Arkru, who had decades of experience suiting up, the experience was still trying and even with all four of the technicians busily preparing him for disembarkation, he found it especially burdensome this time.

"I wish I could be with you, professor," Zorig lied, as he exited the decontamination chamber. "I'll stay on the bridge until you return topside. Take care when you walk down the ramp."

"You don't fool me *one bit*, Zorig!" Arkru muttered testily. "I know you pity me for having to go out again. Well, my problem is not Irignum's gravity, its poisonous atmosphere or this monstrous suit; its Revekian beer. If you wish to pity me, pity my foolishness. By Izmir, that must not happen again!"

"You're being too hard on yourself," Tobit winked, giving his helmet a pat.

“I wish we were back in space,” Urlum said plaintively to herself as she followed her brother into the hall.

When the decontamination chamber door finally closed and the students, who stood alongside of the three crawlers that would take them into the forest, saw the ramp slowly drop and Irignum’s morning light stream in, there was a sudden and inexplicable silence. Everyone knew that there was something different about today. The professor uttered a spontaneous prayer to himself for the students exiting the ship. While Rifkin, Zither, and Rezwit climbed into the three crawlers that would carry their teammates into the jungle, the remaining students preceded them down the ramp. Down they ambled: nine small aliens from the planet of Revekia. With bulbous helmets masking their bald, simian heads and camouflaged in their bulky, white life support systems, they outwardly resembled astronauts of a latter day.

In expectation of today’s wonders, they huddled quietly below the ship, not at all like the rowdy group seen yesterday or the day before. After starting up their engines, the team leaders descended one by one in their crawlers: Rifkin, Rezwit, and finally Zither, out of logical sequence because of Rezwit’s insistence to be behind his friend. In spite of their efforts to appear dignified, their radio headsets conveyed their first impressions as leaders, driving off without adult supervision for the first time on this world. Rifkin sang. Zither prayed. Rezwit seemed to be laughing hysterically to himself. Down below, as the first, third, and second crawlers disembarked, the students cheered repeatedly but in a descending ratio of enthusiasm as Rifkin, Rezwit, and then Zither drove a short distance from the ship and parked. The last one to exit the decontamination chamber was the professor, himself, who took much longer this time to make his way on foot down the ramp.

As quickly as possible, he gave them his official blessing, mumbled a prayer to Izmir, the great Celestial God again and, as an afterthought, took the three team leaders aside to remind them of their tasks today. Zorig had, on his behalf, already cautioned the students after dinner last night, but he needed to press home the responsibilities and duties that the team leaders had for their teams.

“You are to take your teams in shallow this morning as we discussed,” he instructed them. “This is still a time for testing our traps and our stunners. So go no further than half a league from the ship. Watch your crawler’s gauges.” “No random potshots at creatures.” He looked at Rifkin now. “No efforts to show off or prove your bravery.” He looked at Rezwit and then at Zither, who was the most visibly frightened of the leaders. “Remember,” he said to all three leaders now, “you don’t have to prove anything to me or each other. You’re still students. You’re learning to be collectors and scientists, not warriors or hunters.”

“I want you to collect only juveniles and newly-hatched creatures and to gather any eggs you can,” his voice rose so all the students could hear. “Bring me the plants from their nests and environments. Everything must be transportable. If you find anything small enough to gather with your gloves, remember to dart them first and use your nets. Use your stunners as defensive weapons only, and do not fire wantonly on Irignum’s beasts.” The professor’s voice dropped low again as he looked each one of the leaders in the face. “Do you understand me clearly?”

“Yes Doctor Arkru,” they answered gravely, returning to their teams.

The professor watched the students climb into their respective crawlers with their leaders at the helm and drive off into three cardinal directions: north, west, and east. The only zone not covered was south of the ship, which was mostly a great plain, covered by herds of three horns and other browsing herbivores.

As planned, Team One drove west into the forest, Team Two north of the ship, and Team Three headed east into the sector visited the previous day. It was a painful but glorious moment for Doctor Arkru. Their traps, nets, darts, and stunners would have to protect them now. He had entrusted only four of his students with stunners and fully expected them to share their knowledge with their charges. He just hoped his students didn't play with the guns, as children often do. It was critical that they set their traps properly and used their nets and darts well. More than anything else he hoped their weapons had the effect on Irignum's creatures he had been expecting. Looking up to Irignum's sky, he said a prayer that they were cautious while traveling in their crawlers, remembered what he taught them about their life support systems and equipment, and used common sense in the forest today.

From the bridge, Falon and his staff watched the students depart into the unknown. From a different monitor, they also saw the professor plodding finally toward the ramp, his body weighed down with more than mere gravity, as the crawlers rumbled away. Crowded onto the deck with the commander were Orix, Remgen, Imwep, Kogin, Abwur, Zorig, and several other members of the crew. As the teams moved further away, each one disappearing from view, their contact with the students was limited to chatter from their headsets—twelve students all talking at once, the com lights for each student blinking off and on in a maddening din.

"I hope he knows what he's doing." Falon turned to Arkru's chief technician. "Listen to them; those are children, mentally ill-equipped for this task. This is an incredible world, filled with amazing beasts—we all agree on this. But that is a dangerous place, Zorig, especially for immature students. For their sake, I'll be glad when we put Irignum behind us once and for all!"

Zorig nodded forlornly. The commander's words mirrored his own thoughts. When the professor arrived on the bridge, he would put on a 'happy face,' but he had a bad feeling this time. All of his survival instincts and logic and everything Arkru taught him, told him that the student collection teams was a bad idea.

The life support systems that the students wore were big and bulky for several reasons. Perhaps the most important reason they were so cumbersome was because the large canisters fastened on the back of their suits carried a three day supply of enriched oxygen, helium and argon—the blend which the Revekian must breathe. Also vital was the suits' nearly invincible and weighty outer sheath, which included specially fabricated boots and gloves that were not suppose to tear during use. The systems were, of course, both airtight and watertight. A tough inner sheath insulated them and separated their delicate skin from an air-conditioning network powered by special batteries, which accounted for nearly half of the suit's bulkiness and weight. Their suits were so intricately fitted to their fragile bodies they were almost unaware of the air they breathed or the wastes being excreted into the system until they began moving across the ground. As soon as they began to exert themselves outside of the ship, they would begin feeling the heavier gravity of this planet upon their bulky suites, the canisters on their backs, the tubes disposing their bodily wastes, and the many gauges monitoring their vital signs as they plodded along Irignum's bumpy ground.

The most important piece of equipment in the life support system was, of course, the helmet atop the suit. It consisted mainly of plasmodex, the same sturdy material used for the ship's windows and the enclosures built for the ark. The gas mixture was pumped from the canisters on their backs through lines attached to the back of their helmet, while a two-way radio was installed in its metal rim. The radio acted as both a link to the ship and a landline between

other collectors in the field. It was important for the children to remain in constant communications with the ship at all times and pay close attention to the bridge. Although the two-way radios in the children's helmets were actually one communication line shared by them all, the professor assigned each team a separate number, so that the bridge knew from what team a student was reporting in. Lights below the bridge's communication console, which were numbered 1, 2 and 3, would flash to indicate both the collection zone and student team. Unfortunately, unlike the ship, itself, there was no directional homing device built into the life support system's helmet, and the technology allowing the professor or commander to distinguish the team's identity and its zone number would not help them locate team members if they were lost.

A second deficiency in helmet design, almost equally shortsighted, would also be blamed for communication problems in the forest. Afraid that his students would run amuck outside the ship, Doctor Arkru, at Falon's insistence, took the preventative step of deactivating the normal radio controls. As a consequence, unlike the two-way radios used by the ship's crew, the children couldn't change frequencies or turn their receivers volumes up or down. To the irritation of the collectors, not only could the bridge hear them at all times, but they were forced to listen to everything said on the bridge as well as the whining, complaining and idle chatter of students in other teams. Because it was necessary to eavesdrop on the children, there was, in effect, only one radio frequency for both the bridge and the student teams, with no way to isolate one voice or set of voices when the need arose. During the ceaseless racket, all three lights, in all three zones, would blink on and off constantly, making the numbers assigned by Doctor Arkru useless when everyone was talking at once.

A third deficiency, not as apparent as the others, but one that grew serious as problems multiplied in the forest, was the low sensitivity of the two-way radios in the helmets. Unfortunately for the professor and commander, though they perked up their ears to hear, a faint whisper or murmur uttered by one of the children could easily be missed by them, especially if there was static on the radio or if the explorers were out of range. This static, which could be seen as a fourth deficiency in helmet design, was caused by the unstable sealer around the radio's circuitry that would later, when filled with water and sludge, prove to be disastrous when put to the test.

In addition to the problems of the radio's redesign and the difficulties in hearing or, more importantly, not hearing every verbal exchange, there was the attitude of the explorers, themselves, that no technology could overcome. Rifkin, Rezwit, and Vimml, who had gotten away with so much before, would try the professor and commander's patience and prove how difficult it was to maintain strict phone discipline on this world.

The student explorers could never totally adapt to this hostile planet, only rise above it, as Rifkin and Rezwit seemed able to do. The physical, as well as mental, restrictions placed upon them by Irignum seemed unbearable at times. Inside the crawlers carrying them to their destinations, they could occasionally rest inside their suits, but even these periods of leisure would take a physical toll as the vehicles rocked and jolted along the beaten animal paths.

From a distance as it moved across the ground, the Revekian crawler looked very much like a lunar vehicle or amphibious landing craft. The closer it came to the observer, the more its similarities to these types of vehicles would become apparent. In place of wheels, it rolled along on two metal belts similar to a caterpillar tractor or military tank. As all vehicles that moved along on metal plates, it was able to negotiate rough terrain but, as a result of this motion, moved very slowly, with a maximum speed of about twenty-five miles per hour. Its rugged frame,

which, like the Revekians' life support systems, was made of nearly invincible material, was painted green to match the forest, with the vehicle's number stenciled in bold white letters on the hood.

Typical of most land vehicles, it had an accelerator and break pedal in the floorboard and a steering wheel protruding from the dashboard. In addition to these simple controls, there was a special switch for amphibious operation and a lever for the operation of the winch. The seating compartment was built for only a driver and one passenger in the front seat and two passengers in the back, although two additional passengers could be crammed into the compartment if an emergency arose. Most of the available space on the crawler was intended for specimens. There were several environmental containers in each crawler, which, when the air-conditioning systems were activated, pumped in Irignian air for their occupants so the specimens could be transported in their temporary homes directly to the ship.

A winch on the vehicle was available for pulling heavy objects up to the back of the crawler, but on this planet heavy could mean several tons. Instead of doors on the vehicle, ladders had been welded on the belt housing encircling the seating compartment. A canvass top hidden aft of the container hold could be pulled up over the seating compartment and anchored to the windshield frame if it rained, and yet there were no windows surrounding this compartment to protect the collectors from the wind. The vehicle also did not have shocks installed beneath its carriage to soften the jolts and vibrations of the road. Except for the top cover and cushioned seats on which they sat, the Revekian crawler offered the explorers little comfort against natural elements or the bumpiness of the road.

Internally, the vehicle was propelled by a battery-powered engine and was moved along by flexible plates that were able to negotiate all manner of surface irregularities or debris. In spite of the crawler's apparent ruggedness and excellent mobility, however, it had not been designed with Irignum in mind. Its invincibility would account for nothing if it got bogged down in mud or fell into an unseen chasm on this world. The students' life support systems, for that matter, had been tested out on the planet Orm, whose atmosphere and gravity was the same as their own. Their special suits had been worn by the crewmen, pupils, technicians, and professor only once before during a training session on Orm. Although they had tested out very well in this planet's relatively low gravity, this was the first time they would use these particular suits for a prolonged period of time on a world where the gravity was noticeably greater and they could not even breath the air. So far their life support systems had proved to be comfortable when they were sitting in one place, but the suits proved to be cumbersome and awkward as soon as the students and technicians began walking on this hostile world.

On this morning, despite the natural fears of children and the recklessness of youth, there was an amazing period of restraint and maturity exhibited in each collection team. This amazing period of restraint, the ship's officers wagered, would last about an hour—just long enough for many of the students to become tired, cranky and bored with following the rules. Falon believed that the day would not end until disaster had struck the student collectors. He confided this to Orix as they took their positions on the bridge. Doctor Arkru, who was already sitting at his module, was greatly annoyed by their attitude. First Mate Remgen and Chief Engineer Dazl, who stood in back of the commander and navigator, were just waiting for a calamity to befall the children. He could see it in their gloating faces. Several crewmen, it was rumored, had actually made wagers that many of these “whelps” would be eaten by these beasties before the day had ended. Arkru now wondered if Remgen, Dazl, and the other officers had made such wagers,

themselves. They had, he recalled with vexation, all shown great disrespect for his students last night at the feast.

Unfortunately for everyone on the bridge, the only view they would have of the students would be from those cameras beneath and around the ship, which would capture images only within visual range. When they were in the jungle, only the two-way radios from zones 1, 2 and 3 connected the student collectors to the ship. This allowed the listeners' imaginations to soar and made the professor wish he had designed video links into their helmets instead of worrying so much about them dabbling with the controls.

With the marksmen wreath on his helmet, Rifkin was the first leader to drive his team away from the ark on their first official expedition into the western sector of the surrounding forest—the area professor Arkru designated correspondingly as Zone One. The wreath, which Rifkin designed himself from Revekian moss, quickly blew off as a breeze whipped past his helmet, generating laughter from the classmates in back. Though Team One's crawler was only a speck to the cameras as it zoomed toward Zone One, it was, in the tradition of Rifkin, the first to begin the expedition, and everyone on the bridge could not help cheering this warrior on.

Omrik sat next to Rifkin, riding "shotgun," with Rifkin's stunner clutched fearfully in his trembling hands. Yorzl sat in the back seat cowering in Shizwit's embrace. Shizwit, who thought of herself as the Key Master now, was surprisingly calm, a faint smile playing on her face. She had watched with quiet mirth as Rifkin's wreath blew past.

Hoping that his own enthusiasm might prove infectious to his teammates, Rifkin sang an alien song of glory that would have sounded to modern earthlings like the caterwauling of a cat:

Marching gallantly through galaxies,
defying the scientists' call.
With the purpose of changing history,
the Old One's conquered all.

Duty became recreation
in that warlike, carefree age.
The sport of annihilation
was played on a cosmic stage.

As the vehicle rolled down a beaten animal path into the forest, Yorzl informed the happy adventurer, as if he was reciting it to the classroom, "Singing songs over the radio is forbidden." Rifkin, however, was just getting started. He had memorized many verses:

Death to Furzi, Rimmi and Modrit
for testing Revekian clout.
Because these planets refused to quit,
the Old Ones wiped them out.

Though out of sight, Rifkin's song, in addition to plaguing his classmates, was heard on the bridge. Falon looked around at the others that moment with an "I told you so" look on his face yet said nothing. It was Shizwit, not the commander or professor, who reminded Rifkin that

the Old Ones were exiled by the good doctors for their warlike behavior. Omrik, however, said nothing as he sat holding the gun.

“Fear not my timid Omrik and fearful Yorzl!” Rifkin cried good-naturedly as the crawler hurled into the shadows of the trees. “Take heart, Oh Keeper of the Keys!”

He would, he promised condescendingly, make them collectors just like himself. Feeling inadequate to hold Rifkin’s stunner (especially since it was forbidden by the professor), Omrik looked around the darkening forest with trepidation. Yorzl was utterly terrified, while Shizwit was annoyed by Rifkin’s arrogant behavior. She now thought of herself as a watchdog for Rifkin’s reckless ways. When Doctor Arkru had made her Keeper of the Keys, she had come to realize that, as a key master, she was really a keeper of scientific tradition.

“This isn’t a game,” she declared, wagging a gloved finger at the head grinning at her in the rearview mirror. “You’re driving recklessly! Pay attention to the road! This isn’t a desert path on Beskol, Raethia, or Orm!”

The student collectors could now hear laughter from the bridge. Perversely it seemed to Arkru, Falon and his staff were amused. Shizwit had to comfort Yorzl constantly as he cringed at the sounds of the jungle and each snap of dried branches below the metal plates of Crawler One as it rumbled down the path. Already it seemed to them that Rifkin was out of control. During this introduction to collection in Irignum’s forests, it seemed to them that they were all in the clutches of a deranged mischief-maker bent on driving them into the very maws of destruction. Very soon, however, this same lunatic was pulling off the path into a small clearing and, very clearheadedly, barking orders to them to begin preparing the trap.

“Grab the poles students,” he directed haughtily. “Place them in a square on the beaten path as the professor said. Hurry! Make haste! We want to get the jump on the others and take the most specimens back to the ship.”

The trap was set more sloppily than the prototype the professor had fussed over so much by the ship. The ground was soft here in the jungle clearing, while the earth in the meadow had been hard and difficult to dig. The poles could more easily be tapped into the soil with the flat side of the shovel. After eyeballing the layout of the trap and hastily calibrating each pole, Rifkin selected a bush near the beaten path, as Omrik ran back to the crawler and climbed back inside. Yorzl, in Shizwit’s protective embrace again, sat beside the vehicle, listening for the rustle of advancing beasts. When their quarry didn’t appear soon and the jungle seemed to leave them alone, Rifkin ordered his teammates to begin collecting small animals from the bushes and around the clearing. The shadowy, featureless green surrounding them didn’t inspire confidence. Yorzl began whimpering. Shizwit, who was offended by Rifkin’s bossiness, flatly refused. Omrik was then insulted by Rifkin for failing to obey the team leader’s commands. Rifkin warned Omrik that he would tell everyone he was a coward, but Omrik, unlike Zither, didn’t care. When Rifkin’s insults failed to prod him over to the bushes, he played upon his teammate’s honor as a representative of scientific tradition, which made Omrik laugh hysterically at such a thought.

At this point, to the leader’s discomfort, Shizwit stepped forward for the task. As Rifkin and his volunteer went about ferreting out little creatures crawling or slithering on the ground and bushes nearby, Omrik was shamed finally into joining the effort. Like Yorzl, he had a begrudging admiration for Rifkin’s spirit and energy if not his reckless élan. Even the normally shy Shizwit, Rifkin noted begrudgingly, was stirred to bravery by his mood.

Omrik and Yorzl managed to capture a strange segmented creatures crawling near their vehicle and net a snake, several lizards, and one of those furry creatures that they had all seen

peering furtively from the forest's edge. As Rifkin and Shizwit cornered a lemur-like mammal in a shrub, Omrik and Yorzl squeamishly placed the netted bugs they had caught into a container with the lizards, while the furry creature skittered up a nearby tree. Omrik had never seen such carnivorous creatures on other planets and assumed that the bug was too ugly and hard-shelled to eat, but one of the lizards netted by Yorzl immediately ate one of the segmented creatures crawling on the side of the container, so Omrik hastily put the remaining three bugs in a separate box. Meanwhile, the small snake was set upon by the other lizard, and he had to place it in yet another box. Yorzl squealed in terror as the largest of the two lizards escaped. The reptiles skirted across his shoulder and gas canisters and jumped to safety onto the ground below until being snatched up in Omrik's gloves. Rifkin gently chided them both for their stupidity as he and Shizwit grappled with the mammal in the bush.

It appeared to Rifkin and those listening to Team One that Shizwit had come out of her shell. She was acting almost as fearless as Rifkin now that she was caught up in the chase. In spite of Rifkin's overbearing behavior, Omrik was actually enjoying himself, while Yorzl, after his experiences, wanted to go back to the ship.

Rifkin and his team could hear the voices of their comrades over their airways as Team Two and Team Three navigated into the northern and eastern zones. The bridge had likewise heard everything Rifkin had been saying to his team. According to the rules, students were not suppose to talk needlessly over the radios and tie up potential communications with the professor, commander, and the bridge. They could listen in to each other over their radios but, unless an emergency arose or the professor called to check on his teams, they were not supposed to chatter idly or sing songs as Rifkin was doing today.

"I expect you to admonish him," Falon said to Arkru with his microphone momentarily turned off.

"Team members in Zone One, come in," Arkru's crackly voice now startled Team One members half out of their wits.

"Rifkin here."

"Omrik here."

"Shizwit here."

"Yorzl here."

"Yorzl, you sound as if you've been crying again," Arkru observed with concern.

"A big old snake crawled on me," he complained with a shudder.

"Rifkin, are you watching Yorzl as you promised?" snapped Arkru, a note of wariness in his voice.

"Yorzl's doing just fine," Rifkin assured the professor pertly.

"Have you set your trap in the correct spot?" Arkru asked him sternly.

"Off a beaten path, in a clearing as you ordered," Rifkin responded, rolling his eyes.

Falon nudged the professor politely when he hesitated. Zorig, who was standing behind Arkru, whispered something into his ear.

"Oh yes, Rifkin," Arkru said, clearing his throat, "you stop carrying on over your radio. The commander and his officers are listening to everything you say."

"Very well Doctor Arkru," replied Rifkin, shaking his head in disbelief, "I was just trying to pump them up."

The professor had wanted to sound stern for Falon and Orix's benefit, but he felt great empathy for his students now. Rifkin was pushing his team too hard. That, not the normally cocky show-off heard on Beskol and Orm, should concern the bridge most. He should have

taken him to task for badgering Omrik the way he did. He could hear their grunts and groans over the radios as they hustled back and forth at Rifkin's command.

Shizwit, to Arkru's satisfaction, however, seemed to be holding her own. Though it had no effect on his behavior, she had put Rifkin in his place more than once during the hour. Omrik was trying very hard to get into the spirit too as he helped Shizwit and Rifkin fill the containers with what they had caught, but little Yorzl continued to whine and complain as the commander predicted, taking this opportunity to call out to the professor, as if his voice would protect him from afar.

"I'm so very hungry!" he exclaimed. "I'm so very tired!"

Shizwit tapped out a message on her wrist communicator: Slow down Rifkin; Yorzl, Omrik, and I need a rest!

More quietly this time, Rifkin continued to monitor the trap for any prize specimens, his main goal to outdo, outshine, and out collect everyone else. At Shizwit's insistence, though, he allowed his team to take a short break. All four sat down inside the crawler waiting for a beast to fall into their trap.

As he sat at the bridge beside the scowling Falon and Navigator Orix, Arkru now turned his attention to his other two teams.

"Team Two, come in," he called to Zither now.

Zither had just found a meager clearing for his team in Zone Two. In contrast to Vimml, he responded less energetically than the Team Leader One.

"Zither here."

"Vimml here."

"Illiakim here."

"Zeppa here."

"Zither, you don't sound so sure," the professor seemed worried. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes sir," Zither replied unconvincingly, "everything's fine!"

As Zither surveyed the surrounding meadow, he was again gripped with terror. Only the abiding presence of his alter ego Vimml kept his mind straight.

"This meadow's too small," Vimml sounded off for the professor's benefit. "We should've picked a bigger clearing!"

"I want to go home," Zeppa wailed in the background.

"Zither, I think Zeppa and Yorzl may be too young for this sort of thing," Arkru's voice came calmly into their helmets now. "How are you and Illiakim getting along?"

"Illiakim is acting like a dakka," Vimml offered, turning to her and sticking out his tongue.

"Vimml, remember what I told you," the professor spoke exclusively to him now. "You're an important key member now."

A surge of excitement shot through Vimml as he recalled Arkru asking him to lend the older student his enthusiasm and expertise. It's true, he thought slyly. Zither can't possibly succeed without me! When the professor sees how incompetent he is, he'll put *me* in charge of our team!

As Team Two climbed out of their crawler, Zither could hear the loud hoot of a leviathan climbing out of the water, and he knew that they were not far from a river or lake—places, they were told by the professor, were most of the planet's denizens lurked. Vimml had already

spotted an excellent place to set the trap on and hopped out excitedly with two of the poles already in his hands.

“Be careful with those!” Zither scolded. “When they touch water, they explode!”

“Zither, what’s going on in Zone Two?” the professor blared into their helmets.

Rifkin had been annoyed by the professor’s intrusiveness, but Zither welcomed it as his link to the safety of the ship.

“Nothing sir,” he answered cheerily to his mentor. “Vimml found us a good place to set our traps. We’re next to a body of water of some sort.”

“You take charge Zither, not Vimml!” barked Arkru, a suspicious edge in his voice. “Be careful where you set the trap. Stay away from the water until I have a chance to check it out. Just get me small creatures this time. Juveniles, small enough for our containers, hatchlings and little creatures you can grab up with your gloves.” “Vimml,” he interrupted himself to say, “no heroics out there. You’re not romping on Beskol with Rifkin and Rezwit. You work with Zither like we planned!”

“Yes professor,” Vimml said, a devilish gleam in his eye.

The professor now switched to Zone Three. At that very moment, Rezwit and Alafa were screaming at each about something Grummel had just done. It seemed as though Rezwit’s perfect team was being marred at last by Grummel’s erratic behavior and the awful likelihood that they were lost. Grummel, who had never been certified to use a stunner, had begged Rezwit against Alafa’s wishes to let him just hold the gun so he could get the feel of it in his hand. Letting Grummel hold his gun was, the professor thought with disgust, a profoundly stupid move on Rezwit’s part. After firing over the head of Alafa in the back seat at a juvenile duckbill emerging from a thicket, the gun was immediately confiscated by Alafa even though no damage had been done. It was at this point that the conversation was picked up on the bridge.

“Give it back to me you dakka!” Grummel shrieked. “I thought it was attacking us. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that you fired that over my head!” She wrung her fist in Grummel’s face. “You could’ve melted my helmet and ruined the integrity of my suit!”

“Well, I scared it away, didn’t I?” He turned to Rezwit for support. “What if it had been a leaper? It might’ve attacked us or caused Rezwit to have a wreck!”

“Team Three!” Doctor Arkru boomed into their helmets now. “Sound off students and tell me what’s happening in Zone Three!”

“Grummel here.”

“Lumnal here.”

“Alafa here.”

“Grummel thought we were being attacked,” Rezwit explained lamely, climbing out the vehicle and placing his gun back into his belt.

“Some leader he is,” Alafa complained directly to the professor, hopping out of the back seat. “First he lets Grummel have his gun and then he gets us lost!”

“Lost?” Arkru cried in disbelief.

“Well, not exactly,” Rezwit tried to explain, “There was a fork in the path. We just don’t know where we are.”

“He’s not lost,” Orix murmured sarcastically to Falon on the bridge, “he just doesn’t know where he is, as if somehow that’s not the same thing!”

“Ask me if I’m surprised,” Falon replied in utter disgust.

“Rezwit, is this true?” Arkru sputtered into the microphone now. “You just entered the forest. Are you really lost?”

“Well...yes...sort of,” Rezwit continued to equivocate.

“Great Izmir,” Arkru gave a wounded cry, “that can’t be! We were just in those woods yesterday, Rezwit! Don’t you remember that nice, big meadow we drove up to? That would have been a perfect place to begin collecting. How can you possibly be lost?”

“From the edge of the forest,” Rezwit murmured into his transmitter, “it all looks the same to me: green on green.... One beaten path looks like another.... All we need is one little clearing to set our trap, but all I can see are trees and more trees.”

“This is the worst scenario for an explorer,” Falon muttered angrily for Arkru’s benefit. “It was bad enough he forgot to take the right path, but he lost his bearings. I hope he had enough sense to mark his trail!”

“Rezwit,” the professor picked up the cue, “please tell me you marked your trail.”

A long silence and intake of breath was answer enough. By now, several crewmen had gathered to overhear the disaster unfolding in Zone Three. Wagers were made at this time that Team Three would wind up providing dinner for the beasts.

“Calm down professor and take a deep breath,” Zorig tried offering comfort as he sat down beside Arkru on the bridge.

“Rezwit,” he called over the professor’s microphone, “are you certain you’re lost or are you merely disoriented? Follow the arm of the fork to its source then head west: straight down the beaten path.”

“He’s not lost,” Alafa cut in disparagingly. “He just hasn’t found an open enough space to put the trap!”

“If he’s not lost,” snorted Remgen, “why isn’t he heading west and getting out of there?”

“Rezwit, Remgen’s right. You’re being silly. Turn around and come back exactly the way you came,” the chief technician ordered gently. “When you reach the edge of Zone Three, you’ll see the ship again. Search the forest line and find another path, which might lead to a clearing. Don’t keep driving down the same trail!”

“That is good advice Zorig,” the professor uttered to the chief technician, “but what if he *is* lost and can’t find his way out?”

“Then I’ll send crewmen in to get them out,” vowed Falon, a determined look on his face.

Upon hearing this threat, Rezwit began turning the crawler around on the path. A solid featureless jungle surrounded them on both sides. After bumping a tree, crunching over a rotting log and avoiding a mud puddle that might prove problematical for the tracks, Rezwit found himself going in the right direction this time: *out*. He had decided never to speak to Alafa again after the way she behaved. He longed for those carefree days when he, Rifkin, Vimml, and Grummel romped happy-go-luckily over the deserts and mountains of Raethia, Beskol, and Orm. Irignum had too many trees, too many unfamiliar sounds, and too many creatures that wanted to make them their next meal.

By now Rifkin had gently coaxed, after threatening and shaming his teammates, into filling most of the containers with an assortment of lizards, snakes, bugs and those wondrous furry creatures the professor had marveled at before. Rifkin was quite proud of the multicolored lemur-like creature he and Shizwit had netted in the bush. For the benefit of the commander and professor, he could be heard complimenting his teammates’ zeal. By now, all of Commander

Falon's staff, including the ship's medic, Doctor Eglin, had gathered on the bridge. With several excellent samples in the miniature life support containers, Rifkin—always the showman—took the opportunity to instruct his team members on the proper use of the equipment provided for collection.

"Students," he called out coolly, "carefully take note of the camouflaged mesh in the crawler's hold. Unlike our traps, which take such a long time to prepare, our nets require only one or two collectors to throw them over a beast. Our darts can be thrown at netted creatures too dangerous to transport to a container in a conscious state."

"Rifkin," Arkru blared into their helmets, "be careful. Don't let them touch those darts!"

"Why not?" asked the First Mate.

"Because," he huffed, as if out of breath, "we're not on Beskol or Orm. Rifkin's teammates aren't trained."

"Are they poisonous?" Falon cut in politely.

"Not really—" the professor started to explain.

"Surely," interrupted Dazl, "they must pack a wallop to bring down one of those beasts."

"If that's so," Orix took his turn, "this batch might be harmful to the students. What sort of chemical did you use? Can it be lethal to children using them for target practice on the trees?"

"They're drugged," the professor snapped irritably, "just like the others, only more powerful. That's the purpose of darts. My students won't throw them needlessly. Only my team leaders need throw the darts." "Are you listening Rifkin and Vimml?" he added as Rifkin stood that very moment fondling one of them in his hand.

"Yes Doctor Arkru!" Rifkin replied succinctly, dropping it back in its case.

"The question is, professor," Eglin sounded alarmed, "are they dangerous?"

"Not to the beasts," he tried being calm. "To a small child, like Yorzl, perhaps, but it's an anesthetic, not, strictly speaking, a poison."

Rifkin listened with amusement as the officers in the bridge broke into heated discussion about the professor's unfortunate choice of words.

"Not strictly speaking?" Second Mate Imwep chortled close by. "That's a bit equivocal, isn't professor? A powerful sedative, synthesized from the nectar of the dipper plant can, with the right dose, knock out a sand bug and probably one of those beasts."

"Well, isn't that the point?" snorted Remgen. "*They have to be powerful.* I see nothing wrong with that. The students must be careful, but Rifkin should teach those whelps how to handle darts."

"Well, I guess so," grumbled Falon, "if they're careful."

"After all commander," Dazl offered thoughtfully, "you allowed the professor to train them to use the new stunner. What's worse?"

"All right," the commander grunted, "I get the point."

"Humph," quipped Imwep. "That's twice I've heard that phrase,"

"Ho-ho!" Third Mate Kogin laughed in the background "You get it, Imwep? Point and dart. Remgen and the commander made a pun!"

Though Orix and Eglin muttered dissent, the issue of darts was dropped on the bridge.

"Now that we settled this," Arkru's voice rose wearily, "students—listen up, you especially Rifkin: the darts are important for collecting specimens, but they require training. Like the stunners, I'd prefer that the youngsters don't touch them *at all*. They're not toys! Remember what I told you on Orm. Pick them up gingerly, Rifkin, Rezwit, and Zither, as you would a play darts on Revekia and toss them carefully at your target; this goes for the other older

students when trained in the proper use, but only if given permission. They should only be used when netting or capturing beasts in traps.”

Envisioning Rifkin and Vimml using them for target practice on a nearby tree, Arkru sat there staring into space. Murmurs of approval from the commander and his officers (but not his chief technician) were followed by dead silence from the bridge as they listened to the team leader explain, hopefully only to Shizwit and Omrik, the proper method of tossing darts at beasts. After showing them how to hold a dart and pretending to toss it at an imaginary target, Rift tossed it back into its container and demonstrated how to use the net. Members of the bridge sighed with relief. Darts were easy, Rifkin explained to his teammates—no different than the game of darts. They were just more dangerous, he added for the bridge’s benefit. Netting, on the other hand, wasn’t dangerous, but required practice. It was very similar to the netting used by fishermen on Modrit before the Old Ones came along. Rifkin had seen how clumsy nets and darts could be. He wouldn’t waste his time on them if he could rely on their traps and, if need be, blast the beasts. For the benefit of the bridge, though, he taught his team members the age-old method of net casting on a nearby bush, quickly gathering it up afterwards and tossing it sloppily into the hold.

During another short rest period, in which he could hear the voices of other teams in the field but nothing from the bridge, Rifkin began teaching his teammates, including eight year old Yorzl, how to master the stunner. Once again, using her wrist communicator, Shizwit reminded him that the professor had forbidden youngsters to shoot, especially so close to the trees. Rifkin, however, promised on his own communicator to make them all excellent marksmen if they would keep this to themselves.

“Now don’t talk,” he whispered this time as he took out his gun. “Those folks on the bridge are really cagey. The professor might hear. Just do as I gesture. Watch my moves. With the setting on low, they’ll barely hear. They’ll think its more radio static.” “Now, pay attention,” he murmured, holding up his gun.

As Rifkin pointed to the three levels of intensity on the stunner, a pair of juvenile leapers were suddenly separated from their pack and began running inexplicably their way. Rifkin now showed his teammates how to insert the key into the stunner handle, and without actually firing yet, showed them the two handed “Old One” method of aiming and firing the gun. Omrik was allowed to fire a few shots at a limb across the meadow, which he did in a lackluster, mediocre way. Shizwit, who much more eager to learn, took steady aim, and did much better. When it was Yorzl’s turn, the tired and cranky youngster bristled under Rifkin’s efforts to make him hold the gun correctly and began whimpering aloud. Though young, small, and inexperienced, the juvenile leapers heard what they thought were potential quarry as they approached the clearing. Furtively, they peeked through the thicket, not sure, after hearing those crackling sounds, whether or not they should proceed. Now, after hearing Yorzl’s whimpering, they were encouraged. Such meek cries could only come from easy prey.

“Team One, Yorzl, sound off!” the professor’s voice blared.

“Yorzl’s all right sir,” Rifkin bristled, taking the gun and putting it back into this belt. “He’s just tired. I think he needs a nap.”

“You take care of him,” the professor instructed, a tired edge to his voice. “Don’t overdo it Rifkin. Just fill your hold, as quickly as you can, and come home.”

“Yes, of course, professor,” Rifkin said, heaving a sigh of relief. That was close, he tapped out on his wrist communicator to Yorzl. Promise me you’ll keep your mouth shut about this.

I promise, Yorzl communicated, sticking out his lip.

But Rifkin was not satisfied with their hoard of specimens. The last time he looked over at the trap, it was empty. It was obvious that their proximity was frightening potential specimens away. Now, he reflected with disgust, they were back inside the crawler, too cowardly to venture very far from the vehicle and lie in wait in the bushes, and they were still in plain sight of the trap.

Shizwit, he tapped the words out on his wrist, we should hide unseen in the bushes, not sit out in the open and frighten potential specimens away. Shizwit looked at his message but said nothing. Omrik and Yorzl refused to even look. At this point, he wanted to talk them into lying low for a while, but he could not force them into hiding in the bushes with him without sounding harsh to the bridge. He was growing impatient with them now. Given his gutless team, it seemed as if the prospects of a larger animal taking a detour into their trap and not spotting them first were bleak. Time was running out.

Suddenly, as he tried rousing his teammates from the inside of the crawler, the bushes shook and the two juvenile leapers, who had been stalking them, went on the attack. The first leaper stumbled immediately into the trap. The other leaper managed to dodge the force field that had been set in motion and run passed it to the other side.

Rifkin was so excited he felt dizzy and had to brace himself against the crawler so he could regain his breath. The commotion that followed terrified Omrik and Yorzl, who had been dozing inside the vehicle when they heard Rifkin's yell. Shizwit, who was the first to reach the trap, stood there calmly with a small green snake she had been playing with in her gloves. Rifkin had to do a rough calculation as to the creature's body size. All he could think of as he searched the remaining containers for just the right one was, *It's about four epsols long. It has to be four epsols long!* (The Revekian estimate in feet). Shizwit dropped the snake and ran over to the crawler to help. The young dinosaur had been instantly trapped in the enclosure. The trap had worked again! The next thing that Rifkin had to do was drug the brute with darts, so they could put it into the container.

Forgetting his good manners entirely, Rifkin screamed at Omrik and Yorzl as they cowered in their seats "Get out here—both of you! We need your help!"

"That's a leaper, is it not?" Omrik asked in a quivering voice.

"It's only a baby," Rifkin snapped, motioning for them to come out. "I need your help Omrik. You too Yorzl. We have to knock this fellow out, drag him to a container and drop him in."

"Rifkin, what's going on out there?" The professor's voice broke through again.

"We bagged us a leaper!" Rifkin cried. "He's just small enough to fit into a container."

"He's green, ugly, and about four epsols long," Shizwit said jubilantly, slowly approaching the trap.

"You be careful Shizwit," Arkru's voice still sounded strained. "Rifkin," he barked, "how do you know its a leaper? Could it be one of those spike-toes we saw from the rock?"

"No," Rifkin said with glee, "he's got the same stripes on his back as the big ones. Someday on some parallel world he's going to be a ruler just like he is here!"

"All right boy," the professor replied sternly, "but you pay the most attention to your teammates. No heroics out there!"

"Bagged himself a beast!" Remgen crowed.

The bridge broke into applause. At that very moment, inexplicably muffled in Zone Three, pandemonium was about to break out. Omrik, Shizwit, Yorzl, and Rifkin stood there a

moment more after Arkru signed off staring at their prize. For a brief moment they were united by their mutual awe. Nothing in all their adventures had equaled this moment.

“What’s the matter with Doctor Arkru?” Omrik whispered to Rifkin as they came close to the trap.

“Rezwit was lost earlier,” noted Shizwit. “You think they found their way?”

“I dunno,” Rifkin answered indifferently, “I’m too busy to pay attention to the bridge. If something’s wrong, I’m sure he’ll let us know.”

Reaching into the case of darts, he pulled out a handful of the missiles, each less than an epsol in length. Handing Omrik, Shizwit and Yorzl one of the darts, he advised them in a whisper to throw the darts only at the creatures legs, stomach or tail. This was great fun for everyone. After all the concern on the bridge, the professor would have been shocked if he had seen how careless the missiles were thrown. Though expressly forbidden to let youngsters handle darts, Rifkin, who never cared much for rules, would begin their lessons now. His own boundless energy had fired their imaginations. Shizwit’s growing enthusiasm, like Rifkin’s energy, was infectious for Omrik and Yorzl. After tossing all their darts over the force field perimeter at the beast, the creature began to show visible signs of sluggishness and began to slow down, until it was lying unconscious inside the trap.

Quickly now, before it awakened and bit into their life support systems, Rifkin pressed the controller to disable the trap. The foursome then dragged the juvenile leaper to the container Rifkin had picked out, lifted it up and dropped it clumsily inside. Rifkin then shut and fastened the lid and hooked the container up to the oxygen supply of the crawler. The hum of the vehicle’s air-conditioner followed as Rifkin flipped on the switch. Everyone shuddered at the thought of what they had just caught. There was no question what team had caught the most specimens. Team One had only been in the jungle an hour or so and had filled their crawler’s hold to the brim.

“What we do now Rifkin?” Shizwit asked after glancing at her watch. “You were in such a big hurry we’ve got time to kill.”

“Oh dear, the professor gave us three hours,” Omrik looked at his own watch, feigning alarm. “We’ve got two remaining hours and no more room for specimens; we might as well go back to the ship.”

“Well,” Rifkin smiled with self-satisfaction, “the professor said he wants juveniles and hatchlings. We got us only one juvenile so far, but look how many other animals we’ve found.”

“The professor won’t believe his eyes when he sees all the furry creatures we captured,” Shizwit agreed ardently. “This is going to be hard to beat!”

“Rifkin,” the professor’s voice blurted in once more, “are you seriously saying you’re containers are full? What was the infernal hurry boy? Your team must be exhausted. Why can’t you ever take things easy?”

“Well, we could target practice awhile,” Rifkin suggested, motioning for Yorzl to be silent.

“Humph!... Are you in a large enough clearing?” the professor asked, after a pause, as if he had just went into conference with Falon and Zorig about something on the bridge.

“All right. They’d better be careful!” the commander growled.

Also heard in on the airwaves were yells and whoops from members of Team Three.

“Ah that’s good news,” Arkru suddenly cried. “We can hear them now. Rezwit’s team is finding its way out of Zone Three!”

“What’s he talking about?” Rifkin muttered to himself. “Shizwit’s right.... Rezwit got them lost; now he’s finding his way back—ho-ho, probably without specimens.... And I haven’t heard from Zither for awhile...” “We gottem *all* beat,” he whispered excitedly to Shizwit, “and we got two hours to kill!”

“Kill? There’s that word again. No, please, I don’t like that idea,” Omrik sputtered, shaking his head, “let’s not push our luck!... I-I think we should go back to the ship. I don’t want to practice shooting the gun!”

“Don’t worry Omrik,” Rifkin reassured him, handing him the stunner, “we won’t let anything eat you up. We’ve got to get you and Shizwit qualified to use the gun.”

“Can I shoot it first?” Yorzl whispered faintly.

“No,” Rifkin murmured, shaking his head, “you went cosmic on me. Next time you might shoot off someone’s head.”

“I’ll tell the professor you let me shoot the gun,” Yorzl threatened in a petulant whisper. “Shizwit doesn’t like you, and she’ll back me up!”

It struck Rifkin as humorous that Yorzl was threatening to tell the professor about the very thing he wanted Rifkin to do for him now: teach him to fire the stunner. Holding his finger up to his helmet in a shushing motion he took the gun away from Omrik and handed it to Yorzl. Everyone backed away as the youngster held it in his small glove expertly this time and aimed at the target limb. A trio of spike-toes appeared suddenly on the scene, as if on cue, hissing and dancing around as if they had just found new prey.

“Great Father of the Universe!” Omrik shrieked.

Yorzl opened fire on the three, and though he missed by a wide mark, the crackle of the gun appeared to frighten the trio away. Yorzl was so excited he whooped with joy. Fortunately for Rifkin, the professor was occupied in an argument with Falon over what was going wrong today. A constant barrage of comments, expletives and exhortations, in fact, streamed from the bridge. But Rifkin managed to tune this “static” out. He was impressed with the effect Yorzl had on the spike-toes, although it did not prove that the gun could do real damage to a large or dangerous beast. He had kept the gun on low frequency while Yorzl fired. Experimentally, he would set the frequency a notch higher for Omrik or Shizwit, a fact he did not share with the others, a wonderful feeling of invincibility filling his head.

“All right Yorzl,” he murmured close to the youngster’s helmet, “you got your chance. Let’s give Omrik and Shizwit some more practice so they can be certified to shoot the stunner. Next time we go collecting, we’ll have three guns!”

“I want one too,” Yorzl whimpered, his head dropping to his chest.

While Team One practiced shooting the stunner at various limbs, scattering untold numbers of creatures from their nests, Zither’s team continued to play by the rules. Zither had promised Vimml and Illiakim that he would give them a practice session so they could become certified too. But they would have to find a long meadow to avoid killing alien species in the background during the firing session, an opportunity that seemed bleak in Zone Two. Because of the apparent lake or river not faraway, the jungle was particularly dense in the northern part of the forest. They were lucky, Zither informed them, to find even a small clearing here. Vimml began to complain ceaselessly, his true character showing when he didn’t get his way.

For the time being, Zither was having trouble just filling his quota of specimens to bring back to the ship. It was his goal to fill the hold as much as he could before heading back, but

unlike Rifkin he had no delusions of grandeur. So far, due to what Vimml felt was his own hesitant approach to collecting, they had filled only one container with a small large-eyed furry creature and the plant stuff that would be used for its nest. Not only did Vimml complain about how empty their hold was, but he felt that they could at least get some target practice on the way. He suggested this in whispers, so Arkru wouldn't overhear. It didn't help relations between them when Zither reminded him aloud—for the professor's benefit—that Doctor Arkru had forbidden them to shoot against the trees. Vimml, like Rifkin and Rezwit, followed the rules only when the professor was watching.

"Out of sight, out of mind," he whispered heatedly now, "we could sneak a few potshots here and there. Who will be the wiser?"

"I will be the wiser," Zither informed him, loud enough again for the professor to hear.

"Zither, what's Vimml up to?" Zorig asked this time.

"He wants to play with the stunner," Illiakim tattled, sticking out her tongue.

"You bitch! You stupid dakka!" Vimml cried, throwing a handful of moss at her helmet.

"Zither, are you losing control out there?" the professor's voice broke in again.

"No sir," Zither bristled, "I thought it was going along quite well."

Suddenly, one more of the professor's fears, became apparent as he sat stewing at the bridge. After checking in with Team One, he was left with the unsettling feeling that Rifkin was up to his old tricks again. Rezwit, whom he had trusted the most, had managed to get lost and, though it seemed most likely he would take them safely out of the forest, it appeared it would be empty-handed. It had been poor judgment to place Alafa on his team. Now Zither was showing signs of poor leadership. There was indecisiveness and reluctance in his voice. He should never have put Vimml on his team!

Rising up suddenly and taking Zorig aside so that Falon, Orix, and the others wouldn't overhear, the professor was beside himself with worry.

"You see what's happening?" he confided to Zorig. "Rezwit, who's been quarreling constantly with Alafa as I feared, managed to get lost. Rifkin, who's in competition with Zither, is running amuck. Now Zither, my most responsible student, is being driven crazy by that quarrelsome little child!"

"Personally sir," Zorig spoke frankly, "I think you should keep Rifkin and Vimml permanently on the ship. Rezwit would have been all right if we hadn't put Alafa on his team."

"When they get back, I'm going to switch them all around," Arkru vowed querulously. "I'll put all the rascals in one team so I can keep tabs on them. I'll keep the ones who behave themselves on one team, and make those blasted children stay on the ship!"

"That's very good professor," Zorig drawled with a shrug, "I just hope it's not too late!"

"What do you mean *too late*?" Arkru, who was shuffling forlornly back to the bridge, pivoted abruptly now.

"I mean sir that this morning's expeditions are a long way from being over," the technician explained more gently. "Unless you order them to return soon, there's no telling what our students might do!"

Orix gave the commander a wry smile. Shaking his head, Falon sat there listening to the navigator and Eglin's concerns, as the other officers sat listening to Zone One, Two, and Three. After a brief lull, there was more commotion over the airways. Falon motioned excitedly for Arkru to listen in. The professor and Zorig could hear Alafa berating Rezwit as he fled the forest. This caused a sigh of relief from the professor and his chief technician. Judging by the activity in Zone One, Rifkin, Team One's leader, was flagrantly defying his orders and allowing

his team to target practice in the forest. The crackling noise, which Rifkin hoped wouldn't be noticed, was unmistakable. This produced several I-told-you-so looks from the officers on the bridge, as Arkru and Zorig exchanged troubled expressions, and yet the professor could detect a feeling of camaraderie in Team One—the only team, in fact, that was making progress and showing the proper spirit.

For a few moments, the professor tried overlooking that distinct crackle of stunners from Zone One, hoping that Rifkin had the good sense to fire in a long clearing and wasn't allowing Yorzl to shoot the gun. Though the most unsettling incident developing this morning had been Team Three getting lost, it also appeared as if Rezwit was backtracking as Zorig had suggested. Then a sudden argument in Zone Two between Zither and Vimml alarmed everyone listening in.

“Give me back my stunner!” Zither shouted at Vimml now.

“No, you stingy bastard,” cried Vimml, “I need practice! It's not fair that you're the only one certified to use the gun!”

“Vimml, you little moron,” Arkru screamed from the bridge, “hand it over to your team leader at once. I want you all to head back to ship *now!*”

“This is not fair!” Vimml wailed. “I'm better than stupid old Zither. He's too much of a dakka to lead a collection team!”

“Vimml, you give Zither back his stunner,” Falon tried his hand. “So help me, I'll have you thrown in the brig permanently if you don't obey!”

Suddenly there was the unmistakable crackling of a stunner in Zone Two. Everyone, including the ship's officers, groaned loudly after hearing this sound.

“Bridge this is Rifkin,” Team Leader One bellowed, “what's happening to Zither's team?”

“We're heading back to the ship now,” Rezwit's voice was also heard. “... What's wrong in Zone Two?”

Vimml had just opened fire on a spike-toe that leaped out of a bush. The creature fled immediately. Zither didn't know whether to thank Vimml now or throttle his helmet with the butt of his gun. Not knowing what had happened in this sector, the commander, his officers, the professor, and Zorig remained silent on the bridge. Zither was smoldering with pent-up rage. Vimml had shown his true character again. Without saying a word, he grabbed the gun out of Vimml's trembling hand. Illiakim began pounding Vimml angrily with her fists and Zeppa wept softly to herself. For the first time in over an hour there was silence on Zones One, Two and Three.

A familiar trumpeting and chirping was heard faintly by Team Two: the sound of spike-toes attacking nearby prey. Then the second light began flashing once more as voices sounded in Zone Two.

“What in Cosmic Creation is that?” Zither asked, holding his stunner shakily in his hand.

As if nothing at all had happened, Vimml prodded him excitedly. “What are you waiting for Zither? Let's go find out what it is. Come on, it's not far. I bet it's one of those horny-headed things we saw from the rock.

“M-m-maybe it's a leaper!” Zeppa began to cry.

It was at this point in Zone One that Shizwit had taken another turn, herself, in firing the stunner. Since Rifkin had, when she wasn't looking, playfully raised the setting to the third and highest frequency, she blew a small limb completely off a tree. Arkru was greatly relieved that

Rezwit had turned the crawler around and that Vimml had not shot Zither dead. The loud crackle in Zone One, he decided, must be radio static; he could not believe Rifkin would place the frequency on “kill frequency” for target practice. Even Rifkin had his limits, the professor wanted to believe.

As Arkru, Falon, Orix, and Remgen shouted advice to Team Two, Zither managed to ignore them entirely and allow the megalomaniac young Vimml to lead the way. In truth, the creature they discovered was much better than a leaper or three-horn. There, close to a body of water, a place the professor had told them to avoid, sat what would someday be called an alamosaurus, one of the last giant sauropods to walk the earth. But this long-neck was just a baby, and what’s more there were three spike-toes trying to make it their next meal.

“Go ahead, shoot those monsters before they kill him!” Vimml screamed.

Without hesitation this time, Zither set the frequency on three and let the trio have it full force. Once again, the familiar crackling sound and the strange smell seemed to be enough to frighten away the predators. The anger that Zither felt toward Vimml was mentally shelved as the foursome followed the professor’s instructions on handling juveniles and began the difficult but splendid task of netting the baby long-neck, then, while it thrashed inside the net, stuck several dozen darts into its thick hide.

After comparing Team Two’s stunner fire with the same crackling he heard in Zone One, the professor slowly reached the conclusion that someone in Team One had fired their stunner on the kill frequency too.

“He’s so cute,” Zeppa clapped her hands.

“I hope he’s not dead.” Illiakim looked with concern at the unconscious beast.

Immediately after Zither called in to report their discovery, the airways were filled with great excitement. The student collectors heard several voices at once, including Zither, Vimml, and the professor. Shizwit, who had just finished blasting the limb right off the tree, stood there marveling at her deed, as the professor was heard congratulating Team Two on their catch. It had not occurred to anyone, except the professor, how similar were the recent crackling sounds in Zone One and Zone Two. Shizwit, who examined the setting on the stunner, knew exactly what it meant. Unconcerned with this event, a suddenly troubled Rifkin took the gun out of Shizwit’s trembling hand, more concerned with what he had just heard on his radio.

“You had it set on the kill frequency,” she growled accusingly. “Are you insane?”

“Wh-What is he talking about?” Rifkin sputtered. “I got the most specimens, not him. I filled the entire hold!”

“No,” Shizwit frowned at him, “*we* got the most specimens. Didn’t they just say Team Two—not Zither—caught a long-neck!” “It’s called team work,” she wagged her finger at him. “Stop trying to show off!”

“Impossible,” Rifkin mumbled to himself. “... Even juvenile long-necks are too big to be caught.”

“This long-neck will require a larger container,” Zither was heard explaining to the professor. “It might even be too large to fit into the hold.”

“Listen Zither, you can combine two large containers into an even larger one,” the professor explained patiently. “Can you Vimml, Illiakim, and Zeppa lug that beast into such a container without a winch? Don’t forget that the crawler has such a device.”

“Yes, I think so,” Zither sounded quite beside himself with both excitement and fear.

Arkru tone’s had changed greatly since he had heard that Rezwit’s team was safe. Now, after hearing that Team Two had caught a long-neck, it was downright buoyant.

“Good luck lad,” his voice dripped with pride. “I can’t wait to see this fellow. That’s a real prize!”

“Oh, this makes me sick!” spat Rifkin, looking around wildly at his group.

Team One watched fearfully as Rifkin, their illustrious leader, lost control. All Rifkin could think of was that Zither, leader of Team Two, had found a long-neck. After all his effort today, he would get the most credit, not him. He was so angry about this turn of events, he raised up his gun, took aim and blasted off another limb.

“We’re going to bag us something better than that stupid long-neck!” he vowed racing back to the crawler, the stunner waving in his hand.

“It’s true, isn’t it?” Omrik asked Shizwit as they climbed into their seats. “You told me he was crazy, and he is—*he really is!*”

“Yes, it’s true,” replied Shizwit, as crawler one bolted up the path.

As he paused in his retreat to allow a herd of long-legged and long-necked samgar-like creatures pass, Rezwit listened to the most venomous criticism from Alafa. Not only was she calling him incompetent, but she was attacking him for being a coward, since he had passed up an opportunity to stop and chase a creature into the trees. Rezwit was brave, but he wasn’t a fool: there was no clearing in that direction. The professor had forbidden them to chase specimens into the forest. When the combative Alafa deliberately attacked him over the airways so everyone would overhear, however, the sting was overwhelming. He realized she wasn’t merely being a nag; she was attempting to make him look bad to the professor and his peers. Alafa wanted to be leader of Team Number Three!

“You bitch!” He swore under his breath. “You think I’m a coward, huh? I’ll show you who’s a coward! I’ll show you all! Hold on to your helmet Alafa, *we’re going to bag us a beast!*”

Up ahead he saw a large duckbill crossing the beaten path. Judging by the way the creature stopped suddenly and settled in the trees, it seemed to Rezwit that she might be nesting. What greater prize could he give the professor than a scoop-mouth nest with all her eggs?

“Are you crazy?” Lumnal cried out.

Grummel, who had always acted slightly mad, was giggling hysterically. Alafa, trapped by her own challenge, stared straight ahead in terror at what lie ahead.

“Rezwit, what are you doing?” the professor could be heard screaming from the bridge. “I told you to get out of there. Stay on the path!”

“Doctor Arkru,” Rezwit explained, pulling into a wide spot on the path. “I’ve found a mother scoop-mouth sitting on her nest. I think we can scare her away long enough to steal her nest.”

“No, absolutely not! I know what’s going on in Zone Three,” Arkru shouted. “I heard you and Alafa quarreling. Alafa, you stop competing with your leader. Rezwit, you have nothing to prove! Team Three get out of that neck of the woods *now!*”

But Rezwit had already disembarked with his stunner in his hand. Alafa followed, carrying her own gun, its frequency set to kill. Grummel was leaping around excitedly swinging a branch he had found, while young Lumnal sat cowering in his seat. In the most reckless fashion now, Rezwit and Alafa ran toward the nesting mother. Seeing the lurking shadow in the bushes, they began firing their stunners, certain they were going to bag themselves a nest, if not a beast. Arising finally to her feet as the crackling reached a peak and the smell of ozone filled the

air, the duckbill scooped up the hatchlings in her great mouth and moved quickly through the forest, annoyed more than anything else by the commotion on the other side of the trees. It had been a childish and futile act—not at all what Doctor Arkru’s had in mind. As soon as the shadow was gone, the three aliens ran into the trees and looked down through a patch of bushes at an empty nest.

“Rezwit! Alafa! Grummel! Lumnal! What’s going on?” the professor bellowed.

It seemed obvious to Rezwit what had occurred. They had seen this happen from their viewing screens when Kogin, the helmsmen, began landing the ark. At that time, the mother duckbill had taken advantage of the leaper’s indecision to rescue her young. On this occasion, as in that first glimpse of Irignian life forms, the hatchlings were held safely in their mother’s mouth. She would either take them to a new nest or return to this one when they were gone. After receiving a double dose of “kill” frequency electrons, she had gathered her young in her mouth and departed unscathed.

Rezwit and Alafa felt very stupid right now.

“They’re gone!” Rezwit spoke numbly into his helmet.

“What do you mean *they’re gone*?” Alafa stared at the nest.

“I mean, you dakka-brain, they’re not there!” Rezwit snapped, turning and looking back at the crawler where Lumnal sat.

Lumnal had not moved an inch from his seat. Now that they found themselves in the depths of the jungle, the rustling sound of potential predators and a strange chirping noise alerted the aliens to danger nearby.

“Run!” Rezwit cried.

“Oh, Izmir save them!” Urlum began praying from the bridge.

“I tried to warn you about this,” Falon’s said coolly as a look of horror froze on Arkru’s face.

After Falon, Orix, Remgen, and Dazl’s calm exchange of cynicism over the carelessness of this enterprise, a verbal tumult followed as Arkru, Zorig, Ibris, Tobit, and Urlum grew hysterical on the bridge. In the most clear-headed thinking in his young life, however, Rezwit blanked out everything but the beating of his own alien heart. The shrewish condemnation continuing over the radio by Alafa behind him and the hysterical shrieking of Grummel in front became a blur in his mind as he made his way into the crawler, took command of the steering wheel, and began frantically maneuvering the vehicle back onto the path. By now the spike-toes were upon them. Alafa and Grummel, who had once again taken Rezwit’s gun out of his belt, both opened fire on the pack as their snapping and drooling jaws came closer and closer to the crawler and the occupants inside.

Lumnal remained frozen inside his life support system. Jumping out one-by-one in what seemed to the youngster as a peek-a-boo game, the spike-toes seemed to sense the hopelessness of their situation. In the first place, the vehicle was parked in a patch of muddy ground that would require careful maneuvering to break free onto the path. The spike-toes had the entire jungle as a playground to taunt and harass them now. In the second place, it was demonstrated to Rezwit and Alafa that the stunners were incapable of incapacitating large beasts. Team Three hoped and prayed that their weapons might have a greater effect on the much smaller spike-toes than it had on the duckbill, who seemed totally unphased by the blasts.

Ducking down between the front and back seats to avoid being torn by their jaws, Lumnal wept uncontrollably, his efforts at being “one of the big kids” wiped away in childish terror as Alafa and Grummel fired over his head.

In spite of the continual crackling, Rezwit realized that their stunners had no lasting effect on the beasts. Grummel and Alafa's efforts were just enough to keep the spike-toes' jaws a few yards away from the crawler, and yet the creatures were coming closer and closer as if they were growing used to the blasts. Obviously, the charges were making contact with their bodies, but, unlike the small flyer shot down by Zither, they were only momentarily stunned by the shock. The students would fire and the beasts would back away. This exchange continued as the predators gradually gained ground and the vehicle appeared to be mired in an unseen patch of mud. At that point, the first dual between aliens and earthlings commenced: electron bombardment versus brute persistence.

E-e-e-e-e-e-e!" Alafa, Grummel, and Lumnal screamed into their helmets, their shrieks rising in volume as the spike-toes approached. To those listening in at this point it was an awful sound. Silence descended over the bridge.

"Izmir is great. Izmir is wise. Great is the mercy of Izmir," Rezwit chanted, barely audible to anyone as his teammates continued to scream.

The same prayer was uttered by everyone on the bridge, but the other collecting teams had problems of their own. Fortunately for him, the professor did not know Rifkin's harebrained decision to trek further into the jungle and had not yet fully grasped the futility of Zither's attempts at capturing the long-neck by the lake.

Suddenly, when it appeared as if Team Three would be chewed to pieces by the pack, Rezwit was able to break free of the cul-de-sac and roar back onto the path. A sickening event occurred that very moment as the smallest of the spike-toes made the mistake of running in front of the crawler. The tracks of the enormous vehicle crunched the dim-witted fellow almost flat into the ground as Team Three began speeding back down the trail. It was a testament to the weight and power of the crawler. At the same time that it pulverized the smaller spike-toe, it knocked two other advancing predators out of the way as Alafa and Grummel blasted the remaining predators with their guns. For several moments as Rezwit drove toward the light at the end of the shadowy jungle path, the pack pursued the slow moving vehicle, nipping at the back of it as if it was a living thing, intermittently falling back then regaining momentum as electrons bounced off their hides, until finally, as mysteriously as they first appeared, the spike-toes vanished like phantoms into trees.

Team Three now emerged in the meadow. They could see the ship sitting majestically on the meadow, in earth terminology about a mile or away.

"We're all right. We're out of the woods," Rezwit informed the bridge.

Several well-wishers on the bridge cheered.

"Good going lad," uttered the professor in a weary voice.

Overwhelming relief was counterbalanced by the feeling of utter defeat; it appeared as if they would return empty-handed. Peer group shame was almost as dreadful as spike-toes for Rezwit now. He looked back at Alafa, who was still holding her stunner. A look of horror had replaced the snarling expression on her face. Grummel was offering thanks to Izmir, his gloves held palms-up in prayer. Lumnal was still cowering on the floor. Without taking a vote, Rezwit made a fateful decision: they were going back into the trees.

"What are you doing?" Lumnal shouted in disbelief. "We're free! We're alive! Let's go back to the ship!"

"We're also empty-handed," Rezwit replied calmly, stomping his accelerator to the floor. "The professor said we should choose a different trail."

“Wait a minute Rifkin,” Alafa cried accusingly, “that was Zorig who said that. I heard what the professor said. He told you to get out of here, *not go back in!*”

“But I know what the professor wants,” Rezwit clung stubbornly to the wheel.

His eyes darting madly in his head, Grummel asked, “Rezwit, can I still shoot your gun? ... Come on, I did all right against the spike-toes, didn’t I?... Lemme shoot the gun!”

Pandemonium once more broke out on the bridge. It was difficult to tell who was speaking this time: “Rezwit! Rezwit! Come back, Rezwit! Don’t go back into the forest! Those spike-toes are still stalking you! Rezwit, don’t let Grummel have your gun! Rezwit, *what’re you trying to prove?*”

Rezwit had driven only a short distance into the meadow when he spotted a strange apparition skirting the forest. It was one of those squat, close-to-the-ground, armored creatures that had a club on its tail. From a distance, it looked like a juvenile, but he knew that it would take all of their existing containers to squeeze it into their hold.

“Alafa, Lumnal calm down,” he shouted, turning his wheel, “I just saw one of those armored fellows we saw yesterday near the rock. He looks like a juvenile. If we follow the professor’s instructions for Zither’s long-neck, we might be able to bring him back to the ship.”

“I know what that is!” They heard the professor exclaim with relief. “Be careful students, its got a nasty club on its tail!”

Rifkin, who had decided that he was going to find something bigger and better than Zither’s long-neck, was barely conscious of the voices in his helmet. Knowing that their leader was out of control, his team sat in fearful and angry silence as he careened down the jungle trail. “What else can we do?” Shizwit murmured to the horror-stricken Omrik and Yorzl. “Jump out and walk back to the ship?”

Rifkin’s team was a captive audience now. Despite the rules for radio protocol, which he kept breaking, he began singing loudly again in order to blot out Shizwit’s attempt to report him to the bridge. In his megalomaniac frame of mind, as the hero of Raethia, Beskol and Orm, he resented his teammates attitudes. They were, he told himself petulantly, lucky to have him as a leader. He was surrounded by ingrates, especially Shizwit, in spite of the fact she had helped him the most today. Of all the students aboard ship, he resented her the most now. She was, he realized now, in the midst of some kind of—what was the word?... metamorphoses. Why did the professor give her the silly title Keeper of the Keys? It had gone to her empty head. Now she was trying to inform on him, but he wouldn’t let her. For the hero of Beskol, Raethia and Orm, the rules of radio etiquette didn’t apply. He would let the bridge hear more stanzas from his favorite ballad to let them know that all was well in Zone One and Rifkin’s team.

The Old Ones sit in dark, damp caves,
 their lives a frightful bore.
As penitents, they must behave,
 banished forever more.

On distant Lorg they while away;
 such exile have they earned.
Yet during the Age of Discovery,
 the Old Ones spirit still burns.

Over the airwaves, the student collectors could hear Rifkin's boisterous verses but also the professor shouting encouragement to Rezwit's team. In spite of getting lost, Team Three had, as Zither's team, evidently done something remarkable. This cheered the team-spirited Zither but made Rifkin that much more envious now. Rifkin continued singing until he was quite hoarse. Most of the students, including Shizwit, wished they could turn down the volume of their headsets until his caterwauling ceased. Thanks to the professor's revision of their radios, however, this was quite impossible. Rifkin was acting utterly foolish as he attempted to outdo Zither's feat. As his comrade Rezwit had done, he was breaking one of the professor's cardinal rules. He was driving down the beaten path more deeply than the three-mile limit from the ship. The difference was, of course, he was doing it on purpose.

"There's gotta be a lake, stream, or river," he mumbled feverishly to himself. "That's where Zither found his long-neck."

"When will you learn?" Shizwit asked him calmly now. "This isn't a game. We're a team. Zither is a team player; you must learn to be one too."

As Rifkin drove recklessly and aimlessly into the jungle, they could hear the professor's excited voice over the radio.

"How big would you say he is?" His voice was hoarse from shouting.

"Ten epsols from head to tail, maybe more. He's pretty large," Zither said, puffing and panting as he, Vimml, and Illiakim tried unsuccessfully to budge it from the net.

The professor was silent a moment, as he thought of a plan. "... Zither," he said, exhaling deeply, "the beast might be too big for even two or three containers. You might have to drop off what you have at the ship and then return!"

"Return?" Vimml gave a wounded cry. "Never! We found this beast. It might not be here when we return!"

"We can do it Doctor Arkru," Zither promised the professor, after a long disconsolate sigh.

"Did you hear that?" Rifkin murmured, his eyes popping wide, as he drew the crawler to a stop. "The long-neck's too big. Why don't they just dump everything else out, join all the containers together, and pull it into the hold with the winch? If need be, we can join two crawlers together to bag something like that!"

"Does this mean we're going back to the ship?" Yorzl asked, peeking over the back of Omrik's seat.

"Well?" Shizwit tapped him on the shoulder. "What do you have in mind Rifkin?"

In what struck his teammates as a positive move, Rifkin backed into small clearing, turned the steering wheel one hundred and eighty degrees, and began driving back down the beaten path.

Since Zone One was on the other side of the meadow, Rifkin would pass the ship as he headed to Zone Two. He had no intentions of letting Zither haul the long-neck in himself. He would, whether they liked it or not, offer his help. In the end everyone needed Rifkin's help. Zither would have to wait until help arrived or give up and go back to the ship. Rifkin knew he could get back in time to dump his load into the ship's hold and then return with more containers to join together for the task. The question was, could he convince the professor of his good intentions. Could he talk his teammates into going with him again? His head swam with seemingly unlimited possibilities, but the one that sounded the best right now was one he could do alone.

“Permission to return with specimens,” he called out in a most professional tone.

“Really?” Omrik cried, jumping up and down excitedly in his seat.

“Izmir be praised!” Shizwit sighed, giving the happy Yorzl a hug.

“Permission granted.” Doctor Arkru acknowledged with surprise. “...Well done!” he added hesitantly, for Rifkin had much to answer for when he returned to the ship.

Chapter Seven

Rifkin To The Rescue`

For a short while Doctor Arkru felt a sense of well being, which was partially caused by fatigue. Team Three was safely on the forest's edge capturing a harmless club-tail. Team Two, which had netted a long-neck—but were having trouble moving it—felt they had matters under control. Now Team One had completed its first day of collecting and was returning with a full load of specimens, including a juvenile leaper in its hold. Physical exhaustion now settled over the students as mental exhaustion afflicted the bridge.

For several uneventful moments, with the transmitter turned down and the receiver turned up on the communication console, many of the ship's crew members crowded onto the bridge in back of the commander, navigator, officers, professor, and chief technician listening to the conversations from Zones One, Two, and Three. Soon everyone would be able to see within the temporary enclosures an assortment of Irignum's strange beasts. For the time being, a feeling of relief for the success and continued well-being of the collectors overshadowed the disappointment from the gamblers who had wagered against the students today.

"What more can I ask for?" the professor turned cheerily to Zorig now.

"Twelve students returning safely to the ship," Zorig, his chief technician, quickly replied. "Rifkin's team may be out of harm's way, and you might think Rezwit has everything under control, but I'm worried about Zither, professor. I think you should order Team Two back to the ship!"

"I wanted to give Zither a chance," Arkru uttered reflectively, his finger easing over to the transmitter dial, "but Vimml is pushing him too much. It was a mistake putting him with Zither. Zither is too conscientious to risk the welfare of his team, and yet Vimml has made him think he will lose face if he gives up now."

"Face?" retorted Zorig curtly. "Who cares about losing face? This isn't a game, professor—you said so yourself! They can go out tomorrow and find another long-neck. Zither and his team are too close to the water. Please sir, follow your own rules here and call them back!"

"Just how much time were you planning on giving Team Two?" Falon cut in bluntly as the professor hesitated over the transmitter switch. "We have no idea how Irignum's water creatures will behave or whether or not predators will be attracted to the scene. I agree with Zorig: call them back *now!*"

The commander's entire staff and members of the crew allowed on the bridge echoed Falon's opinion. The technicians Tobit, Ibris, and Urlum chanted under their breaths, "*Now-now-now!*"

"Very well... Team Two, listen up!" the professor called as gently as possible. "I want you students to gather up your equipment and head back to the ship. The commander and I think this is too dangerous so close to the river."

A few crewmembers, who would lose wagers, groaned but were drowned out when the remainder of the audience cheered.

"No, no," Vimml shouted excitedly, "we're not that close to the river! We can do it. We really can. We've got three containers fastened together. All we have to do is slide the beast until he's close enough to the winch."

“Shut up Vimml, “ the professor cut him off angrily. “I’m not interested in what *you* think! I want to hear what your team leader has to say! Zither, speak up boy; be honest with me. You can’t capture that long-neck in a timely manner, can you? It’s already noon. I want you students to pull the net off that poor beast and come back to the ship!”

After a long pause in which Zither anguished over losing his prize and Vimml could be heard in the background berating him for his indecision, a familiar voice broke into the lull.

“Team One requests permission to board ship,” Rifkin piped anxiously. “Please lower the ramp.”

“Permission granted,” Falon complied militarily.

Motioning for Remgen to get the decontamination chamber ready, he stood up and paced nervously back and forth on the bridge.

“Doctor Arkru,” Rifkin said in a breathless, expectant voice over the radio, “... I can save that long-neck. They’ve drugged it so much it’s doomed if they leave it now. Let me take Crawler One to the scene after emptying out its hold. We can join the two vehicles like we’ve done on other planets. That would give us enough power and space.”

“We’ve done that before to carry extra personnel, Rifkin, not specimens,” Arkru replied dismissively, shaking his head. “Your team’s done enough today. Let’s give them some rest!”

“My team doesn’t need to go with me sir,” Rifkin sounded desperate. “Please professor, Zither deserves my help. How many chances will we get for a long-neck?”

“Yes, yes,” cried Vimml, “it’ll be just like old times Rifkin. We can do it. It’ll be worth it to save our beast!”

“I said *shut up Vimml!*” screamed the professor, slamming down his fist. “Come back to the ship at once Zither. Rifkin, you report to the bridge after you’ve unsuited. I want no more heroics today!”

After another pause in which there was muffled argument between Zither and Vimml, Team Leader Two finally spoke: “... Listen, professor, it may be possible to capture the long-neck if we can use Rifkin’s crawler. I hate to leave this unconscious long-neck for those spike-toes. It’s our fault he’s in the condition he’s in.”

“Zither, am I hearing you correctly?” Arkru asked in disbelief. “Is this your own personal opinion or is this Vimml talking again?”

“It’s my opinion,” Zither replied hesitantly. “... We—I mean *I*—want to save this specimen. I really do!”

The professor and Zorig exchanged dubious looks. As Arkru turned up the volume on the receiver, a familiar voice was heard murmuring encouragement in the background.

“Vimml,” Arkru bellowed at top of his lungs, “stop coaching Zither! If I hear one more peep out of you, you’ll be permanently restricted to the ship!”

Back in Zone Two, Vimml stormed into the clearing as if he might just walk back to the ship. In his headset he could hear laughter from the officers on the bridge. “This isn’t fair,” he spat in a strangled whisper. “It was *my* idea to capture the long-neck. Zither’s a coward and a fool!” But then, when Vimml heard a familiar chirping from the thicket, he completely forgot his rage and began running back to the shoreline where Zither and Illiakim stood.

“All right, Team Leader Two, tell me truthfully,” the professor spoke hoarsely to Zither now, “do you really think Team Two can achieve this feat with Rifkin’s help?”

“Yes... I do,” Zither sighed uneasily, as Vimml reappeared.

“Just how much progress have you made in the past two hours?” Falon interjected irritably.

“Well... very little,” Zither admitted with a weary sigh, “that’s why we need Rifkin.”

“But you hate Rifkin. Rifkin has treated you deplorably!” Zorig objected, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I know. That was not my doing. But I can’t leave this poor beast to be eaten by those dreadful spike-toes,” Zither’s voice steadied as he spoke his mind. “My teammates have worked hard today and have little to show for it. I think they deserve this chance too.”

“I know how Vimml feels, but is this what you want Illiakim?” Arkru asked more gently from the bridge.

Illiakim was standing supportively at Zither’s side holding Zeppa’s fidgety hand.

“Yes professor,” she gave a haggard reply, “but Zeppa’s acting terribly now. She wants to go back to the ship.”

“I know that Illiakim,” the professor confessed wearily. “I should never have allowed youngsters on this trip. It’s only important to me that you support Zither now.”

A twinge of pride tempered the professor’s mood as he considered Zither’s words. Zither, unlike the megalomaniacs Rifkin and Vimml, was a team player. In spite of Zeppa’s child-like fears, he had won Illiakim to his side. He knew that Rifkin would try to take credit for this find, and yet he was more concerned about the welfare of his team and safety of the specimen than personal reward. Against his better judgment and the opinion of everyone on the bridge, the professor acquiesced finally, a sigh breaking his severe expression as he considered Rifkin’s magnanimous mood.

“Zorig,” he ordered briskly, “I want you to supervise the collection teams’ re-entry.” “Rifkin,” his tone became grave, “for Team Two’s sake and the good of our mission, I’m trusting you one last time. Drive the crawler up into the decontamination chamber and then wait for the process to be completed. I want Shizwit, Omrik, and Yorzl to remain on the ship. When the crawler is emptied, disembark again. So help me Rifkin, I want you to assist Zither and use your crawler as a drone—nothing more!”

“Yes sir!” Rifkin almost squealed with delight.

“Professor, I want to go too,” Shizwit’s voice was husky with disappointment.

“No, my little Key Master,” the professor spoke kindly now. “I’m very proud of your progress, but this is Rifkin’s scheme. He must do this himself!”

As crewmembers Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep unloaded Crawler One, the decontaminated and unsuited Omrik and Yorzl pranced into the elevator and were lifted happily up to their quarters. Neither one of these students would ever have to set foot on Irignum again. Zorig supervised the movement of the decontaminated containers to temporary enclosures on level eight—Irignum’s first level. Each container was connected to a temporary enclosure into which its inhabitants were prodded by remote robot arms operated by Zorig, himself. Contrary to Doctor Arkru orders, there was very little plant material laid down for the specimens, so the chief technician made a special note on his wrist communicator to inform the professor of this problem. The technicians and crewmen now had the chance to view the first Irignian specimens aboard the ark. Several of them, who were finished with their chores on ship, were already drifting onto level eight and watching the drama unfold. Team One’s collection, which, in addition to the juvenile leaper, included several different kinds of lizards, snakes and mammals and the small flyer stunned by Zither, would be displayed in the temporary enclosures. The permanent enclosures, which were being constructed by technicians and members of the crew,

were, in fact, in various stages of completion. The only finished portions of these enclosures were the plasmodex sheets, which would allow the ship's company to view these exotic creatures when the permanent enclosures were complete. For the time being, the temporary containers sat inside the unfinished enclosures, their portable air canisters now replaced by tubes connecting the containers with outside Irignian air. A terrible din of whistling, hooting, chirping, and scratching made the small specimens seem more terrible than they actually were. The most impressive specter to be seen was the juvenile tyrannosaurus, which drew the largest audience of them all. Zorig, Ibris, and Tobit would build specially reinforced display chambers for such dangerous specimens. Because the drugs administered to it by the darts had worn off completely, the snarling and hissing predator gave the onlookers quite a show.

Shizwit, who felt excluded because she was a girl, did not share Omrik and Yorzl's hatred of this mission. She waited until her teammates had taken the first lift and stood in the elevator smoldering with resentment for being left out. After showering, dressing in a bright tunic and eating a hearty lunch, she returned to her quarters and sulked for several hours, promising herself to make an issue of this affair when she saw the professor again. For the time being, the Key Master settled into her pod in a fetal position and fell into a deep, dream-filled sleep.

Rifkin, after having his air canisters recharged and reinstalled by Hobi, Jitso and Gennep, climbed back into the decontaminated crawler, waited impatiently for the chamber to be emptied of personnel, and then prepared himself for what might prove to be the greatest adventure of his life: capturing a long-neck, by a lake no less, his crawler the key component to the rescue. What greater milestone in his career as collector and explorer could there be than this?

While delusions of grandeur filled Rifkin's head and Crawler One hurled down the beaten path through Zone Two, something strange began happening by the river that would change Rifkin's life. Just when Team Two thought they had successfully drugged the long-neck in preparation for transport to the ship, the beast suddenly and inexplicably awakened and began thrashing wildly as they tightened the net around its neck. Whether or not the darts had not sufficiently dulled its wits or the creature had merely been worn out by its ordeal and was getting a second wind, its sudden burst of energy undid all their efforts at netting it and dragging it as far as they had.

"Wha-what's happening?" Vimml screamed, yanking ineffectually at the rope. "I-I thought he was unconscious!"

"Obviously he's awake," Zither tried sounding calm. "Vimml stand back. Illiakim, give him a few more darts!"

"Oh no! He's heading toward the water. He's taking the net with him. He's going to drown!" Illiakim began weeping loudly into her headset.

Zeppa, who had been ushered moments earlier to the crawler, huddled in her seat, a look of terror on her face as a pair of spike-toes crept onto the scene.

To the horror of Team Two, the long-neck had moved into the shallows of the river with the net weighing it down. The professor had been talking to Zorig over an intercom and had failed to hear this exchange. When he turned his attention back to Zone Two, the commander and his officers were sitting there in stunned silence as they contemplated what to do.

For several moments, in his grand scheme to regain the spotlight, Rifkin drove crawler one over the beaten path, listening with alarm at what was happening by the river. So set on his

present course was he, he did not hesitate. He knew exactly what he must do. The creature was in the water. Since Team Two had failed to capture the long-neck, it was up to Rifkin and Crawler One to save the day. As a matter of pure coincidence, he swung into the clearing just in time to chase the spike-toes back into the bush.

“Thank you Rifkin,” Zeppa murmured breathlessly.

“Stop this!” He heard the professor screaming to Team Two. “Stop this at once! Those tranquilizers have no lasting effect upon this beast. You might just end up killing him if you continue this barrage!”

“What else can we do?” Zither cried in exasperation. “We can’t let him go now—*he’ll drown!*”

“I want you to get away from that river!” Arkru became hysterical. “That’s were we spotted the leaper attacking the scoop-mouth. Get out of there at once!”

Thundering through the clearing leading to the river was a familiar apparition. This time he rode alone into the jaws of danger. Ballads would someday be song about him, he was certain. It was too bad Urlum could not see him now.

“Have no fear, Rifkin’s here!” he cried, sloshing several feet into the water.

“Rifkin, is that you? Rifkin, you haven’t been trained in amphibious operation. You get that vehicle out of that river at once!” Arkru sputtered into his headset.

“Too late sir,” Zither said numbly, “he’s already begun.”

Something totally unexpected began to happen, as Rifkin maneuvered around the sauropod and attempted to bump it back to shore. A strange aquatic animal, which resembled a lizard but had a spiny corrugated hide and long, ragged mouth, suddenly appeared, its long dragon-toothed jaws opening and shutting as it approached the scene.

Everyone who saw the monster remained mute for several seconds, which left the bridge to wonder what horror was befalling the students now. Judging by its shadow under the water and the size of its snout, Rifkin estimated that it was at least forty epsols long: a massive cousin of the land dragons, obviously moving in for the kill.

The juvenile alamosaurus, in spite of its already large size (by Revekian standards), seemed doomed, until Rifkin looked into his rearview mirror and spotted the force field poles in the back of his crawler. Fortunately they were lying loosely in the container directly behind the backseat and he could just reach one of them if he moved quickly and got a grip on one of the poles. Rifkin remembered the professor scolding him about getting them wet. In spite of what Doctor Arkru had told him about force field reactions in water, he knew what he had to do. Four of the poles, when activated, constituted an almost impervious wall that would hold its occupants, causing a mild shock each time they tried to escape. This had been demonstrated in the meadow near the ship and in Zone One during his team’s capture of the leaper. Without a continuous beam from pole-to-pole, it would not work and would remain inert until the activation button was pushed. In water each activated pole would automatically explode upon immersion. Upon dry land, it would explode upon impact with the ground, sending shrapnel in all directions as would a future—albeit old fashioned—earth rocket or bomb.

“It’ll only take one,” Rifkin told himself, his mind now set on its course.

“Rifkin,” Zither, who was very much afraid, called angrily over his radio, “the professor is right. This isn’t necessary. We must all get out of here and let the dragon have his meal. We don’t need this particular long-neck. It’s the natural order of things. We’ll find another.”

“Get everyone out of here!” Rifkin shouted across his landline. “That beast is coming right at me. I’ll drive down the shallows a ways and then hasten up the bank. When I get clear

of the water, I'll let him have it. It'll be enough to put him out of commission for awhile, so we can pull your beast onto land."

"It's not *my* beast. This is not a contest," Zither cried. "We are a team Rifkin! When will you learn?"

Arkru, who had been silent during this argument, suddenly flew into a rage.

"Rifkin, are you a *complete* fool? You're not fast enough to accomplish such a feat. No one is. You'll either be eaten alive or blown to bits. Is this really how you want to be remembered boy? Now get that crawler out of the water! All of you—Zither, Vimml, Illiakim and Zeppa—leave and let nature takes its course!"

Everyone did exactly as the professor demanded, except Rifkin, who was already leading the great dragon down to another part of river. The wheels of the crawler were at their maximum level of submergence before Rifkin remembered to switch to amphibious operation. Unfortunately, the crawler moved even more slowly as a boat. Quickly, before he ran out of traction, Rifkin got his hands on one of the poles.

"Let's see," he mumbled to himself frantically "to activate this all I have to do is push this red button... or is it the green?"

"It's the green, you numskull!" Arkru shouted into his headset again. "Red deactivates the pole; it'll will be inert then. If you don't hurry Rifkin, it's the Outer Reaches for you. Now get out of there at once!"

After hearing Rifkin scream, the professor almost wept. Already the commander had called an emergency meeting of all of his officers. Several crewmen, who had made wagers, secretly congratulated each other on this turn of events. Team Two could be heard crying softly into their headsets. Even Zither, Rifkin's old adversary, was heartsick now. Team Three, who had successfully captured a juvenile club-tail, had been resting from their efforts when the dreadful event began. Rezwit and his team now began racing back to the ship.

"By Izmir, he's right on your tail, isn't he boy?" the professor groaned. "All for one brainless, long-necked beast! It's too late to turn back Rifkin. Now, before he follows you up the bank, you must outrun him and get clear of the water before letting go of the pole. Remember Rifkin, when activated, it explodes upon impact too."

"Don't worry," Rifkin said in a croaking voice. "I just hope I don't hit a log in the water." "One drop of water might trigger it," he told himself miserably, holding the activated pole in his lap. "One jolt may blow *me* up.... What have I done?"

"I don't know boy," Arkru murmured into his microphone, as Commander Falon handed him a note. "This time, you must help yourself!"

In the hastily scribbled note Falon cautioned Arkru not to distract Rifkin now. When he was out of danger, he was to inform his student to drive Crawler One onto shore if possible and make it back to the ship. Otherwise, they would send a rescue party to bring him back. It was the first indication that Falon was taking control of Arkru's mission. For several moments, a drama unfolded that caused the professor and everyone else listening great emotional pain. Zorig, who was also very angry with Rifkin, felt a pang of guilt since he half hoped the dragon would remove the troublesome Rifkin from the scene.

Ironically, though no one cared at this point, the juvenile sauropod they had been trying to save, had freed itself from the net and was struggling ashore. The giant water dragon, who was more interested in the alien, stopped suddenly and floated in the murky water, swishing his great tail, his eyes and snout above the surface in the characteristic pose of crocodiles and

alligators of today. Idling a moment, in no hurry it seemed to make the kill, he then began racing forward at an ever increasing speed, barely giving Rifkin enough time to toss his bomb.

When Rifkin was able to throw his missile toward the advancing juggernaut, he was not sure he had thrown it hard or far enough. He prepared himself now for the Outer Reaches. His entire short life passed before him in one blazing second. The effect of the missile hitting the water was inexplicably delayed for Rifkin. A deathly silence fell over the unseeing bridge, as it floated a moment on the surface of the water sizzling and smoking before detonating in one great flash. Instead of killing the beast or even injuring him slightly, it did what Arkru would have hoped for under normal conditions and merely deflected it. Due to present circumstances, Arkru cared more for Rifkin's safety than the sanctity of alien life. The dragon, who represented the dangers of this planet, had become the enemy. A great geyser of water exploded, splattering Rifkin with pond mud and slime, and knocking him out the crawler into the murky water below. For a fleeting moment, he remembered looking back at the vehicle, which had stopped on a sand bar near the other side of the river, and seeing it sitting there totally intact. After a short interval in which the vehicle remained idle, the battery powered engine would automatically shut down, which meant that Crawler One would be ready to drive if he could ever make it back across the treacherous river. At this point, it seemed light years away from him. Disoriented by the commotion but not undaunted in his mission, the dragon circled around the wake caused by the explosion, slowing down just enough to check out the uninhabited crawler, an action which allowed Rifkin another chance to escape.

Swimming in the water with his air-tight/water-tight suit proved to be awkward for Rifkin since the suit, though somewhat buoyant, was not intended for such use. He looked like a monstrous beetle trying to paddle ashore. One slight puncture in the material and Rifkin knew it might be worse for him than being eaten by the beast. There was no way of knowing how this corrosive atmosphere might react upon his skin, especially in the water. But he found himself moving at a frantic crawl to the bank. At least it was water-proof and he wouldn't sink, he thought grimly. It certainly wasn't made for navigating in the water.

He didn't know how he would ever retrieve the crawler, unless he managed to cross the river and walk out onto the sandbar where the vehicle sat. It might as well been on a different planet right now, Rifkin told himself, looking back one last time in the direction of the crawler. Unfortunately, as he attempted to navigate the water, the crocodile again had him in his sights and was charging toward him at an even greater rate.

"This is it," he said calmly to the professor, "I'm sorry I was such a pain."

Urlum, who had stood silently in the background until now, screamed Rifkin's name. From the most junior crewmen up to the commander, himself, a collective gasp accompanied Urlum's lament: "Rifkin! Oh, Rifkin! What you could've, should've, and might've done!" The professor looked over to Zorig and shook his head sadly, motioning for him to comfort his sister. No one, not even the wage-makers, wanted this to be his end.

"Farewell!" Rifkin's voice turned into a sob.

Rifkin, sensing that soon he would be entering the dark sleep or the Outer Reaches, found himself, praying as the monstrous jaws opened and the beast was but a few epsols from his feet. And then something fortunate happened that caused those who could hear, but not see him, even greater anxiety.

It seemed as though he had paddled right up to a great log that was almost submerged in the river. Rounding its roots just in time to avoid the first snap of the crocodile's jaws, he realized there were also limbs stretching out in all directions, some of them poked up from the

surface of the water for several feet. If he could manage to pull himself down below the surface without damaging his suit, the beast would find it difficult to attack him without biting into a large chunk of the tree. Relying on his breathing system to maintain its integrity and his ability to pull himself as far into the tangled foliage as he could go, he uttered one loud Revekian war whoop to let his friends know he was all right.

“I’m going to hide in these submerged limbs,” he explained, allowing himself to sink further and further into the depths.

“Oh Rifkin!” Urlum squealed.

“Smart lad!” Arkru cried

“He’s not out of danger yet,” Zorig cautioned, a faint crackling sound following in Rifkin’s receiver.

At that point, as the professor asked him what he planned on doing, the communication link between Rifkin and the ship was broken, as the murky, particle-filled water saturated the communication device with sludge.

“What was that? You’re voice is breaking up. Professor? Urlum! Zorig! Can anyone here me?” He frantically called the bridge.

Turning his attention to his immediate difficulties, he wondered if this was not how he would finally meet his end. He had defied all the rules in his short life. He had given Izmir, the Celestial God, who ruled the cosmos, just cause.

As the water dragon continued biting at the tangled limbs, Rifkin found the seldom-used headlight on his helmet still working, turned it on shakily as he descended and marveled at how deep the river was so close to its bank. Following one limb to its end he looked back at the monstrous shadow behind, and then looked up to the tangled nightmare above. On the river bottom, in the murky depths of the water, he could see the outline of something almost as frightening as the dragon above, until he realized what it was.

“It’s one of the long-necks!” he cried jubilantly. “Only this one’s really gigantic. I just have to avoid its great feet yet keep in close to its side. I don’t think the dragon will dare attack something so large.” But his headset remained silent.

He was alone now, cut off from the others as surely as if he had been marooned in space.

An alamosaurus, the last great denizen of its kind, munched lazily on the water plants and foliage of overhanging limbs. The sauropod was, in future earth dimensions, over sixty-five feet long and weighed up to forty tons. It had, like all sauropods, a long graceful neck for reaching up and munching the tops of tall trees and an equally long, whip-like tale that could crush a water dragon or one of the many predators on land. Between its neck and tale, its massive body was supported by short, trunk-like legs padded like those of an elephant. Because of its immense size and with no natural enemies, it ignored the giant crocodile until it came close enough to cause tremors in the river. As Rifkin huddled close to its scaly side, he wondered if he would be treated like one of the countless parasites of the rain forest crawling on such a big beast’s skin. Would he swat him off into the water to the waiting jaws of the dragon below? Or would he just crush him to death by one terrible slap of its tail?

To his satisfaction, Rifkin found the dinosaur totally oblivious to his presence. Obviously, he told himself, this brute was either incredibly stupid or it was used to small creatures hovering around its body. What his protector did take issue with, however, was the approach of the crocodile. With a few swishes of its mighty tail, it was swatted away from the scene. Almost immediately, the single-minded crocodile began searching another sector of the river for prey.

As he floated precariously close to the beast's side, bobbing like a water-bug on the river, Rifkin looked up in wonder at the giant sauropod. There was, he knew for certain, no way they could put a beast even one-fifth its size onto their ship. But what a prize this would be for a collector!

The reminder of his broken communications felt like a weight in his chest and a darkening shadow over his path, but there was no time to feel sorry for himself. He must concentrate upon survival now. As he searched the nearby shore for signs of danger, he paddled awkwardly by the dinosaur, until he could pull himself onto the bank by grasping onto the reeds. When he had struggled onto the dry side of the bank and stood a moment longer looking in wonder at Irignum's greatest beast, it came back finally to him that he had marooned himself from the rest of his kind. A second discovery now struck him numb with anguish. As he looked down to his empty holster, he found himself breaking down and weeping as a child, which he was.

"Where is my stunner?" he screamed into his headset. "I've lost my stunner! Great Celestial God, I lost my only weapon! How could I have been such a fool!"

He was truly alone, weaponless and vulnerable to this planet's dangers. He had no one to blame but himself.

"Please, tell me where I am!" He shouted into his headset, in the hopes that, if he yelled loud enough, the collector might hear. Once again, however, there was no answer. The silence from the bridge seemed mentally deafening to him.

"What have I done?" He groaned, slumping forlornly onto a log. "I have to get back before its gets dark. How can I find the crawler with that dragon lying in wait?"

Rising numbly to his feet, he searched the patch of sky breaking through the trees, wondering how much daylight he had left on this planet before he would be moving in the dark. He still had the headlight on his helmet and, thanks to a last minute decision to have his canisters replenished, at least thirty-six hours of gas to breath, but he had lost his weapon when he was blown off the crawler and, because he had drenched his communication equipment, he had no way of contacting the ship. The sudden thump-thump thumpety-thump of one of the forests beasts, now caused him to leap into the nearest bush.

When he realized he had stumbled into a creature's nest, he tried to avoid the eggs but found himself falling directly onto them. By grabbing a large overhanging branch, he managed to break his fall and not damage the eggs, and yet he had the terrible feeling he had stumbled into the nest of one of those killers they had seen from the bridge and rock. The thump of footsteps continued, growing louder as the beast plowed through the trees.

"What if this is *its* nest?" he wondered aloud. "I'll be trapped here—a perfect snack!"

Looking fearfully through the brambles, he could see to his mounting horror, a creature very different from the giant killer spotted from the bridge and rock. Although somewhat smaller than the great leaper, it was huge even by Irignian standards. Unlike the great leaper they had all seen before, who had tiny, useless arms, it had long arms with huge dagger-like claws but rather stumpy biped legs. There was a sail beginning at the nape of its thick neck, rising up to over six feet at the center of its back and tapering until it disappeared in its massive tail. Rifkin wondered if the fan growing out of its vertebra was used to control body heat. He could think of no other reason for such a bizarre looking appendage. In its dragon-like head there was a mouthful of dagger-sized teeth that were straight instead of curved like other predators. In spite of its fierce appearance and profound ugliness, it did not look as if it could run very fast and was probably, Rifkin judged, the sort of killer who ambushed its victims, very

much like the werka of Raethia, who jumped out of bushes at unsuspecting prey to make them their next meal. Without his cumbersome life support system on, he could probably outrun this brute. But such a comparison gave him little comfort when it took into account that this planet's killer was probably three or four times as large as the werka and, trapped in his suit as he was, he could barely run at all. The question that hung heavily in Rifkin's mind, as he hid in the bush, was "is this the monster's nest?"

Suddenly, the carnosaur stopped in its tracks and stood there only a short distance from the nest, as if sniffing the air. The multicolored sail on its back moved backward and forward, as would a fan. Its nostrils flared and his great arms with their dagger-sized nails seemed poised for the attack as it looked for prey. Then, after looking in the direction of Rifkin's bush, it continued on its way. Soon afterwards, as the first monster exited the scene, a large anatosaurus or duckbill—which the Revekians now called scoop-mouths—passed by, barely missing the nest as it headed into the river. A second and third dinosaur appeared: juvenile leapers, who were evidently stalking the duckbill but were unsure which way it had gone. There remained the water dragon lurking in the river, who was large enough to take such large prey. Rifkin hoped that it had moved on and would leave the gentle scoop-mouth alone.

The thought of his own encounter with the water dragon made what Rifkin was going through now seem insignificant. Obviously this was not the sail-backed monster's nest. As a trophy, Rifkin picked out one of the eggs and carried it awkwardly from the bush but, having second thoughts, quickly put it back. Looking down at the tracks directly ahead, he could see three giant toe marks leading from this spot, which indicated to him who might own the nest. They were tremendous and must belong to one of the giant killers of the forest.

"I was right," he swallowed heavily, "this *is* one of its eggs!"

Following a trail marked by broken branches and crushed foliage left by the passing killers, Rifkin began his long and perilous escape from the jungle. Every moment, such as his holdover in the bush, delayed his trek back up that portion of the jungle where there was a beaten path. He was running out of daylight and time. Eventually, he would run out of air.

"Where am I?" he shouted into the headset. "I've got to find that path!"

Hearing no response again, Rifkin scampered hysterically along the much more narrow path, until it disappeared completely into an impregnable thicket and a great wall of volcanic rock loomed above him. Climbing carefully up the sloping rock, Rifkin hoped that it was elevated high enough to survey the forest. He could think of nothing else constructive to do. Although it was inclined enough for him to struggle to the top, it was almost as dangerous for him as the water, for the face of the rock was jagged and might possibly tear his suit. Night was approaching, and he didn't want to be trapped on top. It would be far more difficult to negotiate his way down in the dark. When he reached the summit of what was apparently the neck of an ancient volcano whose cone had long ago eroded away, he realized to his relief that he had cleared the tops of the forest trees enough to see the ship. To a time traveler looking out upon this primordial forest, the monstrous trilobite-like form would have been a frightening specter to behold. Had there actually been primitive natives at this stage of earth's evolution, the great metallic bug might have been worshipped by them as a god, especially after its dramatic arrival from the sky.

Such thoughts would never have occurred to Rifkin, who had seen the giant sand bugs of Orm and had been an eye-witness to dreamscapes much more strange, though not as frightening, as what he witnessed now. At this stage in his young life, nothing in the universe had surprised Rifkin very much. He and his shipmates had looked out from their portholes to witness black

holes with brilliant coronas of matter surrounding them. They had seen frigid comets close-up and witnessed the birth of stars. On Raethia, where they discovered the first monstrous forms of life, they had found giant multilegged dakkas, who were harmless omnivores, and fierce, headless flying creatures called hubrids, whose mouths opened where their stomach should be. As terrifying as the previous worlds had been, the aliens had been relatively safe. They did not have to wear life support systems on the desert planet of Orm, the forests of Raethia or the watery planet of Tomol. They didn't have to face ferocious creatures a hundred times their size or worry about running out of air or dying of atmospheric poisoning. Rifkin was racing against the clock and the environment, two constants that seemed to be beyond his control.

Chapter Eight

Somewhere In The Forest

During the first hour of Rifkin's ordeal, the remaining two teams were called back to the ship. To the surprise of both Rezwit and Vimml, Zither volunteered immediately to form a search team. Rezwit, of course, volunteered too, but the professor refused to allow Vimml to join the team. As Crawler Two and Three returned to the ship, Crawler Four was being prepared for travel. Second Mate Imwep and Third Mate Kogin had volunteered to accompany the two student leaders, which meant that there would be at least four stunners for protection this time. Doctor Arkru reminded the volunteers that, in addition to their stunners, the force field trap poles appeared to make excellent bombs, a concession that illustrated the pacifistic professor's desire to find Rifkin at all costs. No one, not even the militant minded Imwep and Kogin, liked the idea of using such unstable pyrotechnics, but it was decided by the commander and his staff that such poles, in place of the regular firepower outlawed by the Doctors of Science, would be standard gear this time.

With Rifkin's radio evidently not working, the search team could not pinpoint his location. Commander Falon insisted that they stay on the beaten path and search the shoreline of the river first. All they had to go on, at this stage, was the fact that Rifkin disappeared by the river's bank in Zone Two. It would be very difficult to trek blindly through the trees. Zone Two would be a vast dark wilderness, especially with night approaching. So, to many students and crewmen, the rescue seemed doomed from the start.

As Zither led the search team down the same beaten path that Team Two had taken this morning, he felt the same doubts and fears he had before, but this time he was accompanied by Rezwit and two adult crewmen, which added three additional stunners to their arsenal. This couldn't help fortify Zither's wavering courage. In addition to their handguns, they now had Rifkin's "pole bombs" which no one, not even Rezwit, wanted to deploy. They were, claimed Zither, who was an eyewitness to the actual account, unstable and not really intended for such use.

Second Mate Imwep actually led the expedition this time and Zither was merely the guide. At first Zither, the two officers, and Rezwit made a unsettling team. Rezwit, who had never spoken much to Zither before, talked to him even less now. Falon's officers treated them both with polite indifference bordering upon contempt. With little daylight left, they hoped to find Rifkin somewhere near the water's edge, but the only vantage point they would have now would be the small clearing in which Crawler Two had been parked earlier and the beaten path leading to the river bank. On each side of them there seemed to be an impenetrable wall of jungle. The trumpeting and thumping sounds of leviathans, the growls, hiss, and chirp of predators, and pervasive cacophony of small mammals, birds, and lizards skittering throughout the forest, was most apparent with the engine turned off. The foursome sat expectantly in the crawler: Zither and Imwep in the front seat and Rezwit and Kogin sitting quietly in back.

"Search team to bridge, this is Team Leader Imwep," the Second Mate reported in to the bridge.

"Team Leader, this is the commander," responded Falon crisply. "Rescue Team One sound off!"

“Second Mate Imwep, sir.”

“Third Mate Kogin, sir.”

“Student Collector Zither, sir.”

“Student Collector Rezwit, sir.”

It was a historic moment for the ship’s company, especially since the commander had given the search team its official name. As members of Rescue Team One, students and crewman were now working together as a team. Back on the ship, Doctor Arkru sat in a state close to emotional exhaustion between Orix and Zorig at the bridge. Behind them, the professor’s technicians and the remaining students stood amongst off-duty crewmen, waiting anxiously for word of Rifkin. Urlum had been allowed to sit on the bridge beside her brother Zorig. Her normally twinkling eyes looked out dully through the window at the forbidden world. Her smiling face was now pale and expressionless as she listened to the search team report in.

The cynical attitude on the bridge now that Falon was in control made the crisis seem that much worse. Most of the officers, the commander included, didn’t think Rifkin stood a chance in the forest. The professor detected potential problems immediately when he heard the boys’ voices over the radio: Zither sounded frightened and Rezwit sounded belligerent. Irrational as it seemed, Rezwit resented Zither coming along as driver and guide. He thought he should be the guide or at least be behind the wheel, and he wanted Vimml to come along too—a request that had caused laughter on the bridge. Since bravery often eluded him during times of crisis, Zither, for his part, was displaying great courage by returning to Zone Two. He didn’t need Rezwit’s jealousy right now. But Falon had no intention of humoring the over permissive professor anymore. Unlike Arkru, he was not interested in Zither or Rezwit’s state of mind during this venture.

“Imwep,” he instructed the Second Mate now, “I want your driver to make a careful sweep of the clearing and river. I want Rescue Team One to follow it down as far as it can be safely done before heading back to the ship. There’s a chance, if you miss him at the collection point, he might try to reach you on the path.”

“We gotta go down to the river to find Rifkin!” Rezwit blurted as Imwep considered Falon’s plan.

“Team Leader,” called the commander, ignoring Rezwit’s interruption, “you have your orders. I want no more outbursts from that child. I don’t want you lads attempting any heroics out there with all those monsters on the prowl. Have you had any problems with spike-toes or leapers on the way?”

“Nothing yet sir,” replied Imwep, giving Rezwit’s helmet a thump. “We’ve certainly heard a lot of interesting noises in the forest: groans, grunts, whistles, and even chirps. Several of those blighters crossed our path on the way, but so far they’ve left us alone.”

“Very good, Imwep,” Falon grumbled with approval. “Don’t take any chances. If predators even look like they’re attacking, *shoot them dead!*”

“Sir!” Kogin spoke up quickly. “We need to test our guns out, using maximum frequency, on one these brutes to make sure they’re effective!”

“I’m not comfortable with that idea,” Arkru muttered to Falon on the bridge. “Those uneducated bumpkins are going to turn this rescue into a sport.”

“I don’t see why not,” Falon agreed with Kogin, ignoring the professor’s scowl. “I’m told you’re our best marksmen, Kogin. Next time one of those fellows crosses your path, let ’em have it!”

“You mean kill them?” Zither cried in disbelief. “Just to test out our guns?”

“Yes, of course,” Rezwit now seemed deranged, “we should even toss some of those poles if necessary! I don’t care how many of these beasts we kill!”

Imwep thumped his helmet again. Kogin was already drawing a bead on a small, dark green biped, watching them through the trees. The strange looking creature had a spiny crest on its head and large intelligent eyes. Everyone in the crawler, except the ecologically minded Zither, felt they had been given *carte blanche* by the commander to kill on sight.

“Falon,” the professor whispered, tapping his arm, “you’re making a mistake here. I detect dissent about this matter between my students. May I speak to them?”

“Well,... all right.” The commander nodded curtly, “but make it brief!”

“I’m shocked at your attitude toward Zither, Rezwit!” the professor came straight to the point. “I find your sudden bloodlust for alien life inexcusable! I don’t *ever* want to hear you talk like that again!” “Zither,” his tone changed immediately, “I’m very proud of you lad. Your heart is in the right place. I may not agree with them taking potshots at alien life forms, but I’m afraid the commander’s right about monsters. There might not be enough daylight left for a proper and safe search. If we don’t find him today, we’ll try bright and early tomorrow.”

“But it might be too late then,” Rezwit grew agitated again. “Who knows what might happen to Rifkin tonight? We’ve gotta get him outta there *now!*”

“Rezwit,” Arkru yelled, “I want you to shut up! You can’t help your friend right now!”

This time Third Mate Kogin thumped Rezwit’s helmet severely. Afterwards, Imwep reached over the front seat and turned him rudely around in his seat.

“Listen, you little moron,” he growled under his breath, “you leave that mouth of yours shut tight while the adults are talking, you understand?”

Rezwit nodded angrily. Several cheers followed on the bridge. Zither couldn’t help smiling as the conversation between Falon and Imwep continued unabated, as if a mere trifle of static had interrupted them just now.

The commander cautioned Imwep against waiting until the sun was low in the horizon, which was the professor’s concern too. The shadows of the forest would make it almost night for them if they waited too long. Their main mission, he explained, was to scout out Zone Two for signs of Rifkin and find out if there are any peripheral trails that can be navigated by the crawler. As they signed off, Zither felt that emotional umbilical cord he had experienced the first day they stepped out the ship onto this dreadful world. He was torn by his need to redeem himself after wishing Rifkin ill and his desire to get away from these ‘warmongering’ military types and return to the security of the ship.

“All right lads,” Falon addressed them from the bridge, “we’re just going to listen the rest of the way. If you have any questions whatsoever, speak up immediately. Imwep and Kogin: you fellows be sensible about testing those stunners. Those poles, by the way, are a last resort. Let’s not rile the native wild life too much!”

After the commander and professor turned down their transmitters, Arkru protested angrily to Falon: “I can’t believe you gave Kogin permission to use Irignian creatures as target practice. That’s not necessary. It’s not only barbaric, but it might prove to be dangerous. What if they merely provoke a group of predators? Let’s not forget that they’re greatly outnumbered out there!”

“That’ll be quite enough!” Falon exploded. “I’m in command of this vessel. I will decide whether or not we test out our guns on these dim-witted brutes. If need be, thanks to your force field poles, they can blow those brutes to bits!”

Arkru's eyes narrowed to slits. "You're in charge of the ship Falon, but I'm in charge of the ark and mission. The only reason you're in command of this ship is to take us to our destination. Our ship's purpose is scientific exploration and collection. I'm the scientist, not you. So help me, by Izmir, I will tell the mother ship you're undermining the mission if you interfere with our work!"

"Doctor Arkru! Commander Falon! Please," Zorig cried, "I see a serious breach between our two leaders that must cease. Commander Falon, sir, we don't follow military rules. We follow a scientific code. Clearly they're in disharmony this time, if you're telling your officers to wantonly shoot alien life. And yet, Doctor Arkru, I can't see the point in endangering our students anymore."

"Precisely what do you mean?" The professor could not believe his ears. "Are you suggesting we give up before we even start?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all," Zorig threw up his hands. "I think we should turn the entire rescue over to professionals. I just wish they could proceed without scorching the forest to a blackened cinder as the Old Ones did to Rimmi!"

"Thanks to our Fathers of Science, we no longer have those capabilities," Falon reminded him bitterly. "What's the harm in killing one or two of those ugly brutes to make sure our guns work? This planet is teeming with all manner of creature. I frankly don't understand the professor's pacifistic views on alien life!"

"No, Falon, you don't understand," Arkru quickly retorted. "This has nothing to do with animal pacifism. It has to do with common sense. It's dangerous and foolish to take on creatures that we know absolutely nothing about. The guns were designed for a different setting and the poles were not designed as weapons *at all!* Your officers might get the rescue team surrounded by a pack of those killers. What if the guns are not effective enough and they're able to break through and grab one of the lads? What if the unstable poles are mishandled during their panic and they blow themselves to bits?"

"Humph.... Very well, I see your point," Falon said begrudgingly. "No random firing Imwep and Kogin," he barked, after turning up the transmitter. "Pick your targets well. Unless your lives are absolutely threatened, leave those poles alone!"

"We heard you loud and clear sir," Imwep replied, winking at Kogin, as they both set their frequencies on kill. "We won't fire randomly.... We'll take careful aim!"

Without further delay, the first rescue team advanced to action as the aliens climbed cautiously out of their seats. All four of them drew their stunners and looked carefully around the clearing.

"All right," Zither piped, leading them to the river's edge, "this is where we netted the long-neck. This is a good place to start." "... Over there," he said, pointing a gloved finger, "is where Rifkin led the dragon away from us. We lost track of him at the bend of the river."

"You should've saved him," cried Rezwit, stomping his boot. "I would've gone in there and looked for him! I wouldn't have returned to the ship so soon!"

"I don't believe it," the professor muttered from the bridge. "He's almost as bad as Rifkin. He just won't shut up!"

"We'll have no more of that," Kogin informed Rezwit this time. "We'll have our look-see, but unless we trek into the jungle, itself, we're not gonna find your friend."

"Then let's do it," Rezwit replied, walking a few paces toward the trees. "Let's go in there. We got our guns. We'll just blast our way in!"

“Simmer down lad.” Imwep restrained him. “We’re not trekking anywhere wearing these suits. We go where we can take the crawler, nowhere else.”

“That’s right lad,” chortled Kogin. “This is not Revekia or Orm. We don’t have regular bodies here!”

“He’s right Rezwit.” Zither tried to lay a hand on Rifkin’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me you coward!” Rezwit shrugged off his arm.

“Rezwit,” Zither shouted, “this was not my fault! It was Rifkin’s doing! Why do you blame *me*?”

“Imwep and Kogin,” Falon broke his silence, “deal with that lad!”

Imwep jerked Rezwit to one side, while Kogin gently guided Zither to the other. There was an intake of breaths heard from the bridge but no more interruptions for a while.

“Listen, you little hubrid-brain,” Imwep snarled, knocking Rezwit’s helmet several times. “I’ve been watching that friend of yours, Rifkin Whats-His-Face, and let me tell you lad—he’s to blame for this. Zither is still a child and so are you. Your professor forgot that when he sent children to do an adult’s job! You mind your place or I’ll take a switch to you on the ship!”

As Imwep gave Rezwit a dressing down, Kogin used a very gentle approach with Zither, who had won both officers’ sympathy for having to put up with Rifkin and then Rezwit today.

“Your problem,” he shook his finger, “is not cowardice. You’re too nice. Young folks like that Rifkin and Rezwit will learn only one way!”

Kogin doubled up his fist to make his point.

“That’s barbaric!” Zither exclaimed, wrinkling his nose.

“Life aboard ship *is* barbaric,” Kogin smiled. “You’ve had a lot of trouble with Rifkin and his gang. I’ve heard all about it from the professor. But believe me lad, someone like that Rezwit respects only one thing.” “Blap-blap-blap!” He socked his palm.

“Yes,... perhaps your right,” Zither nodded dubiously, obligingly drawing his hand into a fist.

In spite of his rough and barbaric ways, Zither had begun to like the crusty Third Mate. He half agreed with the notion of testing their guns if it could be done humanely. Perhaps they could kill a wounded creature that was going to die anyway, he reasoned. It would certainly be necessary to kill a predator if they were attacked. In this respect, Zither took comfort that he had befriended the best marksmen aboard the ship.

“Your bigger than Rezwit,” he heard Kogin say to him as he stood there deep in thought. “Use your ‘bigness.’ Next time he mouths off to you on the ship, hit him. Hit him real hard. You’ll see what I mean!”

Zither said nothing this time, as he reached in a Revekian gesture of friendship to grip Kogin’s arm. Imwep had said much less to Rezwit, whom he believed was the core of the problem. There was no mistake in Zither’s mind whose side the officers were on. Whatever Imwep had said to Rezwit had caused an immediate, though temporary, change in Rezwit’s attitude toward him. After Imwep’s indelicate prodding, Rezwit stuck out a glove and he and Zither gripped forearms as the two officers looked on.

“That’s more like it,” Imwep said, nudging Kogin’s shoulder. “Two whelps making peace. Its does a body good!”

“What about Rifkin?” Rezwit looked from Imwep to Kogin. “Are we just going to give up?”

“No, of course not,” Zither assured him bravely. “We’ll continue to scan the bank. Maybe we’ll walk up the edge of the river a bit. Who knows, he might even show up somewhere down the way.”

“Oh, is that right trooper?” Kogin tapped his helmet playfully. “And how long will we be standing out there with that river dragon about?”

Zither stood there scanning the river. In the distance, as the water turned sharply south, he could see the monstrous hulk of the alamosaurus discovered by Rifkin. It was the most massive creature they had ever seen. There were several such giants along the river, but this leviathan was only a few hundred epsols away. Gliding past this giant, the water dragon Zither had witnessed before seemed to be heading their way until it disappeared suddenly into the depths. The whole project to find Rifkin seemed doomed from the start. It was, he realized grimly, as if they were all going to make some sort of token effort to find Rifkin, when in fact no one knew how to accomplish this without, as Rezwit suggested, *going in*.

The very thought made him shudder.

Zither, who was the only expert on Zone Two, was aware of the irregular shoreline. He knew Rifkin had disappeared beyond the bend of the river and there was absolutely no way that they could find him without somehow venturing that way. It suddenly dawned on him that Rifkin’s crawler might be on the other side of the river, bogged down in the thrushes, which made his situation even more hopeless. How could Rifkin ever make it out of there on foot? After falling into the river, did he even have his stunner with him? What could this puny little band of heavily suited-up aliens with their untested guns do against the awesome horror of Irignum’s forest?

It was at that point that Zither noticed the volcanic neck jutting out of a mantle of green. The rock sat due west and was less than a deben (roughly one earth mile) from where they stood. He could barely make it out among the foreground of trees, but there was no mistaking the fact that this was the highest point in this portion of the jungle. It was a perfect lookout point for someone to view the forest below.

“Wake up lad,” Kogin called, poking his arm. “Let’s drive down the path as the commander suggested. Maybe we’ll run into your friend.”

“Wait!” Zither suddenly cried, pointing to the summit. “Look, Kogin, do you see that little peak?”

“Why yes, I do,” Kogin nodded, shielding his eyes from the evening sun, which on Irignum sat in the west.

“Does this have meaning lad?” Imwep joined the vigil.

“Yes, I bet he’ll climb up there to gain his bearings,” answered Zither. “It’s what I’d do.” “Professor,” he called over the radio, “I think I know which way Rifkin might have gone.”

“What? Tell me Zither,” the professor grew excited.

The officers on the bridge stirred, murmuring to each other about what Zither had just claimed.

“He’ll climb down and follow the river back to where he was before,” Zither continued. “He has no choice unless he wants to travel the jungle alone.”

“That means he could just as easily be heading south,” remarked Arkru. “I noticed, as we were touching down on Irignum, the river, though flowing west awhile in Zone Two, bends sharply south in Zone One.”

“Yes, Rifkin found a beaten path in that sector,” Zither reminded him eagerly. “He won’t want to head back to the water dragon. But if he can skirt the river until he finds his crawler, he might take the risk.”

“Yes, yes, he has two options. This means that we need three or perhaps four rescue teams,” the professor informed everyone listening to their conversation, “one that will cover Zone Two, one that will cover Zone One, and additional teams to drive up and down both beaten paths in case Rifkin shows up and needs a ride back to the ship. We’re running out of daylight now, but tomorrow bright and early we’ll do this rescue right. I’ll take a rescue team into Zone One, Zither can guide Imwep’s team into Zone Two, and we can get volunteers to patrol the paths.”

“Does this mean we’re going on foot?” Zither tried not to sound hysterical.

“That’s a good question. We’ll talk more about this aboard ship,” Falon sounded incredulous at this point. “These students are still children professor; I can see allowing them to search for Rifkin if they stay in the crawlers, but they require supervision. I insist that you let my First Mate Remgen lead one of the roving patrols; that way he can come to your rescue if the need arises. We’ll decide this evening exactly which volunteers are on what teams.”

“Will he last that long?” Rezwit asked, stricken by the thought that Rifkin would have to spend a night out here alone.

“Don’t worry Rezwit,” the professor spoke kindly from the bridge. “Hobi told me that they recharged Rifkin’s canisters. He has plenty of air. We’ll find him.”

“If he doesn’t find us first!” Imwep piped, giving Rezwit’s helmet another thump.

In inverse ratio to Rifkin’s rising fears, Irignum’s sun sank lower and lower in the west. Soon it would disappear completely in the horizon. He could, from his vantage point, barely detect the beaten path used by herds traveling to the river’s edge. Between the volcanic neck on which he stood and Team Two’s beaten path, however, there was over a mile of impenetrable jungle. If he could somehow build a fire, he could signal to his ship, though he didn’t want anyone crossing the forest to save him now. Even if they knew precisely where he was, how could they safely send out a team to rescue him? Where would they begin? How many of them would be attacked and eaten by predators during the attempt?

“No,” he told himself grimly, “I got myself into this; I’ll get myself out. One thing is certain; I can’t travel at night. I’ll have to find shelter soon and build myself a fire!”

Rifkin felt some comfort in hearing his own voice. Perhaps the communication equipment in his helmet would soon be dry enough for the bridge to hear him too. Added to his fears was the possibility that his fire starter had been, as his radio, damaged in the water. The dangers of darkness, he was certain, were very great on Irignum; he needed fire to protect him and somewhere safe to hide. Searching Earth’s heavens for a moon, similar to the great luminous moon over his own planet, Rifkin was dismayed to find it still brimming in the east as the sun sat in the west. This struck him as bizarre since the sun rose and sat just the opposite on his world. The questions are, he asked himself, ‘how long will it take Irignum’s pitifully small moon to rise?’ and ‘how much light will it give me up here when it finally comes?’ The eerie sounds of the jungle filled him with dread as he stood precariously on the jagged outcrop of rock and surveyed the forest surrounding his ship.

In the distance, several miles north of his summit, over a dense mountainous forest that would one day become an arid desert of plateaus, arroyos, and dry stream beds, Rifkin could see

the smoke of a volcano rise ominously from its smoldering mouth. He wondered if they would even pay attention to a pitifully small plum of smoke if he built a signal fire. It would be sheer insanity for anyone to attempt to cross this stretch of jungle at night.

As he scanned the jungle below, the most hideous creature Rifkin had ever seen came out of the sky. Like the flying creature Zither had bagged in Zone Three but much larger, an ugly misshapen reptile with huge wings, a great beak and gargoyle head swooped down upon the morsel perched on the rock.

Fortunately for Rifkin, the flyer was far enough away to allow him to make a frantic scramble down the rock. If the creature were to grab him in the clutches of its claws now, he would either be eaten outright by the beast or his suit would be punctured and he would die a slow, painful death while the creature carried him back to its nest.

As he ducked into a crevice below the rim of the rock, he prayed to Izmir for delivery. He heard the scratch of claws on the summit and was enveloped by its shadow as it hovered there on the precipice overhead. The flying reptile, whose fossil remains would one day be dubbed Quetzalcoatlus, made a honking and hissing noise as it searched impatiently around the perimeter of the rock. Rifkin, who was only a few feet below it, was wedged into a precarious spot near the summit. Afraid that enough of him might be exposed for the creature to reach over the ledge and pluck him out with its beak, Rifkin scooted further into the crevice and took a dreadful chance rupturing some of his equipment or tearing his suit. It was at that critical point that he heard a faint voice in his helmet. He had hoped it had just been the moisture and sludge in his radio that had prevented it from working and, after drying out, it would begin working again, but the radio had remained silent for too long. Now, when such silence could save his life, the professor's voice had finally come through.

"Rifkin," he called hoarsely, "if you're out there, come in my son!"

"Oh, now I'm his son," Rifkin muttered bitterly. "When I need silence, I'm his son!"

"Please shut up!" he whispered inaudibly, wishing he could turn down volume of the radio. At the commander's insistence, he recalled, the professor had given the students' radios a permanent setting. Under normal circumstances, Rifkin and his classmates could hear a constant din of conversation and static. He had tried, during Team One's collection, to tamper with the controls only to find the knobs spinning uselessly because of the professor's modification. Now he needed silence more than anything else, and yet he longed to hear the professor's voice.

On Raethia, he remembered light-headedly, the creatures were deaf and relied totally on sight and smell, but then Raethia was a quiet world; Irignum was filled with noise and vibrations at every turn. On Raethia, with the exception of the dakka, the creatures were much smaller than the leviathans on Irignum, and it wouldn't matter if they could hear. When the reception began to clear again, and the professor's voice momentarily blared into his ears, Rifkin set aside these trifling reflections and responded softly into his helmet microphone, "Rifkin here.... Arkru come in.... I'm alive!"

"What's that Rifkin?" Arkru voice grew faint again. "I can barely hear you.... Where are you lad?"

"I-I don't know exactly," Rifkin confessed, peeking apprehensively up at the summit. "I'm on this big volcanic boulder and there's this big flyer on top trying to eat me. Your voice is fading professor, but it's just as well; I don't need a lot of noise right now."

"What's that Rifkin? I can barely hear you. Speak up lad!" Arkru shouted from the bridge. "Did you say that you were on a volcanic boulder? Zither said you'd be there. We're going to get four rescue teams to search for you tomorrow. Tell me which direction you'll be

heading, so we can have a crawler waiting to pick you up.” But the professor’s last important sentences were too faint for Rifkin to hear.

Rifkin knew with sinking spirits that his radio was still seriously damaged. The tiny buzz of the professor’s voice grew fainter and fainter, until it vanished altogether as it had before. Had he been hiding on the other side of the summit, he would have looked out to see his shipmates moving back to the ship and would have been even more depressed than he was now. What he did glimpse directly above him struck him numb with fear. The pterodactyl was trying, after cocking its wedge-shaped head to the side and trying to pinpoint the source of the sounds, to snip him out of his hideout, while balancing its awkward, oversized winged body on the rock.

Though terrified, Rifkin was not surprised. The professor had made enough noise. The great beak was only inches from his exposed boot, but the creature could not seem to get a grip on him at the angle from which it was leaning off the rock. After several attempts, it just sat there awhile honking and hissing until suddenly and inexplicably it began flapping its mighty wings and flew away. Though no one on the bridge could hear, Rifkin let out a Revekian war whoop. He had survived his fourth encounter with predators. A dragon, a sail-backed monster, a pair of leapers, and now a flying monster had failed to end his short life.

With night falling, he knew that he had to find a place to build a fire and hide until daybreak. His helmet lamp might light his way until the battery ran out, but it would also provide night creatures, such as the flyer, with an excellent beacon to zero in on him for the kill. For the time being, his main goal was to get off the rock before darkness fell. That would be almost as great a miracle as escaping from the dragon and then escaping the flyer on the rock.

He felt a strange inscrutable confidence returning to him now. So far Izmir had been with him. If only he would give him two more miracles and get him off the rock and also allow him to find a safe place to build a fire. He knew that, with the fading light, climbing down a volcanic surface would be much more difficult than climbing up. Looking down the face of the rock now, Rifkin noticed that there were enough jagged outcrops below him to make a descent. Soon he would have to use his helmet light to forge the darkness. It would be night by the time he reached the bottom of the rock, and he would be fair game for the creepers, crawlers and leapers of the jungle floor. Hopefully, the flyer would not come back and try again.

As Rifkin began his descent, he was forced to stop continually and gauge each step and handhold on the way. It was a slow and painstaking journey. Finally, after turning his helmet light on, he could see the ground close below him. Just a few more steps and he would be able to search the base of this volcanic neck for a cave or recess in the rock. He would be safe soon. He might even survive.

Rifkin prayed deliriously now for deliverance from his descent and was gratified to feel his boot touch the grass at the bottom of the dome. A brightly colored frill-necked lizard ran past him just then, startling him half out of his wits. As he scanned the darkness, he heard Whoop-whoop-whoop! EE-EE-ee-ee! EE-EE-ee-ee! and S-s-s-s-s-s-s! noises—sounds of night creatures calling to each other or on the prowl.

Once again he heard static on his radio interspersed with the muffled sounds of someone trying unsuccessfully to reach him. “Professor! Professor! Do you hear me professor!” he called again.

Scanning the exterior of the dome, he noticed that there were countless crevices at its perimeter, but so far in his search he had not seen anything large enough to be classified as a cave or recess in the rock. He grew frantic when he found himself plunged into the thick of night with nothing but menacing shadows on his right and jagged and unfriendly rock on his left.

When he was almost ready to drop from exhaustion and was once more in the throes of panic, he finally detected a large black hole in the side of the rock. Turning toward it and allowing his helmet light to scan its exterior, he discovered that there were no occupants in the cave. Not far from the shelter was some dry brush, too sparse to burn as firewood but perfect to act as kindling when he found enough wood.

“All right,” he told himself shakily as he looked over at the trees, “I must quickly find some large branches to burn. I can’t stay out here very long!”

Below his feet, as he walked gingerly across a clearing not far away from the little cave, he could, in fact, hear the crunch of small branches. He picked some of them up for extra kindling. After a few more steps, he looked ahead and saw a rotting log. Dropping the kindling into a decayed cavity in the log, he grabbed onto the dead limb and drug it quickly to the mouth of his cave. Kicking out a large enough impression in the ground with his boot, he laid the log in its center, arranged the kindling around it and made a hasty fire ring with the stones lying in the cave.

“All right Rifkin,” he murmured aloud, “you learned how to start fires in the Junior Trooper League. Now what you need is a lighter that works.” “Please Izmir, make it work!” he prayed, looking down at the special compartment in his life support system. Reaching into the pouch labeled ‘Emergency Kit,’ which he hoped was as watertight as his suit, he searched for the small black lighter amongst the first aid gear and other odds and ends. When he had it enclosed in his gloves and had brought it reverently out into the beam of his helmet light, he held his breath with anticipation and gave it a flick. It’s abrupt flash of brilliance was the most beautiful light he had ever seen. Without further delay he lit the kindling and stood back excitedly to watch countless insects and one small lizard jump free of the rotting log.

“Sorry fellows,” he said, sitting down beside the fire, “I didn’t know this was your home.”

Rifkin turned his helmet light off and reached down to touch his communicator controls. The radio, which had been emitting occasional bursts of static, remained silent as he spun the knob. Checking the gas meter on his chest, he was gratified to see that it was still three quarters full. This was, by far, the most important factor protecting his life. Without the required gas mixture, he would suffocate inside his suit. It was bad enough being trapped in this awkward suit without worrying about asphyxiation.

Now that he had a small fire, he was thankful that he had found a large enough log to burn all night. All creatures seemed to be afraid of fire—except the jummi on Raethia, who deliberately incinerated themselves when they saw a flame. Here, on Irignum, darkness would probably mean death, even inside this cave. It appeared as if the entire planet was one immense feeding ground. Everything was eating everything else, everywhere all the time. The noises of the night were constant and unwavering and, now that night had fallen, the darkness beneath the mantle of green was complete.

Propping himself against the side of the cave, Rifkin longed for the weapon he had lost in the water but was thankful that he had been able to make himself a fire at the mouth of his cave. It burned just enough to give him warmth and security and provided him with a natural barrier between himself and the jungle outside. He was apparently safe and sound beside his fire. He didn’t feel safe enough to fall asleep with so many sounds in the night, but he knew he couldn’t remain awake, especially with so much lying ahead. If he had his stunner in his glove, he could wake up just in time to zap any prowler close to the cave. The next best thing for him was to hold a rock in his lap, as he allowed himself to finally fall asleep.

In another more benign world Rifkin found himself walking hand-in-hand with Urlum down a path on Raethia, which led to a secluded lake fed by a cold mountain stream. Raethia had fruit they could eat and water they could drink. It had been a safer and gentler time on this world. The previous planets they had visited had only a few dangerous creatures, which were easily frightened away, even without guns. The air on these worlds had been breathable. They didn't need their cumbersome life support systems. There were beautiful flowers and, except for the darters and skippers living on a few islands on Tomol, pesky creatures could be managed by simply shooing them away.

As he sat there dreaming by the fire, several small furry creatures stared at him from the bushes. A small, dark green biped, with a spiny crest and large probing eyes, stopped to glance at the conflagration before continuing to hunt the darkness for prey. A large multicolored snake wound quietly through the grass nearby, searching for victims in the night.

Chapter Nine

The Rescue Teams

Back on the ship, as Rifkin slept fitfully in his cave, the professor, Zorig, Falon, and his officers sat grimly in the officer's lounge. Along with most of the ship's company, the students and technicians were in their pods, as children should be, their exhaustion too great for them to hold vigil any longer on Rifkin's behalf. Although the professor was aware of Falon's moods, he had never seen him this way before. Falon, who had never liked Rifkin, had almost written him off as a lost cause. Most of the commander's officers felt the same way, and even Arkru's own chief technician was pessimistic about ever finding Rifkin on time.

"I know you grieve for Rifkin," Falon spoke gently at first, "but, while some of us look for him, others must go on with our mission. The ark is far from being filled with Irignian creatures. Professor, you think we need four rescue teams—one to cover Zone One, one to cover Zone Two, and a third and fourth to patrol the beaten paths. I've thought about this, and I partially agree. But we must face four concerns in this dilemma: Rifkin's limited supply of air, damaged radio, vulnerable life-support system, and the possibility his suit might be torn. After the established time limit decided by his air supply, we must go on from there. We must finish our expeditions on this forsaken planet then rendezvous with the Mother Ship as planned. Our emotions can guide us only so far."

Zorig, who felt guilty for his wish that the troublesome Rifkin would never return, was the only one at the informal meeting to side with the professor. Nevertheless, he spoke what was in his heart.

"Rifkin might already be dead," he said, half hoping, himself, it was true.

"If he isn't yet dead," Remgen exclaimed coldly, "he *will be* by morning!"

"As I said," Falon looked directly into Arkru's eyes, "we can't wait forever for him. Unless he shows himself soon, we're not going to be able to find him in that thick cloak of green. He could be anywhere... if he even stays alive in the darkness tonight."

"I don't care how impossible it sounds," the professor demanded, stomping his foot, "we must do our best to find Rifkin. He's alone out there. We all heard his voice. He said he was on a volcanic rock of some kind. Zither saw this rock Falon; so did your officers. Undoubtedly, he'll head back to the ship on his own. He might even locate the crawler and find the ship by himself."

"You're assuming he survives Irignum's night," Dazl countered, clasping his head with his four digit hands. "It staggers the imagination to visualize what goes on out there in the daytime! Can you imagine what goes on at *night*?"

"We must save poor Rifkin!" Arkru looked for agreement in the room.

At this point he needed his students' support. Even the cautious Zorig seemed to see Rifkin as a lost cause. "There-there," he murmured to the professor as if he was consoling a small child.

The professor was beside himself with worry and perhaps, they all suspected, a measure of guilt. He now excused himself abruptly from the meeting. Zorig hastened after him to the bridge where Third Mate Kogin sat watch, barely awake after today's effort in the jungle. Several of the younger team members who admired Rifkin's spirit but resented the predicament

he placed them in gave mixed responses to Arkru's call to action today. Vimml, who should have been restricted indefinitely to the ship after his performance with Zither, had volunteered immediately. Rezwit had wanted a search team to plunge right into the forest today, blasting away with their stunners until they found Rifkin alive and well. Everyone else had expressed great alarm in Rifkin's predicament, but they also displayed irritation at his foolishness and the fact that his recklessness would place them in danger now.

"I wish we didn't have to use children in the search," the professor murmured to Zorig as he recalled their reaction this evening. "Many of them are frightened at the prospect. It seems unfair that I'm placing them in harm's way."

"Why should we suffer for Rifkin foolishness?" groaned Zorig. "Everything was going well until he began acting like a fool!"

"Nevertheless," Arkru said firmly, spreading his hands with finality, "we're going to search for Rifkin. Falon can't stop me. He wouldn't dare. Since there are two possible directions that Rifkin is heading—back to Zone Two to find his crawler or through Zone One to reach the ship on foot, I will lead one expedition into the Zone One and Imwep will lead another into Zone Two. First Mate Remgen and you, Zorig, will lead a third and fourth rescue team along the beaten paths of Zone One and Two, respectively, in the hopes that Rifkin will emerge on one of the paths. Rescue Teams One and Two may have to search for him *on foot!*"

When Zorig didn't respond this time, he nudged him as they stood looking out into the night.

"Come on, Zorig," he coaxed him gently, "you must do this willingly. If the situation was reversed, Rifkin would save *you*."

Orix appeared suddenly on the bridge with the request that they join the officers in the dining hall for a late night snack. As they followed the navigator, the professor suspected it was a sort of peace offering by the commander for the hostility growing between them. He was hungry and suddenly very thirsty for some cold Revekian beer. Falon took the opportunity, as they waited for Wurbl and Imyor to arrive with their snack, to remind the professor that his first responsibility as commander was the operation of the ship.

"As long as the mother ship is deep in space," he told Arkru, "you remain in charge of this mission, but it's my duty to protect the crew and run this ship. The ark's capacity for alien specimens is a long way from reaching its limit. Within the next few weeks, when it's time to rendezvous with the mother ship, the collections will have to be complete. You and your students must have everything done at that point so we can depart."

"I understand your responsibilities. I don't need you to remind me of *mine*," Arkru replied, smiling forbearingly as Falon fidgeted in his chair.

He realized now how very much the commander hated this hostile world and wanted to leave. He and his officers would be very happy if they left it a burnt cinder if it meant saving members of the crew.

"We have, I admit," Arkru contemplated the jungle's treasures, "a long way to go before we can be satisfied with our collections for Irignum. There are so many different kinds of creatures out there that must be included in the ark. But my only concern at this point is for Rifkin. He's out in that nightmarish wilderness right now." "... We have to find that young numbskull before we continue collecting," he whispered almost to himself. "I fear the worst has befallen my star pupil, but I can't give up!"

"For Urlum's sake," Zorig blurted testily, "I agree. We're honor bound to find him, but you must punish him this time professor. Once and for all you must put him in his place!"

“You never liked Rifkin,” Arkru frowned disapprovingly at his assistant. “Your concern for your little sister’s feelings about Rifkin should be at the bottom of this. I can understand these sorts of cares. But I believe there is something else in your attitude that belies your concern... something less noble than brotherly affection.... Is it jealousy Zorig? Or are you afraid?”

“No sir, that’s nonsense,” Zorig shook his head emphatically as he rose from his seat. “I’m no more afraid than anyone else who must walk into that deathtrap. But I *am* irritated. It’s just plain aggravation that you see. Nothing else. You’ve gone the limit in your patience with Rifkin. Everyone else, not just me, feels this is so. Look what he’s gone and done now. Do you know how dangerous a rescue mission is going to be if we have to go deep into the forest—especially on foot? Some of us *could die* in the process! Is it so unnatural not to want to throw you life away for someone who never follows the rules?”

“Makes sense to me,” Falon said, pursing his lips.

“I’m very well aware of the dangers Zorig. I’m also aware the predicament Rifkin has placed us in,” Arkru sat back wearily in his chair. “That’s why I need your cooperation. Only student and technician volunteers will assist crewmembers in the rescue, and I will not allow your little sister Urlum to tag along. This is going to be dangerous. How do you think it made me feel to suggest using force field trap poles as bombs? There’s simply no precedent for what Rifkin is causing us to do. He has placed us all in harm’s way, just as I did when I endangered my class in the first place, but it has to be done. We simply can’t turn our backs on our colleague and let him die. We have to try!”

“That calls for a toast!” Remgen declared, watching Wurbl carry a platter of samgar and vragga cold cuts to the table. Imyor, who looked as if he might have been imbibing himself, carried a tray of Revekian beer, the officers’ favorite beverage, in a second tray. The professor knew he was being foolish again, but he was the first to grab his mug.

“My shipmates and comrades,” Falon offered, as they were all poured a mug of cold beer, “I make a toast to the brave students, technicians, crewmen, and officers volunteering to find Rifkin in the jungle. May they return safely, with or without achieving their goal!”

The adult volunteers slept more peacefully that night than the student volunteers who would join them in the search for Rifkin in the morning. Revekian beer was an excellent sleep-aid, especially when drunk to excess. Rifkin had slept soundly in a sitting position for several hours, awakening with a stiff neck late at night. After rising shakily to his feet and stretching his stiff neck, he stoked the fire, relieved to see the log only partially burned. As the fire came back to life, he remembered his pleasant dream about Urlum. So far nothing had disturbed him in his small shelter. As he suspected, the universal fear of fire exhibited by animals was strong on Irignum. There were a few insects that strayed into the fire as the jummi might do, but he remained safe and secure behind his barricade of flames. The cave he had selected was so shallow and small that only the smallest of the forest’s denizens could have lived in it. He noticed in the firelight tracks and spore, probably from a scaly crawler or one of those small furry creatures darting through the forest. On the wall, growing as a vine from an outside plant, he could also see tiny fruit sprouting from a cluster of leaves.

For the first time since his ordeal began, Rifkin realized how very hungry and thirsty he was. He had no way of knowing what was or wasn’t poisonous on this world. More importantly he could not, even if it was safe to do so, eat one piece of its forbidden fruit nor, as he had done

on his planet, lick the dew from the leaves of bushes and trees. He was trapped in his life support system and shut off from the touch, taste and smells of Irignum.... Yet he was alive, he reminded himself. A battery powered air-conditioning unit in his life support system kept his body at a comfortable temperature regardless of the temperature outside. His bodily wastes, broken down by chemicals, continued to accumulate, as always, in a canister in his suit. His gas gauge, he noted with satisfaction, registered three quarters full. Now that he thought about it, he realized he had probably used a fourth or fifth of his air supply during his climb. According to the professor, a team member used far more gas during activity than during rest. During sleep they would use even less. The trick was to ration your use of gas by regulating your movement. As he sat staring at his fire, he recalled Doctor Arkru's lecture about the life support system and realized how difficult it was to follow his rules.

His wrist communicator, though out of range of the ship's computer, was filled with useful information, including the Doctor Arkru's notes. In the dim light, using the small magnifying glass stored in his communicator's case, he brought up from his database the Five Cardinal Rules of Life Support System Use:

- (1) Frequently check your suit's equipment and gauges (gas supply, air conditioning, radio, and waste management) to insure your survival during exploration.
- (2) While on foot and not in the crawler, move slowly and deliberately to avoid physical exertion in your suit.
- (3) Avoid jagged surfaces and corrosive material to maintain the integrity of the suit.
- (4) Never climb up a surface when you can go around it, for this takes twice as much effort and therefore twice as much gas.
- (5) Though the life support system is watertight, avoid immersing it in water, since the suit was not designed for aquatic use.

Staring intently at the screen, he felt comforted, if not edified, by the glow. Now that his radio seemed dead, the small fluorescent crystal was his last link to the ship. He had never kept the first rule on the list, until this very hour, when he was forced to read his gauges, but it was the one rule he would keep for now on. To move slowly through the forest, however, as the second rule demanded seemed foolish, if he wanted to stay ahead of predators on his trail. Twice now, out of sheer necessity, he had broken the third and fourth rules—once with the professor and his classmates and now by himself, after climbing up the volcanic neck. Not only did this feat break cardinal rule three's command to avoid jagged surfaces but he had, contrary to the fourth rule, wasted much of his gas mixture climbing up the rock. As the first rule to avoid excessive exercise, the rules to avoid jagged surfaces or unforeseen obstacles overlooked the realities of this world. He laughed light-headedly now as he recalled how he broke rule five during his efforts to escape the river dragon. That episode had cost him his radio and stunner. So much for rules, he thought, switching off the screen. Revekian rules don't apply on this world!

Due to a limited supply of gas, he had only so much time, and yet he had to move carefully and silently and, when necessary, quickly through the jungle to avoid predators along the way... unless, he mused lazily, settling back down against the cave wall... he could find a log and float down the river toward the ship. That would take very little energy. It would, give or take a water dragon or two, be safer than trying to find the crawler and his path through the trees. On the other hand, the crawler still contained the remaining poles of Team Two's trap and was the quickest way back to the ship. His only other option was to climb back up the rock, build a fire and stay put on top until he was discovered by a rescue team. This would force his

shipmates to endanger their lives for him, the very notion filling him with shame. It would also signal to the great flyer that he was available again as its meal.

“Yes,” he told himself, trying not to think of his hunger and thirst, “I have options.” The question is, he thought, his eyelids falling to half-mast, which option will work the best, and which will allow me to live?

This was, Rifkin knew from experience, not the leisurely timeless environment of Revekia or Beskol, where trial and error was possible due to a breathable atmosphere and friendlier environment. This was Irignum, a planet of horrors and potential death at every turn. Time was at a premium now. When he finally fell back to sleep, it was not with the pleasant image of Urlum in his mind. The darkness and terror he had envisioned followed him into slumber and he was tormented with nightmares for the remainder of the night.

Awakening with a jolt after several hours of sleep, he looked about himself and realized that the first rays of sunlight were creeping finally through the trees. The noises of the jungle, always the same it seemed, sounded much louder to him this morning. The fire had almost gone out, its smoke a mere filament rising in front of the cave. Without further hesitation now, Rifkin struggled to his feet and gingerly moved around the edge of the campfire, looking both ways before stepping out fully into the world outside his cave. Looking back at his temporary shelter, he smiled fondly at his refuge. Feeling a warmth for his cave that he couldn't define, he set out carefully and watchfully down the animal-beaten path and looked back, after walking only a short distance, up to the rock.

Rifkin knew he couldn't stay where he was. His shipmates would never find him. The notion of climbing back up to build a signal fire was also not an option. Other than walk back to the ship in the hopes of being found or reaching the vessel on his own, it seemed he had only two other options: he could find his crawler, or, if this was impossible, somehow build a raft and float down the river through Zone One toward the ship. As he retraced the path through the forest that had led to the volcanic neck, he realized how ridiculous his raft idea had been. This feat, as building a fire on the rock, would be too big a task, if it was possible at all. Returning to the scene to find the crawler where the river monster lay in wait, for that matter, filled him with dread. Though the river dropped suddenly in a southerly direction, which brought it closer to the ship, it led him back through impenetrable jungle and a waterway ruled by water dragons.

Suddenly, as he followed the beaten path, he felt an abrupt silence in the jungle and felt a rumbling below his feet reminiscent of earthquakes he had experienced on other worlds. Stopping just long enough to watch, with horror, as several duckbilled creatures moved past him on all sides, he realized that a great leaper was chasing them and was heading his way.

Thump-thump, thumpety-thump... RRRRRRRRRRRRRR!

Rifkin looked around for cover, immediately scurried up a low-lying tree trunk nearby and managed to reach a point directly above the passing head of a tyrannosaurus in pursuit of its prey. The tree that he had climbed up was host to countless smaller creatures who hissed and chattered at him now that he had disturbed their nests. A tiny snake slithered over his arm just as a giant cockroach appeared suddenly on his leg. Small furry creatures skittered and scampered above. More fearful of the creature below than those in the trees right now, Rifkin ignored the reptile and insect as they crawled over him on their way up the tree. He also ignored the menacing hiss of a large lizard on an adjacent limb and a pair of primitive feathered flyers, who squawked at him and dive bombed his head. When the sound of the charging leaper had died

down and it appeared as if the threat had passed, Rifkin reluctantly slid and climbed down the tree.

The sounds of the jungle, were, he realized abstractedly, mainly from feathered flyers. Their constant chirps, whistles, and squawks had already returned now that the tyrannosaurus was gone, but he knew there were countless predators roaming around quietly in the forest and flying overhead. There simply were no safe paths in the jungle. In spite of his misgiving about returning to the river, he decided to concentrate on finding the crawler, which might be his only hope of getting out of the forest alive.

Breakfast for the ships' company this morning was noisy and chaotic. The student and technician volunteers did not share the carefree enthusiasm for adventure of the officers who had volunteered for the operation. The cavalier attitude of the officers toward this enterprise irked Rifkin's colleagues. Arkru's thought that the last minute wagering at the breakfast tables between Imwep, Kogin, and Remgen on who would "fry the most beasties," shouldn't have been tolerated by the commander. The most irksome event occurring to the professor this morning, however, was when Falon informed him that Chief Engineer Dazl would be on his team. Unless he left Alafa or Jitso behind, which he refused to do, Arkru would now have a five-member team, when the commander knew perfectly well that the crawler was designed for only four. The precedent had already been set, the commander reminded him, when the class took its safari into Zone Three. At that time, Urlum had been squeezed in between two technicians, Ibris and Tobit, a fact that had slipped the professor's mind. Moreover, according to Falon, it was important that the operation be done quickly and expeditiously, but it must also be done right. Dazl could fix the crawlers if anything went wrong. Falon also insisted that Varik, the assistant medic, go along with Rescue Team One, since they were the most likely to find Rifkin today.

"Both of these additions," Arkru whispered heatedly to Zorig, "are merely excuses for them to join in the sport!"

Not wanting to create dissention, the professor swallowed his anger and concentrated on the students and technicians sitting around the room. He felt very paternalistic toward them now. He had promised their parents, who were left behind on their dying world, that he would teach them the mysteries of the universe, so that someday, when they grew up, they would become scientists and collectors just like him. He had also promised to take care of their children on the trip. It seemed clear to him this hour that he had failed to keep this promise to Rifkin's parents, who had such high expectations for their son.

Fortunately for many of the parents, only half of the children could actually serve as volunteers on rescue teams regardless if they volunteered or not. Urlum, who was sick with worry, was refused a place in a rescue team. Omrik, Yorzl, Lumnal, Zeppa, and Grummel (who seemed mentally unbalanced) were also excused from service with little argument on their parts. The professor decided, they would be put to work helping Ibris and Tobit build the enclosures when the rescue operation was complete.

Vimml, Arkru recalled with disgust, would have been permanently restricted to the ship after his performance yesterday with Rescue Team One had Rezwit not made such a fuss. Now he was on Rezwit's team and would be carrying a weapon. In a decision that also filled him with misgivings, he authorized the remaining five students, including Illiakim, and Shizwit, who had not yet proven their marksmanship to the professor, to carry guns. Zither and Rezwit, who would act as guides for Rescue Teams One and Three, respectively, would assist himself and the

officers in supervising Illiakim and Shizwit, the novice weapon-carriers. Arkru had lost a great deal of confidence in the hotheaded Rezwit and the faltering Zither. Alafa had showed a dark side to herself in her actions during Collection Team Three's nearly disastrous performance in Zone Three. Since Alafa would be on the professor's team, Arkru was not worried about her behavior this time, but he wasn't so sure about the others. What if Rezwit lost his temper with Remgen, as he had yesterday with Zither, and went berserk? He might end up blowing them all up with one of the bombs. What if Imwep and Kogin placed Zither and Illiakim in danger by their exploits? Would Zither have the sense or courage to call him for help over the radio or would he become fearfully tongue-tied and mute as he had the day before?

Only Rescue Team Two, which the professor commanded, himself inspired Arkru with any confidence at all. Zorig's Rescue Team Four, which contained almost all of his technicians, were all certified to use the stunner, and yet Zorig, of all the leaders selected, was the most reluctant of them to go.

The professor had done everything he could think of to minimize the potential for conflict and danger today. Since Rezwit couldn't get along with Zither, he was moved to Remgen's team and was replaced by Illiakim, who had fit in well with Zither and Collection Team Two. Although it seemed logical to place Shizwit with her old friend Zither, the professor felt that she might have some influence over the easily provoked Rezwit and unstable Vimml too. He was, on second thought, not so sure about this now. Rezwit, like Rifkin, hated authority, and Vimml could be downright incorrigible. Over this potentially volatile group, Falon had placed Remgen, whom he felt would make them all behave. It was Arkru's fervent prayer that the first mate could do just that, but he would feel much better right now if Vimml was staying on the ship and Rezwit was not carrying a gun.

Rescue Team Two, the professor had learned last night, would have to put up with Chief Engineer Dazl, who wanted "his time in the jungle" before they left Irignum behind. Arkru wished he could have argued with Falon about this, but relations were already worn thin between the two leaders. Whether they liked it or not, Imwep, Kogin, Zither, and Illiakim would be accompanied by the medic Varik, who considered himself to be an excellent marksman but, like Dazl, had no business on this trip. The two reluctant technicians, Ibris and Tobit, would ride with their leader Zorig on patrol, with volunteer Hobi, who was a fairly good marksman, and was the only full fledged adult aboard Rescue Team Four.

Orix, as some of the other officers, had wanted his experience in the forest too, but the commander could ill afford to lose his navigator for Rifkin's sake. Eglin, the ship's doctor, the chef Wurbl, and the Communications Officer Abwur were also not expendable and were denied the privilege to volunteer. Although Jitso had been the first member in ship's stores to volunteer for Rescue Team Two and Hobi had quickly volunteered to accompany Zorig in Rescue Team Four, their good friend Gennep happily declined the opportunity. He was satisfied to join the student shut-ins and other reluctant crewmen in acting as a cheering section for the rescuers when they disembarked.

Virtually none of Falon's officers believed they would find the young student alive. Their main reason for going out with the teams, Falon and Arkru clearly understood, was for the sake of adventure. They now had guns and bombs to play with and a vast jungle for such recreation before returning to their humdrum occupations aboard ship. Some of them had actually made wagers against Rifkin chances for survival with their shipmates. Perhaps no one but the professor and Urlum believed he would be found at all.

Chapter Ten

The “Rifkin Madness”

As Rifkin searched for his crawler, the four rescue teams mustered below the ship. A predisposed attitude against the venture settled over the bridge. A feeling of resignation lay heavily on the teams below that Rifkin was already dead. Rescue Teams One and Two began moving into the respective Zone One and Zone Two sectors of the forest, while Rescue Teams Three and Four would patrol the beaten paths.

Rescue Team One, led by Second Mate Imwep, headed back up to the river clearing in Zone Two, stopping for several moments as a herd of duckbills charged down Zone Two’s path. Rescue Team Two, led by Doctor Arkru, followed Rifkin’s path into Zone One, discovering, after dodging a similar herd themselves, a portion of the river which Collection Team One had missed: a small lake created by a lava flow that had solidified and nearly shut off a sector of the waterway. A giant sauropod shared the water with juvenile long-necks. The banks of the waterway teamed with small long-necked bipeds, club-tails, and the crested cousins of the duckbills.

Whenever possible, all four crawlers were driven at their maximum speed, twenty-five miles per hour, which was often reduced to barely ten miles per hour because of the chuckholes and debris lying in their paths. As Remgen and Zorig drove their teams up and down the beaten paths, they discovered a commotion they had noticed before but had never gotten used to during their expeditions. The busy jungle thoroughfare was crossed repeatedly by small furtive runners and flyers. A slow moving club-tail emerged unexpectedly from the bushes causing Zorig to jam on his breaks. Once, so typical of single-minded killers, a pair a juvenile of leapers chased a young bone-head in front of Remgen’s crawler across Zone Two’s path. Many of the rescuers hoped, but did not believe, that Rifkin also would emerge from the bushes, so they could all go back to ship and get out of their clunky suits. Most of them had learned that the jungle wasn’t like the meadow or forest edge. The air in the dense foliage was thick with tiny flying segmented creatures. The forest floor was alive with all manner of creeping and crawling things. Mingled in with the constant movement and cacophony of jungle sounds were sights and sounds they had never noticed before. Hissing, clicking, croaking, and gurgling sounds joined the normal hoots, chirps, snorts, and trumpeting from the darkened trees: an unrelenting din amongst a ceaseless horde of living things.

All four crawlers carried in their holds force field trap poles that could be used as missiles, although only Zither, Illiakim, and Vimml had actually seen one of them used as a bomb. Added canisters of air, life support system repair kits, first aid supplies, and stretchers were included in each crawler in case an emergency arose or if Rifkin was found. To allow extra space for him if he was injured, each crawler had been emptied of its containers. The stretchers would be tied aft of each vehicle to carry him in the hold after rescuers secured him in place with straps. Despite the teams’ organization and readiness for this search, only Arkru, of all the rescuers, believed that Rifkin would actually be found.

While the search for Rifkin moved forward, Urlum, Zorig’s kid sister, immersed herself in her duties as a lab assistant, which included analyzing vials of blood, tissue slides, and petri dishes smeared with the hair, feathers, and spore of the specimens in the ark. Like everyone else

aboard ship, Urlum found it very difficult to concentrate. Her concern for the safety of Rifkin and now for her brother made the communication center on the bridge irresistible. After leaving her workbench in the laboratory, she made her way once more up to the bridge and stood at the sidelines hoping to hear good news from the rescue teams. The same confusion of voices and background of static blared from the radio. Orix, who sat watch at the bridge, glanced back irritably at the idling crewmembers and students seeking news about their friends. Because of the extraordinary circumstances, he said nothing to the crewmembers and students, but, after a short while, gently rose up and motioned them off of the bridge. Not suspecting that more dreadful news was about to break on the bridge, Urlum reluctantly walked back to her bench to continue the assignment given to her by the professor. It was the third time this morning she had made the futile trip.

Rescue Team Four, after traveling on what Zorig believed was the correct path, was about to provide the aliens with their second altercation with earthlings and their first major disaster of the mission. On the beaten path leading deep into the forest, Zorig, the most reluctant of all the leaders, drove the crawler over the bumpy path with the same hope as Rescue Team Three: Rifkin would appear suddenly out of the jungle, and they could all go home. A viewing scope was slung over his shoulder and banged rhythmically on his gas canisters each time the wheels of the crawler hit a chuckhole. Hobi, who road shotgun, thought of himself as being second-in-command and carried his weapon as a warrior, barely able to wait until he might bag his first alien beast. Everyone in Rescue Team Four carried a stunner. The two nervous technicians, Ibris and Tobit, who sat in the back seat, brandished their weapons less confidently in their tiny gloves. All members of Rescue Team Four shuddered at the thought of using "Rifkin's bombs."

As the small team passed through the leafy jungle tunnel, they were aware of countless eyes staring back at them. From the limbs above, the constant vigil of the small tree-climbing mammals and the tiny mammal's furtive movements added a feeling of expectation. It was as if these more intelligent members of this planet's life forms were waiting for something momentous to happen. The feathered flyers they had seen even more rarely than the furry fellows were eerily quiet now, and yet an occasional screech or chirp burst from each side of the forest. The lizards and snakes moved quietly through the trees, while the buzz and scrape of those strange, hideously ugly segmented creatures was a constant undertone in the jungle that nothing, not even the approach of the great leaper, could mute.

During the first fifteen minutes of driving slowly up and down Zone Two's path, Zorig had complained ceaselessly about the bumpiness of the ride. Somewhere during the last mile before reaching the river and Zorig's last complaint, he had somehow managed to take an alternate path, freshly widened and plowed by a herd of duckbills migrating to the swamp. Already, he sensed that they were lost. Rescue Team Four's crawler, the only vehicle that had not been used yet on Irignum, soon arrived at a particularly dense patch of forest. The aliens realized that the wide beaten path had suddenly narrowed to a thin trail that seemed to end at the shores of a swamp. On the banks of the swamp, which was actually a back bay portion of the river, a great herd of duckbills quietly munched the leaves of overhanging trees. This particular herd had several of the bone-headed and crested cousins of the duckbill mingled in their midst. There were all manner of dinosaurs congregated at the water's edge of the swamp, including club-tails, small bipedal plant-eaters, and a trio of giant sauropods similar though not quite as large as Rifkin's long-neck.

As the crawler approached, slowing to less than five miles per hour, the four aliens marveled at this congregation, almost forgetting the dangers they faced. Zorig's attempt to drive the crawler further down the narrowing path proved to be a disaster for the team. The vehicle immediately became mired in a large puddle of mud. As Zorig continued to accelerate, the tracks of the crawler burrowed more deeply into the muck, until they were hopelessly entrenched in what was actually a patch of quicksand near the swamp.

"Out! We're sinking!" He cried, becoming the first to abandon the vehicle.

The others quickly followed suit, managing to jump onto a dry portion of the jungle floor and move cautiously behind their fearful leader, back down the trail leading back to the main path.

"Well," Hobi looked wryly at Zorig afterwards, "what do we do now? We just lost our transportation. Judging by the way that vehicle's sinking, it looks like we'll also lose our bombs."

"This is all insane," Zorig whined miserably. "I'm a scientist, not an explorer. The professor said to follow the animal path, as if it would go on endlessly. I told him that this wasn't a good idea. Now the path, if you can call it that, suddenly ends at a swamp!"

"Maybe this isn't the same path," Hobi offered calmly, setting his stunner frequency to 'kill', "but at least it runs into water. Perhaps it's merely a backwater to the river. Rifkin's river couldn't be too far."

"All paths look the same to me," murmured Ibris to Tobit in the back seat. "I should've stayed on the ship!"

"This has to be the right path," Zorig looked around defensively at his team. "I was sure it was. It was wider than the other path when we reached the fork. It seemed logical to take it and not the narrower path. I was so certain it was correct."

"Those scoop-mouths by the swamp widened this path," Tobit informed him bitterly. "It looked too new to me at the time. The foliage was freshly trampled and limbs were recently broken. I don't know why I didn't say something to you. I thought you knew what you were doing. Obviously, you didn't! The professor should never have made you leader of our team!"

"Well," Hobi snorted, shaking his head, "the fact is we can't go on without the crawler. Now we'll have to return to the ship on foot. Anyone could have made the same mistake."

"Rifkin wouldn't have made such a mistake," Tobit declared accusingly.

"Rifkin's smart," nodded Ibris, "Rifkin's brave."

"Rifkin is the cause of us being here in *the first place!*" Zorig shouted down at the smaller technicians.

At that point, the professor picked up their conversation over his radio. Falon remained mute on the bridge as Arkru's voice broke into their helmets.

"Zorig, what's going on out there?"

"Nothing much," the chief technician looked with terror straight ahead.

"Oh no, don't tell me," the professor groaned, "you're lost!"

"No... worse," Zorig admitted, hanging his head in shame.

"We lost the crawler," said Ibris, as it tilted ominously in the quicksand. "We also lost our bombs!"

"Great Celestial God, not again!" Arkru sputtered a wounded cry.

It appeared as if the entire vehicle would be swallowed up by the quicksand. Not only had the chief technician endangered their lives, but he had also lost a vehicle that was vital to their mission and its payload of bombs.

“We’ll be all right sir,” he tried to sound convincing. “We’ll just walk very carefully back to the ship.”

“Walk back? Without a crawler?” the professor mumbled the words in disbelief. “Are you serious Zorig? Walk back indeed! This is not Revekia or Orm. What happened to your vehicle Zorig? You lost your crawler and some of my force field traps. This better be good!”

“Quicksand,” the technician responded bleakly.

“Quicksand?” The professor murmured incredulously to himself. “There was no quicksand reported in Zone Two.... Where are you Zorig? Please tell me you’re at least in the right zone!”

“I-I’m not sure,” Zorig answered wretchedly, “.... After being fairly wide, the path suddenly narrowed.... We’re in the forest, beside a swamp, but I don’t think we’re going in the right direction now.”

“Oh Izmir,” Arkru lamented, “you’re in the forest, lost and on foot. You’re no better off than Rifkin. Now we have *five* lost people!”

“Rescue Team One,” Falon broke in finally, “are you listening to this?”

“Yes sir,” Imwep responded quickly, “it sounds serious!”

“They couldn’t be too far away,” Kogin joined in. “We’re scanning the river now. We should be able to reach them by driving back down our path and finding the fork in the road.”

“Good idea, Kogin,” replied Falon severely, “but you fellows stay in your vehicle on the alternate path. We don’t need two groups of hybrid-brains.” “By the way,” his tone mellowed, “how’s Varik doing on the team? He’s been awfully quiet the last hour.”

“I’m all right sir,” the medic piped. “I got my eye on one of those feathery flyers in the bush. I figure they’d make for a fine stew.”

“Varik,” the commander barked irritably, “you keep your gun in its belt until it’s needed.” “Imwep,” he switched to the leader, “I don’t know how four more team members are going to fit into a vehicle designed for only four, unless we make two trips. What if we dumped out the canisters, along with your stretcher, in order to cram everyone in? Would that give you enough room?”

“I dunno sir,” Imwep answered hesitantly. “.... Can that actually be done?”

“Falon, those canisters are setting in permanent racks,” the professor explained hoarsely now. “The stretcher, like the containers, can be easily removed but not the racks, even if you toss the canisters out. There’s no way they’ll all have the room to sit with your team, and we mustn’t wait for a return trip. I’ll have to bring my crawler over there to take on a few. Rifkin will just have to wait!”

To accentuate Rescue Team Four’s problems, a strange chirping noise erupted from a dense thicket nearby. Everyone except the veteran crewman Hobi gasped and muttered amongst themselves, “What’s that? Did you hear that? What’s that noise?”

Zorig now clutched his mouth in disbelief. The fact was, he realized with horror, they had all been acting as they were taking a pleasure hike in a Raethian meadow. “Shhhh! Quiet!” he motioned to the others. “I hear chirps. Is that a flyer? What could make such a noise?”

“Listen Zorig,” the professor murmured as calmly as possible. “We’ve all been too lax on this world. But what’s done is done. One of the cardinal rules on an alien world should be ‘keep your voices down.’ I have a strong feeling these brutes are attracted more by sound than smell. Stay put. We’ll be there as soon as we can!”

“He’s right, let’s keep it down,” Zorig said quietly to his team. “We’ve just alerted every carnivore in the jungle that we’re here. Be ready to fire your stunners. Remember to keep the frequency on ‘kill’!”

But it was too late to be silent now. The bizarre chirping sound continued, accented at times by a mewing noise, as if two separate animals were lurking in the bushes. Drawn normally by their keen sense of smell, the spike-toed dromaeosaurs had a difficult time smelling the aliens in their synthetic suits and helmets. The odor was too reminiscent of other inorganic compounds that did not put out a pungent enough smell to register in the olfactory portion of their brains. But, as the professor had reckoned, the spike-toes also had a keen sense of hearing and were able to hear prey moving through the jungle several hundred feet away. A half dozen adult dromaeosaurs interspersed with a dozen or more juvenile dromaeosaurs had just given up trying to bring down one of those tank sized armored club-tail dinosaurs Arkru had recently admired. The most they had gotten from the encounter was a battering with its ball and chain tail. One of them now sported a broken arm and another had wandered mortally wounded away from the scene.

The apparent feeding-frenzy they had seen in Zone Three had made them appear stupid to the aliens. One fact none of the Revekians would have guessed, however, was the spike-toes’ relatively large brains. They appeared, as the playful killers in Zone Three, to show careful deliberation at times. Unlike the plant-eaters who leisurely foraged and found an endless banquet of food to eat each hour of the day, the pack hunters had to continuously forage for wounded or juvenile animals to eat unless they were daring enough to engage dangerous prey such as the armored dinosaurs or attempted to single out a member of a duckbill or triceratops herd without being trampled or impaled to death. Such seemingly thoughtless behavior was dictated by hunger, not stupidity, and yet it made them seem reckless, if not playfully foolish as they attacked.

Today the pack had sensed that more prospective prey were coming their way. Eagerly they swarmed toward the sound of tramping feet and the noise of voices, their only concern being that moment when they could peek through the foliage and see whether or not the new prey was infirmed, singled out from its herd, or not sporting horns or armor plating on its skin. When they reached a point where the sound was especially loud, thanks to Zorig and his team, they stopped instinctively to listen to their prey. It could just as easily have been another pack of spike-toes, perhaps even the larger raptors, or maybe another armored denizen. They wanted no more of that! The largest female, who appeared to be their leader, halted by an undergrowth of ferns and peered craftily through the fronds, her reptilian eyes rolling around crazily in her scaly head as she estimated the numbers of this biped herd. They were, she calculated in her crafty mind, too small to be threatening and there were only a handful of them, which meant they would be easy prey. From the spot where the team had stopped and were now stymied by the turn of events, at least a dozen pairs of eyes peered out furtively from the fronds, the spike-toes now hovering with baited breath. The faint swishing of the creatures’ long tails was occasionally followed by a dreadful mewing sound as that coming from tomcats on the prowl. The most ominous noise uttered by the spike-toes was a familiar chirping sound that meant they were ready to attack.

“What is that?” Ibris asked Tobit, who, in child-like fear, clutched his co-worker’s hand.

“It sounds like a mushka,” Tobit whispered thoughtfully, nodding his helmeted head.

“It sounds nothing like a mushka,” Zorig murmured irritably. “This is not Beskol or Raethia where harmless and brainless mushkas and hubrids roam around in a mindless dither. This is Irignum where every step we take may lead us straight into the jaws of beasts!”

After hearing the mewling sound once again, followed by several chirps, Zorig held out his stunner, aiming it every which way in a most amateurish fashion.

“That certainly doesn’t sound like anything *I’ve* ever heard,” he muttered hysterically to himself. “That’s definitely coming from predators.”

“But they sound like they’re crying,” Hobi, who had been silent for several moments, remarked. “I’ve never heard predators like that. Usually predators hiss or growl, don’t they? Maybe they’re friendly or just as afraid of us. I’ve never heard monsters make such silly sounds.”

The mewling became intense now. The fronds shook with expectation, as the spike-toes sensed they had found their next meal. The chief technician crouched down inane, his stunner now clutched ineptly in his hands.

“Come now, Zorig,” Hobi sneered, aiming his own gun steadily at the ferns. “Why would they be stalking us? We’re wearing indigestible suites. We’d just give them bellyaches. We’d probably poison them too.”

“It seems clear to me Hobi that you don’t understand these brutes at all,” Zorig replied peevishly, trying to make out their shadowy outlines behind the fronds. “There must be a dozen of them out there. To them we’re just another meal.”

“Well, we got our guns,” Hobi replied flippantly, pretending to shoot at the source of the mewling. “They better not mess with *me!*”

When the unseen creatures began to chirp again, Zorig knew they were going to attack.

“Get ready!” he cried out, backing away and motioning for the others to do the same.

Several voices from the bridge, including the commander, communications officer, and navigator attempted to give them comfort as the remaining rescue teams rushed to their aid. The doomsday voice of Eglin intoning, “May the great god Izmir welcome your souls into celestial paradise!” gave them little solace now. The chief medic, who also presided as religious functionary for the ship, sincerely believed that Zorig had led his team into a deathtrap. For only the second time in earth’s history, a confrontation between aliens and earthlings was about to begin. The first earthling to approach was the large kangaroo-sized female. She didn’t impress the group very much after what they had seen, but the other spike-toes had not pressed forward yet.

“Let me zap it,” Hobi shouted excitedly. “Its time to test out our guns!”

“Great Izmir!” Zorig cried, as a dozen adult-sized dromaeosaurs broke through the trees.

Just when she had resumed peering through her microscope and was trying to concentrate on her work, Urlum received a call over her intercom from Gennep, Hobi’s workmate. Dire news broke finally over the bridge from Zone Two that Zorig and his teammates were in great peril. Once more she raced up to the bridge, panting and whimpering with dread, along with several other shipmates who had heard the news. Together, they crowded around the officers sitting at the communication panel. No one spoke for several moments as they listened to Team Four. The sudden, inexplicable silence from the forest, interspersed with the telltale crackling of stunners set on kill frequency, was quickly translated by Urlum and everyone else on the bridge

as meaning that those small, deadly spike-toed meat-eaters were attacking and probably making the rescuers their next meal.

In utter panic, the four aliens fired from a distance without effect at the pack and continued to walk backwards down the path until Zorig looked around and spied a pair of spike-toes trying to sneak up on them from the rear. They began firing steadfastly on the pair yet managed only to knock one of them down momentarily as the other spike-toe darted back into the ferns. To their utter amazement and horror, the downed spike-toe was not dead at all but merely stunned. After only a brief moment, he was rising to his feet as if ready to charge again.

Rescue Team One was the first group to find the alternate path. Fresh crawler tracks had marked the spot. As quickly as their vehicle could move through the newly crushed foliage, they rolled to the scene. For several moments, Zither was able to drive close to maximum speed, until, out of nowhere, a large group of three-horns began crossing the path, causing him to jam on the breaks and everyone in the crawler to yelp with fear as the leviathans passed.

“Rescue Team One!” Falon voice rang out. “What’s going out there?”

“A herd of three-horns,” Imwep explained calmly. “They’re magnificent!”

“Great Izmir!” Doctor Eglin cried from the bridge. “I wish I was there. So help me commander, next time I’m going *too!*”

Professor Arkru was dismayed by what he heard. Imwep and Kogin acted as if they were on a field trip. Even Eglin wanted to bag himself a beast. While the professor and Alafa frantically scanned the main path in Zone Two, Dazl sat between Jitso and Imyor, complaining constantly about the bumpy ride and how crowded it was in back. He was just waiting, as the other officers, for a chance to fire his gun.

Zither, Imwep, Kogin, Varik, and Illiakim sat muttering in disbelief as the parade of giants passed. Stunners would be useless against such a herd. The passage of the triceratops had a humbling effect upon the sportsmen. For several moments, their annoying prattle about who would kill the first predator was replaced by a reverence for alien life. Up close for the first time, the Revekians had a chance to see the majesty of these dinosaurs. Their ambling bodies were dark gray in color with stripes of brown running down their backs. They had beaks similar to some of the flyers, and yet their squat bodies moved like the long-necks, only somewhat faster, a strange, discordant honking noise being uttered out of their throats. Their frilled heads, which were sheathed in armor half the length of their bodies, sported two horns above the eyes and one smaller horn on the nose, and yet a typically reptilian tail dragged behind each denizen as they lumbered through the trees.

As Kogin held his stunner ready and Illiakim peaked fearfully over the seat, Imwep whispered faintly to them, “Don’t move, don’t make a sound; these beasts don’t seem to notice us. They seem to be a peaceable lot.”

“Well these beasts *aren’t!*” shouted Zorig, as another stream of electrons were blasted from his gun.

“Sounds or smells aren’t the issue,” declared Remgen flatly. “Sight is the problem. Those blighters are staring Zorig and his crew right in the face!”

“Can’t you go around those beasties?” Tobit called out to Rescue Team One. “These spike-toes are inching in for the kill!”

Remgen was having as much trouble as Doctor Arkru in finding Zorig’s path. The professor was heartsick for Korig’s team. He didn’t know how to console them without showing pity or alarm. Encouragement was given by Abwur from the bridge. Falon told them to be brave. Eglin prayed for their souls. To most of the rescuers who knew better, it seemed to be a

hopeless cause. The sound of the stunner's crackling interspersed with the eerie chirping and mewling of the spike-toes belied the optimism flowing from the bridge.

When the last triceratops had rumbled passed them, Rescue Team One heaved a collective sigh, and without being prodded, Zither took off with a jolt. Now that their path was clear, the officers could more clearly hear the bridge communicating with Rescue Team Four, but, until the immediate crisis ended, Zither could hear only the beating of his heart and the mantra "Izmir is good, Izmir is great!" pouring from Illiakim's lips."

"Well, how many of them have you killed?" Remgen was asking Zorig now.

"None," Zorig said in a deadpan voice, "they keep getting back up on their feet, only shaken up a bit."

"Then let them have it again!" Rezwit bellowed over his radio.

Similar encouragement was given by Alafa and Vimml from Rescue Teams Two and Three, respectively. But an alarming fact was becoming evident over the radio: the stunners were not having much effect. More importantly, the dreadful realization dawned over the airways that the spike-toes knew this too.

"Not only are the weapons not working well," concluded the professor, "but the predators are not really afraid. This is very strange." "These little killers," he confided grimly, "are either very stupid... or very smart. It sounds almost like they're playing with Zorig's team!"

Arkru stopped the crawler a moment, badly shaken by the thought. Falon turned to Orix and Abwur on the bridge and nodded gravely at his assessment. Eglin, returning to his alternate role as religious functionary, uttered the Revekian equivalent to the Last Rites. Remgen, who had been frustrated by his failed attempt to find Zorig's team, laughed bitterly at this turn of events, summing up what was on everybody's mind. "Some gun this Class 4 Stunner has turned out to be!"

"Oh, horrors," groaned Arkru miserably, as Dazl shook his head. "It's true! Those infernal contraptions only knock them down. On setting three, it should *kill them outright!*"

"We should never have outlawed weapons of destruction," Kogin commented over his radio now. "It was short sighted and ill-conceived!"

"It was insane!" cried Dazl, the chief engineer.

"The Old Ones almost destroyed our people!" Arkru said defensively. "Have you all forgotten everything on this dreadful world?"

To the professor's added dismay, the same veterans, who had fought the Old Ones in the past, now openly ridiculed the decision of the Doctors of Science for their pacifistic philosophy of life. They had chosen to forget the horrors of the Dark Days. He knew now, however, that, in Irignum's case, the veterans were right. The scientists had underestimated the potential threat of such distant worlds. Nothing could have prepared them for creatures with such thick hides and the ability to absorb electric shock. On all the other worlds they had explored, simple electrical shock had been enough to control primitive life forms. Unfortunately for Zorig's team, the spike-toes were not primitive beasts. No one would have believed that they would have the ability to toy and tease them in the face of electron bombardment that was normally fatal to alien life.

Belatedly and tragically, Arkru would have to redesign the stunner so it would virtually cook through the dinosaur's tough hide—a deed that went against everything he believed. The force field poles, which were the only truly effective weapon, were dangerously unstable and would have to be transformed into a reliable missile when the time allowed.

“I don’t understand why the spike-toes don’t just die,” the professor said in a strained voice. “I guess it’s a shame you lost your poles. Zorig, you and your teammates are going to have to fire at the same time and train all our energy on these brutes. You must keep your heads and not lose your nerve.”

“That’s fine talk professor,” spat Ibris bitterly. “You’re not the one facing a pack of hungry beasts!”

“First we’ve got to find a better place to fight them off,” Zorig replied with remarkable steadiness, looking around frantically for such a spot. “We need to keep them off our backs. We can’t let them surround us; we must keep them in front.”

“Good thinking lad. That’s sound military strategy,” Imwep tried to sound chipper. “You hold them off as long as you can. Surely *all* of our guns will keep them at bay!”

“Hurry,” croaked Tobit, “they’re closing in!”

“Enough with all this talk,” cried Ibris, “we need action *now!*”

With the main pack moving up from the direction of the crawler in the swamp and that daring pair of spike-toes inching stubbornly closer from behind, the sudden appearance of a short clearing directly beside the foursome gave Zorig a surge of hope. Izmir was with him! He could see an outcrop of small trees in the middle of a small clearing with a outcrop of igneous rock in back of it, which did, in fact, appear to be a tactically sound place to hold off the pack until help arrived. The only other alternates they had was to stay on the road and risk being attacked or run into the forest and hope that they could quickly climb a tree.

“Follow me as I back into that clearing alongside of us,” Zorig directed in a shaky voice. “Do exactly as I do.” “We’re making a last stand against these killers!” He called over the radio again. “Imwep, you better get here immediately. Hurry before it’s too late!”

“I can’t believe it,” Alafa complained petulantly to Jitso and Imyor as the professor rolled down Zone One’s path. “Zorig drove right into a swamp. This is a disaster. It seems, after all our target practice, our guns have no lasting influence over these beasts!”

While firing their stunners at both groups of spike-toes, members of Rescue Team Four followed Zorig’s example. As they backed away quickly into the clearing, they sprayed the scene in front of them in a one hundred and eighty degree arc. When they had reached the copse of small trees, Zorig realized, in spite of being on higher ground and not having to worry about being attacked from the rear, they were trapped in a veritable cul-de-sac with no avenue of escape. The pack walled them off completely. Each member of the pack would pick itself up after being knocked down by a stunner blast and become that much more daring the next time it attempted a frontal attack. Although they were temporarily incapacitated by a blast from a stunner, they seemed now to accept the momentary inconvenience in stride, inching closer and closer toward the group.

“Imwep, you must move faster. We’re cornered like dakkas!” Zorig sounded quite hysterical as he and the other team members fired at will at the beasts. “Our stunners, which are on kill frequency, are not stopping them for long. In just a few seconds they’re up on their feet and lurching forward again.”

“Stand fast,” the second mate set his jaw. “We’re on our way!”

“Zorig,” the professor called hoarsely over the radio, “please stay calm. Those spike-toes are playing with you lads. We’ll be there shortly. Just keep letting them have it; maybe they’ll give up and go away.”

“Go away? Go *away?*” Zorig cried hysterically. “Well you listen to your optimism? Imwep tells us to stand fast, and you tell me to be calm. They’re going to eat us professor. If we can’t stop them permanently, they’re going to chew us to bits!”

Now that they could proceed safely down the alternate path, Imwep, Kogin, and Varik looked around themselves with wide eyes at the wonders of the forest. Within moments they expected to be confronting a pack of bloodthirsty predators, which for them would be great sport. For the students, however, there was great trepidation. Zither was appalled by the officer’s attitudes. It was as if they were having a holiday on Beskol or Orm. A sense of foreboding filled him now that they were so close. Because of Rifkin exploits and the resulting ineptitude of Zorig, their task had escalated from mere rescuers to liberators. They would now have to come in blazing with guns, already proven obsolete.

Upon these doleful reflections, Zither drove passed a large copse of tree ferns and right into the melee before he realized where he was.

“Oh, Great Cosmic Ghost!” he cried.

To avoid being set upon by the spike-toes, Zither frantically backed the crawler up the path a safe distance away to avoid being immediately set upon by members of the pack. Fortunately for the team, the predators were too busy facing off the besieged team. Varik, the assistant medic, had been anxious to fire his weapon and was outraged by this apparent lack of resolve.

“What are you doing?” he shouted at the top of his lungs. “We should be blasting them, not backing up! Here let me toss them one of our bombs!”

“Shut up Varik, and sit down!” Imwep ordered, sticking his own weapon back into this belt.

Imwep could not believe how many predators surrounded Rescue Team Four. Although it seemed possible to blow up spike-toes in the back ranks, at least a dozen of the beasts had turned around to face them now and seemed poised to attack. As they cocked their grinning heads and cooed softly amongst themselves, several of them began to creep slowly and playfully their way. Gradually more and more of them followed their example, until nearly half of the original pack were drifting toward Rescue Team One.

“All right lad,” Imwep said gently to the driver, “don’t panic. Back into that thicket of ferns. Do it now!”

As Zither stomped the accelerator, Imwep reported his decision calmly to the bridge: “Commander Falon, there’s too many of them. There must be three or four dozen of those blighters here. We’re going to wait a few moments in a convenient bush until Arkru’s and Remgen’s teams arrive.”

“Good thinking,” Falon replied with concern. “I assume you’ll be safe where you’re at until help arrives. Remgen! Arkru! You’d better hurry! We’ve now got *two* beleaguered teams!”

As the crawler settled awkwardly into the interior of the copse, Zither continued to hold the steering wheel, completely petrified with fear. Surveying the wall of foliage, Imwep hoped the copse of tree ferns surrounding them would offer some protection. A great impression in the center of the bush on which the crawler sat indicated that it might have been used as a large creature’s nest. Hopefully, she would not return to reclaim her station. As Imwep’s eyes rolled around to the passengers in the back seat, he realized with horror that one of the team members

was missing. “Where’s Varik?” he spoke calmly at first. When the two passengers failed to respond, he screamed. “Are you both mute as well as deaf?”

“Things were happening so fast, I guess he jumped out,” Kogin answered with a shrug.

“He climbed right over me,” Illiakim said petulantly. “He whispered to me that he was going to bag himself a beast!”

Imwep drew his weapon again and began climbing out of the crawler. “Come on Kogin,” he called back to the third mate. “The only bag Varik’s going to get will be used to pick up his remains.”

The bridge listened to this verbal exchange with disbelief.

“Quiet!” Falon shushed the others on the bridge. “Varik has done a very foolish thing. We mustn’t distract them until he’s out of harm’s way!”

After slipping out of the copse, Varik nearly became the first alien casualty as one of the predators came within inches of tearing into his suit. The crackle of his gun was followed by an intake of breaths on the bridge and inside the copse as the beast fell unconscious at his feet. The silence following this event was unbearable for those back on the ship.

“Close range! That’s the trick!” he cried, jumping up and down with glee. “Killed the blighter. Killed ’em, I did. Look at him lying there stone cold!”

By now there were several spike-toes approaching the alien. The fallen predator was already awake and staggering to its feet.

“Are you mad?” cried Imwep, reaching out with Kogin to pull him toward the copse. “You merely knocked him out! They’re just playing with you. Why couldn’t you wait until we had more fire power? Now *we’re* under attack!”

The professor had been correct. In what seemed strange even for this planet’s predators, the spike-toes were toying with their prey, which allowed the aliens time to back up carefully into the copse. If they had wanted to kill Varik or, for that matter Imwep and Kogin, they would have torn them to pieces immediately as they exited the ferns. Soon, at least a dozen of the dromaeosaurs were circling the thicket, not sure how to proceed against the unseen menace with the “fire sticks” in their hands. It seemed to be great fun for the relatively intelligent spike-toes; they were like mischievous sprites as they pranced and cavorted around the ferns.

“You stupid bastard!” cried Kogin, giving the medic’s helmet a thump.

“Consider yourself on report Varik!” Falon called out angrily from the bridge. “That was a damn foolish thing you did! You could’ve got yourself killed! Your team’s in great danger because of what you’ve done!”

“What was he thinking?” Imwep muttered to Kogin in the background as Falon took Varik to task. “I’d expect that from a student but not from a member of the ship’s crew!”

“It’s this Rifkin madness,” Kogin explained wryly, as the battle raged on between the spike-toes and Rescue Team Four.

Chapter Eleven

Disaster in the Forest

Crowded behind Commander Falon and his senior officers were students and members of the ship's crew. The crackling of Rescue Team Four's stunners against a relentless horde of predators, the chirping and cooing of the spike-toes surrounding the beleaguered groups, and the prospects of saving not one but two of the rescue teams, in addition to finding Rifkin still alive, overwhelmed the officers and well-wishers on the bridge. During their vigil, Remgen and Arkru continued their search, each leader at his wit's end as he pondered the featureless green. As Rescue Team Four battled for their lives, Rescue Team One sat helplessly in their vehicle while the spike-toes circled the ferns. Torn by his sense of duty and his instinct to survive, Zither held the steering wheel in a death grip. He wanted to comfort Illiakim, who sat sobbing hysterically to herself, but he couldn't speak, which was just as well. A cowardly squeal might be uttered now from his mouth. He wanted to curse Rifkin and the professor for placing them all in harm's way. More than anything else in his short life, he wanted to drive the crawler out of the copse and charge back down the alternate path. The slow-moving crawler might prove to be a death trap for them. They might be torn to pieces as they attempted to escape, but at least he would have tried to save his teammates from what looked like certain death.

As the copse of tree ferns they hid in was increasingly encompassed by spike-toes—one, two and then three abreast—Rescue Team One realized they were in a predicament almost as bad as Rescue Team Four. Imwep and Kogin now turned their anger upon Varik, whose recklessness had made their situation worse. Illiakim continued sobbing into her headset, while Zither's vocal chords remained frozen in his throat.

"Calm down Rescue Team One," Arkru called out over his radio, although he was anything but calm. "Do you remember what you did as the three-horns passed?"

"Yes," replied the second mate incredulously, "*nothing*."

"Precisely!" Arkru exclaimed, bringing his crawler to a stop. "I'm positive that these fellows are attracted by sounds more than anything else. I explained this to Zorig awhile ago, and now it's come back to me. If you sit very still in your seats, they might just leave you alone!"

"This is not a passing herd of three-horns," Imwep murmured, shaking his head. "These fellows are anything but stupid—you said as much yourself. You were right when you said this is a game to them. When they're through cavorting around our bush, they'll eat us up. It won't matter to them if we're *standing on our heads!*"

"Sit still?... Leave them alone?... Is the good professor losing his wits?" Eglin murmured from the bridge.

"Silence everyone!" Falon shouted suddenly into his transmitter. "Imwep, Kogin, Varik, Zither, and Illiakim, do what the professor says. Sit still and be very quiet. *Don't make a sound!*"

Imwep held one gloved fingers in front of his helmet as if to say "Hush!" to his teammates, but rolled his eyes around in disgust. The other members of Rescue Team One nodded mutely as they listened to the spike-toes chirp and cavort around the ferns. As they sat very still in the crawler, they looked like statues in their bulky life support systems, frozen in

time and space. The glowing eyes of their tormentors peeked through the fronds. As shadowy figures, they swarmed thickly around the copse. As the tree ferns shook and the terrible mewing and chirping grew louder, it seemed as if the predators were ready to break through. After only a few more moments of sitting absolutely still, however, the aliens were greatly relieved to find the shadows disappearing and the mewing and chirping fading from the scene. Clearly, as Doctor Arkru had predicted, the predators were drifting back toward the embattled rescue team after losing interest in Rescue Team One.

“It worked,” Kogin murmured to Illiakim. “I think they’re gone.”

Dazl, who sat beside Arkru in the crawler, marveled at what he had just heard. “Can you believe it?” He crowed into his headset. “Silence has won the day!”

“Yes, Dazl,” uttered the professor as he contemplated the path ahead, “it’s truly amazing. I just hope that young Rifkin discovered this too. Now stay put Rescue Team One until help arrives, and don’t make any noise.”

“What about Rescue Team Four?” Varik blurted aloud.

“What about them?” Kogin whispered shrilly as he gave Varik’s helmet a thump. “The damn fools brought this on themselves!”

Against his better judgment, Commander Falon was permitting unauthorized persons on the bridge. He allowed this lapse in the rules in wake of Rifkin’s disappearance in the forest. After hearing the news that one of the teams sent to find Rifkin was surrounded by predators, an even larger crowd of idlers grew in the small room. Except for a few emotional outbursts by Urlum, Rifkin’s sweetheart, and the callous betting going on between crew members this hour, the visitors had been quiet and well-behaved, trying their best not to interfere with the communication between the commander and his teams. Except for the recent feast in the dining hall, the camaraderie between the students, officers and crew members had never been greater.

Commander Falon and his officers had to deal with yet another crisis in the forest: Rescue Team One. They were growing tired of a restive audience in the room. Upon hearing that Rescue Team One had failed to save her brother’s group and had driven straight into a trap, Urlum had broken down completely and was ushered from the room. Afterwards, when it appeared that Imwep’s group was out of danger, it was soon apparent to everyone listening to Arkru and Remgen’s groans that Rescue Teams Two and Three couldn’t find the alternate path. The hopelessness of Rescue Teams One and Four’s situations was all too obvious to the audience gathered on the bridge, and it appeared that Rifkin would never be found. At the same time that Rifkin’s classmates grieved for him and saw him as a lost cause, Hobi, Imwep, and Kogin’s shipmates cursed him to the Outer Reaches, blaming him for what had befallen their friends. Falon found the sudden grumbling back and forth unsettling. As the crew members began taunting the children, he ordered them off the bridge. When Omrik, Yorzl, Lumnal, and Zeppa continued to whimper amongst themselves, he ordered them off the bridge too.

“I’ve had it!” he shouted, pointing to the hatch. “All of you—students, crew members and idlers! Out! Out! *Out!*”

“It’s about time!” Orix said, prodding the last malingerer from the room. “This whole Rifkin madness has turned the ship upside down!”

Only Abwur, the communications officer, and Doctor Eglin remained on the bridge with Falon and Orix for morale, rather than technical, support. Abwur was responsible for repairing all computers and electronic devices aboard the ship and Eglin was, of course, the ship’s medic.

Together they provided the chief officers of the ship with advice and good company, especially during times of crisis such as the disaster confronting them now.

“This isn’t your fault,” Abwur said intuitively as Falon sat grumbling to himself. “Those whelps are nothing but trouble. You should’ve put them in their place when we first landed on this world.”

“But this wasn’t suppose to happen,” Falon groaned in frustration. “Up until our landing on Irignum, all went well for our muddle-headed professor. The incorrigible Rifkin provided amusement to the ship’s crew. The rules of alien engagement demanded by the Father’s of Science worked on planets like Raethia and Beskol. But we were complacent. *I was complacent!*” “No, Abwur,” he sighed brokenly now, “I should’ve cracked down on them a long time ago when our odyssey began.”

“Come now, my good commander,” Emlin pshawed, shaking head, “it’s not too late. You have the entire ship’s crew behind you. You certainly have your officers on your side.”

“I don’t have the mother ship,” Falon countered bitterly, rubbing his temples. “According to the good professor, I command the ship but he commands the ark.”

“I fail to see the difference,” uttered Abwur. “Call it what you will, but those creatures could also be considered cargo in the hold of our ship.”

“Yes, the ark is merely the collection portion of the ship, nothing more,” Orix chimed in tutorially. “In space, Falon’s in charge. After landing our vessel, in or out of the ship, he still commands.”

Falon brightened. His mood began to change.

“Thank you, my navigator,” he smiled faintly. “I understand my senior officers. What you’re all saying, is what I’ve heard from my first mate and chief engineer: take control of the mission. But would this not be construed as mutiny by the mother ship?”

“Who cares about the mother ship?” Emlin said, waving a hand. “In a few decades Revekia will be cosmic dust. Already our planet’s inhabitants are being transplanted to other worlds, while we continue the work of science and collection at the far edge of space. The mother ship is almost an abstraction now. I wonder if we’ll ever see her again.”

“Yes,” Abwur, the second sage, spoke, “we are becoming a race of nomads. As you know commander, nomads make their own laws. Ever since the Old Ones broke from our ways, a feeling of rebellion followed those venturing into space. You have some of it, we all have some of it, and that numbskull Rifkin has a great deal of it flowing in his veins. We need more of their spirit now commander. The Fathers of Science have never seen a planet like Irignum, nor have any of their vessels traveled this far. I’m sure, if they knew what we knew, they’d understand.”

“Then it’s true,” said Commander Falon, stirring in his seat, “you want me take control of the mission?”

“No sir,” Abwur replied boldly, rising to his feet, “I mean take control *period!* This is your ship Falon, not the professor’s ark! The ark is part of the ship. This mission is just one mission in our continuing odyssey through space.”

“Take control!” Emlin echoed Abwur’s sentiment. “Put that bumbling old fool in his place!”

“Yes commander,” Orix rose from his seat, “but first, let’s upgrade our weapons and show this planet’s monsters who’s in control!”

“Alas,” Falon said wistfully, “that’s not going to help our teams now. All our fine words won’t. It’s going to take several months for Abwur to organize such an effort. What do we do *now?*”

Doctor Eglin, who was not only the chief medic but spiritual advisor for the ship, held his palms upward, and said in his most pontifical voice, “We pray, my good commander. We ask Izmir to give us wisdom and guidance in the coming days!”

Not knowing where or how to look for the alternate beaten path, Remgen realized, after a short while, that he didn’t have a clue. He instructed his driver Rezwit to slow down to a crawl as they looked frantically for the entrance to the path. Soon Rescue Team Two had caught up with Rescue Team Three, catching the first mate sitting in the crawler scratching his helmet in a gesture of confusion and dismay. Vimml and Shizwit sat quietly and anxiously in the back seat as Rescue Team Two approached.

“Where’s the alternate path?” cried Arkru as they pulled alongside of Team Three. “Don’t tell me you can’t find it. We’re running out of time!”

Remgen made a deprecating gesture with both hands. “It all looks the same to me professor: green on green.”

“Well, that’s not good enough,” Arkru scolded him querulously. “We’ve got two teams on the verge of being torn to bits. Let’s go in both directions: you search north and I’ll search south, until one of us finds a freshly made entrance to a path.”

Remgen resented being told what to do by a civilian—an intellectual at that! Dazl winced at his colleague’s scolding, but Alafa was amused by the feisty old man. Remgen nudged Rezwit gruffly and, without a word, Rescue Team Three drove slowly up the path, while the professor turned the crawler around to face south and began scanning his half of Zone Two’s path.

The process of discovery was painful for everyone concerned, but especially for Rescue Team Four. Zorig and his teammates continued to fire upon the stubborn predators while Imwep and his team sat helplessly inside the copse.

“Where are those blithering hubrid-brained dakkas?” Kogin murmured into his headset.

“The fools are lost!” Imwep spat the words.

Kogin and Imwep’s barbs caused Remgen and Arkru to cringe with guilt. Along with everything else going wrong this hour, Rescue Teams Two and Three seemed hopelessly lost. Commander Falon was comforted by his officers as he listened to the beleaguered teams. He was disappointed with the professor and the first mate, but he also felt sorry for them as they drove up and down like hubrids searching for the path. Mentally, he agreed with Eglin and Abwur’s criticism, but his heart agonized over his inability to save the teams. It was the first time in his career as commander that he was unable to personally assist the crewmen, students, and technicians of his ship. His death would, in theory, be devastating for the mission, but the death of just one of the ship’s company in this godless wilderness was unacceptable to him right now.

“Remgen and Imwep are both right,” he could hear the professor mutter bitterly to his team, “we can’t find the entrance. Out here, it’s one great featureless green. We are, in fact, profoundly ignorant of this planet’s topography. At the rate we’re going, the search could go on for hours!”

“That’s unacceptable!” Falon’s catchword blared over the airways. “Unacceptable, do you hear me? *Un-ac-cept-able!* You must look more closely Doctor Arkru. Remgen, I expected better from a veteran such as you! Imwep, Kogin, Zither, Zorig—all of you out there, *please don’t lose heart!* “

For their part, Kogin and Imwep continued to utter quiet imprecations at the tardy rescuers. It didn’t seem to matter to them that everyone could hear what they were saying. Then, inexplicably, the crackle of stunners died down as the spike-toes regrouped several yards from the front. Though it seemed to be a foolish notion, it appeared to Zorig that the predators had gone into a huddle, at one point, to decide their next move. Through a fog of fatigue and fear, Zorig noticed that many of the spike-toes lay motionless on the ground. Their constant fire was taking its toll. At last, the Class 4 Stunner was having an effect upon the predators. But, at the same time that their efforts appeared to be paying off, the fact remained that there were still several dozen of them advancing and retreating relentlessly as he and his teammates wore themselves out. As no surprise to him, the huddle ended. Something he didn’t expect, though, almost paralyzed him with fear. As wicked, carefree children, the spike-toes pranced and frolicked toward their prey, calling, with their chirps and mewling, their kinsfolk from the forest, until it appeared, in Zorig’s panic-driven mind, that hundreds of spike-toes were emerging as reserve forces from the trees. Hobi, Imyor, Ibris, Tobit and the team leader began, without spoken words, to fire in shifts. Two or three would stand and shoot their stunners while the remainder would rest against the rock. Such a simple routine, Zorig realized, was absolutely essential, for it kept them from dropping from sheer exhaustion. Now, however, the fact that Rescue Team One had become surrounded by spike-toes and both Rescue Team Two and Three couldn’t find the alternate path dampened whatever hopes they had of surviving the predators’ onslaught.

“I don’t know how much longer we can keep this up,” he confessed into this headset. “When we train our fire power on certain spike-toes they drop in their tracks and don’t get up. . . but too many of them are taking their places. . . Our arms and legs are tired. . . How much longer do we have to wait?”

“Not long,” Arkru promised, heaving a sigh.

“Hold on,” Imwep uttered in a faint whisper, “we’re gonna get you out!”

“How?” screamed Zorig. “You’re surrounded Imwep! The professor and Remgen haven’t a clue! We need help *now!*”

Both Kogin and Varik now socked their gloved fists with frustration. As Illiakim sat in a hysterical stupor, Zither, himself, was on the verge of tears. Managing to stay calm during the crisis, Imwep carefully peeked out of the copse into the direction of Rescue Team Four. Suddenly, as before, the predators paused, appearing to regroup again, as if they might be having second thoughts.

“Psst! Kogin,” he whispered as the third mate sat grumbling under his breath, “the guns have stopped and so has that awful chirping. I think Rescue Team Four’s guns are having an effect. Enough electrons have bombarded some of their thick hides; it looks as if many of those blighters are dead. It could also be that those beasties are getting a second wind. Team Four, however, has ran out of steam. We must take matters into our own hands!” “Commander,” Imwep’s voice rose a notch. “Are you listening sir? I should be saying this to you.”

“I’m listening,” Falon’s voice was husky with emotion. “I just wish I could be there to help.... These are hard, unfriendly times for my crew.”

“Don’t worry sir,” Imwep piped reassuringly, “Zorig’s team has made a difference. A couple of them are lying dead out there, at least I think they’re dead. The rest of them out there are biding their time. With our weapons joining Rescue Team Four’s, we should be able to draw off half of the predators and give Four some time until Two and Three arrive.”

“Proceed,” replied Falon in a deadpan voice.

“All right. That’s very touching,” Kogin mumbled, looking anxiously at his leader.

“What now?”

Gripping both Kogin’s and Varik’s shoulders, Imwep spoke gently to them: “Now listen lads, those other fellows looking for the alternate path are lost.” “No offense intended,” he said for the benefit of the professor and Remgen, “but they’re not going to be much help until they find the entrance to the path. We’re going to have to take matters into our own hands if we want to save Zorig’s team. By the time the others arrive, Rescue Team Four will have been shredded over the jungle floor!”

“Count me in,” Varik leaned forward anxiously.

“What about them?” Kogin pointed to Zither and Illiakim, who shrank fearfully into their seats.

“They’re children,” Imwep smiled compassionately at them. “They’re staying put!”

Forgetting his radio etiquette once more, Kogin replied that it had been a terrible mistake to send children to do adults’ work. Again the professor cringed with guilt as he searched for the entrance to the path. The students looked up forlornly at the adults. It seemed so unfair to them, after all their training from Doctor Arkru, that these rustics were in control of the rescue and Commander Falon was giving orders to Arkru from the bridge. Kogin caught Zither’s pained expression and took time to console him now.

“There-there lad,” he patted him paternalistically on his helmet. “The old second mate’s right. It’s up to us see that you whelps don’t become casualties. You have no business being out here in the first place!”

“But I-I want to help,” Zither voice broke with emotion. “I studied and planned to be a collector—we all did, just like Doctor Arkru. Now, all of a sudden we—the professor, students and technicians—have lost control. If we can’t pull our weight now, what good will all our training and effort have been?”

“You know something lad,” Imwep leaned forward to whisper exclusively to him, “... when I was your age I was still playing children’s games on Revekia. You wouldn’t catch my parents sending me off into the unknown. No sir, we let children grow up naturally then. Kogin’s right lad; this notion of the Fathers of Science to send out children to do an adult’s work is a great mistake. What kind of parents would even allow this to happen? Why, at the rate our journey is going, you’ll be *my age* when you return!”

Zither was moved by the crusty officers’ concern. When he thought about it, he realized that he had never felt comfortable with so much responsibility. Though Imwep and Kogin couldn’t have known, Zither’s father had been killed in the Old Ones Wars and his mother had been too busy as a scientist to give him much attention when he was a child. Zither’s grandparents’ hatred of war had instilled in him a pacifism that even the dangers of Irignum couldn’t shake. It had made him mentally ill equipped for this hostile world. Kogin interpreted his silence as disagreement, however, and he changed tactics when Zither didn’t speak.

“It’s this Rifkin fellow, isn’t?” he asked, looking down at him now. “He’s caused more trouble than he’s worth. He’s got the whole ship in a turmoil and endangered all our lives.”

“Well let me tell you lad,” he wrung his finger, “he’s an immature little show-off, and he doesn’t impress me at all!”

It saddened Doctor Arkru to hear the adults talk disparagingly about one of his pupils. Rifkin had showed so much promise in his eyes, but now, because of the dilemma he had placed the students, technicians, and ship’s crewmembers in, he was becoming a pariah in everyone’s minds. For several moments, as he frantically searched each side of the forest, the professor mumbled deliriously to himself “Must find path.... Must find path.” No one in the crawler, including the talkative Alafa, could console him or give him encouragement, so they, too, lapsed into silence, until pandemonium broke on the alternate path.

At this point, the professor could hear shouts from both of the beleaguered teams as Imwep, Kogin and Varik began firing on the pack. As always, the crackling sound was, in itself, a heart-stopping sound. Only about half of the remaining predators began advancing on the aliens, wary of the fire-stick’s power after seeing many of their comrades finally drop from repeated bombardment, yet undeterred. Unlike Rescue Team Four, who had an outcrop of igneous rock at their backs, the three team members could move around on their firing line, which made their gunshots seem more like an offensive maneuver rather than pure defense. As a dozen or more of the spike-toes rushed the trio, Imwep realized they had succeeded in dividing the pack but at very great peril. Unfortunately, this advantage would soon change.

As Rescue Team Four had discovered earlier, Imwep, Kogin and Varik found that training their line of fire on one predator at a time had a more lasting effect on the spike-toes than random potshots. For awhile it heartened Rescue Team One’s marksmen to see the constant barrage of electrons nearly halt the predators’ advance, until, to everyone’s horror, several of the downed predators, who had seemed to have dropped dead, were climbing groggily back onto their feet. Zorig was not surprised about this setback and offered no comment when the predators seemed resurrected before his eyes. The sight of so many of them getting back onto their feet was too much for his terror-shocked brain. After all the electrons they had thrown at them from their stunners and even with Rescue Team Ones’ added shots, the predators stubbornly believed they had cornered helpless prey. The impact, though far greater when received from more than one gun, was still not permanent and seemed to have no lasting impact on the dinosaur’s nervous systems and thick hides.

The positions of both Rescue Teams Four and One seemed utterly hopeless at this point, and yet a far more serious problem loomed suddenly at the edge of the clearing. Zorig saw them first through the advancing bodies of the third spike-toe assault, but could not believe his eyes. Because of the dense undergrowth of ferns and low-lying limbs, the approach of this horde had caught the aliens by surprise.

“It’s working!” Varik squealed with delight.

“No, it’s not!” cried Kogin. “They’re climbing back on their feet, even the ones lying down. I’ve never seen so many of these blighters in one place. We should’ve stayed in our bush!”

“Keep your heads lads,” Imwep tried sounding confident, “the pack’s now broken in half. At least we’re slowing them down!”

“Slowing them down? Broken in half?” Zorig screamed hysterically into his receiver. “What nonsense! Are you blind? Are you deaf? Can’t you see them? Can’t you hear them? There’s more of them coming out of the forest. It’s going to be a feeding frenzy now!”

“Oh, Izmir!” Tobit wept unabashedly. “Someone better get here fast!”

It became evident to the others, after experiencing the first, second, and third assault of spike-toes, that what they were seeing now were not merely predators rising back on their feet or even the sporadic reinforcements drawn to the scene, but fresh groups of spike-toes streaming en masse passed their stunned relatives through the trees. The sound of chirping, mewing, hissing, the crackling barrage of electrons, and blare of panic-stricken voices over the airways, seemed deafening to those on the bridge. To those lost on the beaten paths, it was the heaviest of emotional blows. The dromaeosaur, whose fossil claws would someday send chills up paleontologists spines, were, during the last days of the dinosaurs, equivalent to canine packs or schools of hungry sharks, with the exception that, like cats with mice, they first played with their food.... Now it seemed to the beleaguered teams that they were closing in for the kill.

It was a miracle that Zorig and his teammates weren't torn to pieces immediately that moment. All they could do was stand their ground and fire their useless guns. Certain that he was going to the Outer Reaches, Zorig cursed everyone that had gotten him into this mess, then, while firing his weapon madly, uttered the Revekian dirge. The frightened voice of his associate and friend caused Arkru to moan loudly and shake his head. It also spurred him into moving faster than before. He could hear Falon from the bridge trying to bring calm into the situation, but there was indecision in the commander's voice.

“You can do it lads!” he said lamely to the teammates. “Just keep on firing at them; they'll get the message. You fought the Old Ones. Certainly, we should be able to tame these dumb brutes!”

“Begging your pardon, commander,” said Kogin, out of breath, “these blighters are stubborn, but they're *anything* but dumb!”

An irrational thought entered the professor's head as he searched the trees: *they needed Rifkin*. Rifkin, in spite of his recklessness, had dared take a crawler into a dragon-infested river in order to save his classmates. They needed his bravery and undaunted spirit. But then, Arkru reminded himself quickly, it was Rifkin who had caused this disaster. None of this would have happened if he had not gotten himself lost.

Everyone listened from the forest and the bridge as the dromaeosaurs, whom the professor had officially dubbed “elizom hirzolum” (spike-toes), repeatedly lunged at the teams. Their weapons were obviously not capable of killing these denizens and could only stun them for a short awhile, but it was apparent to everyone by now that the nervous systems and thick hides of the attackers were not altogether immune to their guns. They could be stopped for short periods of time, just long enough for Zither and his teammates to regroup or grab a second wind, yet, after a short period of unconsciousness, were back on their legs, wobbling like crewmen drunk on Revekian beer. Now that a fresh horde of raptors were upon them, the task was daunting.

During this dark hour, just when it seemed to Remgen that his search was hopeless, the first mate spotted tracks of the two previous crawlers leading sharply into the forest and quickly swung into the opening in the trees. Like the professor, he had been muttering deliriously to himself, and had not heard the second mate's harebrained plan. Upon finding the freshly plowed path, he let out a Revekian war hoop and, without even notifying the professor or Falon, plunged the vehicle at full speed down the trail.

“Remgen,” Falon said, after hearing him yell, “are you listening to your radio. Imwep, Kogin and Varik are firing on the pack. Those spike-toes won’t give up. You’ve got to get there before it’s too late!”

“Remgen!” shouted Arkru angrily. “Why couldn’t you have waited? Give us some landmarks to follow. You must help us find the path!”

Shizwit and Vimml were visibly frightened and yet Shizwit held her gun fiercely in her little hand and Rezwit had a look of terrified determination on his face.

“Frightened little children—all of you,” Remgen snarled into his rearview mirror. “The whole bunch of you students aren’t worth one Imwep, Kogin, or Rifkin. Now Rifkin won’t be rescued and my shipmates are in danger because of the stupidity of Zorig and his team!”

Remgen announced finally to the commander and Doctor Arkru that he had found the entrance, explaining calmly to the professor the landmarks marking the entry point to the alternate path. Falon, Orix, Abwur, and Eglin looked at each other helplessly, wondering if Rescue Two and Three would reach their beleaguered shipmates in time.

“That’s correct professor,” members of Rescue Team One and Four heard Remgen explain, “if you hear that familiar hooting of the duckbills you’re in the right neck of the woods. Looking toward that volcanic neck and the more distant volcano means you’re heading in the right direction. When you see a small meadow to your left with a large, fallen tree in its midst, and hear the sound of stunners in the distance, as I hear now, *you’re almost there!*”

The fact that Remgen had not waited for the professor to catch up with him caused Arkru great agitation. After only a few moments of searching, Dazl and Alafa helped him spot the landmarks given by the first mate. Rescue Team Two knew, at that point, they were on the right path.

“I’m on my way!” Arkru exclaimed happily, the sound of his confidence filling Zorig with hope.

Remgen now slowed his vehicle to a crawl to allow Rescue Team Two to catch up.

As Rescue Team Four’s last reserve of stunner energy poured out against the pack, they were encouraged by Imwep, Kogin, and Varik’s help and the knowledge that both Remgen and the professor were almost here, but they were close to collapse. Prolonged stunner operation required a cooling off period. One or two more blasts from their weapons, which drew energy from the atmosphere but would begin malfunctioning because of overuse, might very well be their last. They could barely hold their arms up. Their legs seemed ready to crumble beneath them as they held their ground. Suddenly, as Remgen and Arkru’s teams charged onto the scene, Zorig realized that there might be fifteen stunners firing on the spike-toes, instead of only seven, not to mention the twelve force field poles he hoped they wouldn’t have to use.

While voices shot back and forth in their helmets, Rescue Team Four were too exhausted to respond. All their attention and energy remained focused upon the stunners in their hands and the predators straight ahead.

“Remgen, Arkru, Imwep,” Falon’s voice rang out in his old form, “state your positions. Rescue Team Leaders One, Two, Three, and Four sound off!”

With irritation, Remgen reported hastily to the commander “Rescue Teams Two and Three have arrived sir and are joining the fight.”

“Did you hear that Rescue Team Four?” cried Falon. “How are you holding up?”

“We heard it commander,” Zorig said faintly. “Please don’t make me talk.”

“Zorig,” Arkru exclaimed anxiously, ready to collapse himself, “don’t lose heart. Help has finally arrived!”

“Imwep and Kogin,” the commander called, “join Two and Three in a continuous line of fire. While the marksmen from Rescue Team One, Two, and Three fire upon the pack, scattering predators here and there, I want their drivers to move into position behind them to pick up survivors.”

“Survivors?” whimpered Tobit. “I don’t like that word!”

It struck Imwep and Kogin as bizarre that Falon was mustering his troops. Since he couldn’t see what was going on, his commands seemed especially absurd, and yet the commander sat at the bridge barking out orders as would a field general from distant a hill.

“Sir,” Imwep protested, intermittently firing his weapon, “Zither and Illiakim are still inside the vehicle in the copse. They’re safe and sound right now. I think we should wait until we’ve driven these blighters off before endangering their lives.”

“Begging the commander’s pardon,” the professor sounded out of breath, “but I’m the driver of Rescue Team Two, and *I’m* joining the fight!”

“Me too,” snorted Rezwit, amazed at Falon’s orders.

“I’m well aware that you’re both drivers,” Falon bristled. “I meant for the leaders to delegate that responsibility to someone on your teams.”

“Sir,” Dazl offered politely, “we need all the fire power we can get.”

“Imwep,” Remgen called, taking aim and firing, “Zither and Illiakim have no protection in there. They’re better off helping us!”

The professor, who was too exhausted to speak, nodded dubiously at the first mate. Together with his team, he joined the firing line. All of the remaining children, including Shizwit, the Key Master, abandoned their crawlers, moving out bravely with their guns ablaze. With the greatest of misgivings, Imwep motioned to Zither and Illiakim, who stood peeking out of the copse, to come too. “We must drive off the spike-toes before attempting an escape,” he explained, hastily checking their weapons to make sure they were armed and set. “When we have the upper hand,” he promised, turning to fire, “we’ll make our escape!”

The children followed the adults example and fired their weapons continuously at the beasts. After a short period, in which Falon was consoled by Orix, Eglin, and Abwur, the commander bowed his head in dismay. Eglin uttered another prayer. The crackle of stunners could be heard on the bridge, punctuated at times by curses and gasps from the group. A fundamental need for video cameras to be installed on all life support helmets had been demonstrated to the commander. Only the professor’s specially designed helmet accommodated such a device, and it had been left on the ship. What had seemed like a sound and tactical maneuver on paper didn’t work in the field, especially when the “general” was working blind.

The adult and children’s combined efforts succeeded, after only a few moments, in pushing the pack to the far side of the clearing, leaving countless unconscious spike-toes lying on the ground. At a point forever lost in the recollection of students and crewmen alike, a signal was given by someone for Rescue Team Four to make a dash to safety. Perhaps, the commander later reasoned, it had been mere panic that had set it off. Or perhaps, as Arkru, the defender of the students, had suggested, it had been the fault of the adults for not having the crawlers ready. But, the fact remained, Zorig and his team should have waited until the crawlers were ready to move and the marksmen were positioned inside the vehicles and were ready to give them all cover before they escaped.

When members of Zorig's ill-fated team stumbled across the clearing in their bulky suits, several of the predators, who had been knocked down by the barrage, began rising up just in time to lunge at the escapees. At that point, Zither, who stood closest to the copse, took the cue from Illiakim, who was running toward the crawler, herself.

"I'll get it started," he cried frantically to the others. "Illiakim, you stay with the group!"

Stumbling, then picking herself up, she staggered frantically into the copse, shouting repeatedly "I don't wanna die," her voice becoming a haunting refrain on the bridge.

Though it seemed like retreat, Zither reached the vehicle, jumped behind the wheel, just as Illiakim scrambled up the ladder and into the back seat. Seeing the hopelessness in Rescue Team Four's situation, Varik had seen his chance for glory and ran back to commandeer crawler number one, too. At just that moment, Zither heard that awful chirping of the spike-toes behind the copse. Rising up on the seat, his stunner drawn, he prayed to Izmir but also cursed Illiakim for not coming to his aid. As he stood frozen like a statue, gun in hand, looking this way and that, he was knocked rudely aside by Varik, his teammate, who immediately grabbed the steering wheel with the intention of personally rescuing Team Four.

"Are you insane?" Zither shouted, as the vehicle lurched out of the copse.

Since it was impossible for the marksmen to fire upon the spike-toes without hitting members of Rescue Team Four, the escapees were forced to turn and fire occasionally at the attackers, themselves, as they fled slowly over the ground. This didn't save Hobit from having his suit torn by the jaws of one of the beasts. When Rescue Team One's crawler broke through the wall of ferns, it also didn't save poor Tobit from being immediately crushed to death. Meanwhile Zither had fallen into the back seat, rising up fearfully alongside of Illiakim, who was screaming at the top of her lungs. It had all happened too fast for anyone to have seen either event occur. To add to the confusion, as the terror-stricken and exhausted escapees were pulled beyond the line of fire, both Remgen and the professor decided that it was a perfect time to use the force field poles. Using the first and second mates' stronger arms, the poles were tossed into the space the marksmen had created with the intention to widen the space between themselves and the spike-toes and give them more time to escape. The blast, though not nearly equal to the weaponry used in the Solar Wars, was substantial, not only fragmenting several of the disoriented predators instantly, but disabling and stunning the remainder of the pack as it huddled at the far end of the clearing.

As Varik, Remgen, and Arkru sat anxiously behind the wheels of crawlers one, two, and three, the survivors and marksmen were pulled onto the vehicles. It was apparent that the pack hunters had gotten the message hoped for by the commander, but at a terrible cost. When the team leaders hastily counted heads as the crawlers ambled back to the ship, Hobi lie unconscious in Rescue Team Three's crawler, and Tobit couldn't be found at all. As Kogin, Zither and Illiakim, who sat as passengers behind Varik and Imwep, looked behind them, they could see a most awful sight: the crushed frame of Tobit being dragged away into the bushes by members of the pack.

"Varik," Zither gave a wounded cry, "you left Tobit! You must've run over him as he tried to climb aboard!"

"No, no," Varik mumbled numbly, "it can't be!"

"He's dead," Kogin said, patting Zither's shoulder, "we can't help him now!"

"We must go back!" Doctor Arkru cried piteously, slumping at his wheel.

"Remgen, sir," Alafa said between sobs, "Hobi has been injured. He's unconscious. Those beasties have bitten through his suit."

“Rescue Teams One, Two, Three, and Four proceed to ship.” Falon came alive on the bridge. “My condolences to you Doctor Arkru and Hobi’s friends, but I want no more casualties out there!”

All things considered, at least in the commander and his senior officers’ thinking, the mission to save Rescue Team Four was a qualified success. Not counting Rifkin, who was merely lost, only two shipmates had become casualties. During the discovery of Tobit’s disappearance and Hobi’s wound, everyone had been either crying or cursing about what had happened, but the commander was greatly relieved that the disaster had not claimed more.

As the three crawlers hastened back to ship, silence filled the airways. The professor had been furious with Zorig for getting them all into this mess, but now he was just heartsick and blamed himself for setting it all in motion. Perhaps, he told himself, Falon was right: children should not be expected to do an adult’s job. It had been Varik’s appropriation of Zither’s crawler that crushed Tobit to death, and yet Varik had only been trying to save Rescue Team Four’s lives. Even though his own conduct had caused the current problem in the first place and Varik had been directly responsible for Tobit’s death, Zorig blamed Rifkin the most. Alafa and Ibris quietly cursed all three of them for what happened today. No one, not even Rezwit and Vimml, dared stick up for Rifkin now. Gentle Tobit had died and was being eaten by alien life forms. Rifkin was, most everyone had to agree, ultimately to blame. Zorig and Varik had merely been bunglers along the way.

Arkru grieved for the one dead technician and felt responsible for the seriously injured crewman, but his chief concern was now for Rifkin, who had been totally forgotten by everyone in the tragedy occurring today. As his shock wore off, he grew angry with Zorig for placing them in this situation, but he didn’t have the heart to bawl him out now. That would come later aboard ship when they were out of these dreadful suits, cleaned, and fed. Perhaps by then he would be able to look at these crashing events logically and with an objective mind.

When the three crawlers arrived at the ship and drove one-by-one up the ramp leading into the decontamination chamber of the hold, no one spoke. After a hasty decontamination made it possible for the chief medic to enter, Hobi was immediately attended too by Eglin, with Varik assisting as a medic once more. Varik, however, was ordered to leave, while Gennep, Hobi’s best friend, helped Eglin place the stricken crewman into a gurney and carry him up to the infirmary. Everyone was worn out by the ordeal, and Eglin realized his assistant was still in shock after the disaster. The process of removing their suits after decontamination, which would have to be endured twice today, had been especially tiresome for those shipmates emotionally shattered as well.

A rescue team still had to go out and find Rifkin but no one was volunteering to do so this time. Falon appeared now in the chamber in a clean, shiny uniform alongside of Abwur and Wurbl, for the purpose, the commander explained to Arkru, Remgen and Imwep, of volunteering for the task. In a corner of the room, the sixth and final crawler was already fueled and ready to go. On its hood was the commander’s familiar winged logo from his days as a lieutenant in the Solar Wars. The dramatic gesture, which infuriated the students and technicians, was merely irritating to the first, second and third mates. The senior officers of the ship would, Remgen, Imwep, and Kogin were quite certain, not let their precious commander risk his life, and the commander knew very well that they, not himself nor his irreplaceable senior officers, would go out again today.

“Thank you Arkru for helping to save most of my crewmen,” Falon held out his hand as Arkru stood there with the others shivering in his undergarments. “I don’t blame you for this disaster professor, but neither do I commend you totally for its success. From now on I will lead the expeditions. Orix is an accomplished pilot and captain. I will not allow anyone to use my position as a reason to keep me aboard ship. You are a scientist Arkru, not a warrior. This hostile planet requires warriors more than explorers.”

“That’s utter nonsense,” Rezwit muttered to Vimml.

“You Zorig,” Falon turned to the chief technician, “behaved badly today. As a leader of a team, you have shown unforgivable incompetence. Your inability caused the death of one of our shipmates and injured a member of my crew. Your guilt should be seen as the lesser since Rifkin’s recklessness caused all this mess in the first place, but it was your ineptitude that ultimately required a second rescue attempt.”

“What?” Zorig’s mouth dropped in disbelief.

“Begging the commander’s pardon,” Ibris spoke up for his leader. “No one could grieve for Tobit more than I, but it was your precious crewman Varik who ran over my friend. Zorig did everything he could to save our skins.”

Pointing to the dejected chief technician, Falon quickly countered “It was *him* that caused it all to happen in the first place. If he hadn’t been so inept, you would all still be looking for young Rifkin right now!”

Varik stood with his helmet bowed. He knew his recklessness had killed Tobit. No one could feel worse than himself, and yet he felt angry that his split decision to save Rescue Team Four was merely one point in a series of crashing events that lead back to one source.

“We all know who is really at fault here,” he looked up at the commander then. “Let’s put the blame on the real cause!”

“Rifkin!” Alafa spat.

“Rifkin!” Remgen, Imwep, and Kogin echoed, nodding their heads.

“Yes, Rifkin!” Varik looked defiantly around the room. “Rifkin caused all this to happen. All Zorig and I tried to do, in our own way, was help!”

“Silence!” the professor cried. “Please, officers, crewmen, students, and technicians, ask yourselves what you have to gain by casting blame. There’s enough dissention on this ship. The fact is I blame myself most of all, but we must still nevertheless find poor Rifkin. After all, he’s only a child. Zorig is only a few years older than him; I should never have given him such responsibility. He’s a scientist, not an explorer. Varik, on the other hand, is an adult. If he can’t share in the blame, perhaps he can share in the rescue of Rifkin.”

“Yes,... I would like to go,” Varik replied, seeing his chance to absolve himself.

“I don’t think so,” said Falon, wagging a gloved finger at the medic. “You might be exonerated from guilt in Tobit’s death Varik but not from the gross insubordination and disobedience you displayed out there.”

“I volunteer in his place,” Imwep stepped forward a pace.

“I volunteer too,” Kogin followed suit.

Several, though not all of those assembled, volunteered to accompany the commander, except the professor who stood there wondering if he could make it through the remainder of the day.

“One thing is certain,” he finally uttered, looking forbearingly at the commander, “you, Falon, can’t go. You’re not expendable, and neither is our communications officer or chief cook.

Please Falon, don't jeopardize our mission by risking your life. Let us go out again while you man the bridge."

Virtually all of the commander's officers took him aside and argued with him in hushed tones, until he finally nodded his head and walked slowly back to the assembled group.

"I will stay aboard ship on one condition," Falon bargained, walking over to take the professor's hand. "You must stay on board too. You look like you're going to drop dead, yourself, Doctor Arkru. What would happen to the scientific collection of specimens if you died?"

"What have I done, except place my students and the ship's crewmen in danger?" Arkru gave a bitter laugh. "I think I've made a mess of things. I wonder now if we should ever have landed on this forsaken world."

"You believed in them," declared Falon, "and they responded as explorers and visionaries just like yourself. You trusted them to do an adult's task. Until now, they performed well, filling the ship's enclosures with alien animals and plants. But now we've found a world that's uncompromising in its bounties and unforgiving of our mistakes. You must take what you've learned to mind, not to heart. You must feel anger and frustration, not shame or guilt. We must take the time to design weapons that are more effective than our stunners and those unpredictable trap poles. We must teach this savage world that we, not they, are in control."

As students and crewmen rallied around their two leaders, they reached out to grasp each other's forearms as was the custom of their people, and a prayer was spoken by Eglin for their fallen comrade. A service would be held to commemorate his life, but for now there was little time left. The crews must go back out. This time, it was agreed to by Arkru and Falon, only three of the remaining four crawlers—one heading into Zone One, one heading into Zone Two and a crawler to cover both paths—would go out one more time. Crawler number six, the commander's private vehicle, would not need to go. If Rifkin was not found by nightfall, they wouldn't be able to go out again until tomorrow morning and by then he would probably be dead.

Though not everyone seemed eager to volunteer, Falon ordered them all to line up so Eglin and Varik could make sure they were fit for duty. Also inspected was their life support suits to insure they were functioning properly and had enough air. Afterwards, Varik made notes in his wrist communicator on how much air they each needed and what systems needed adjustment or repairs, and then the commander stepped forward and called out in a marshal voice: "All those volunteering to go a second and final time to find Rifkin step forward now!"

Imwep, Kogin, Dazl, and Imyor all quickly stepped forward a pace. At almost the same time, Rezwit, Vimml, Shizwit, Alafa, and Zither stepped forward too, but Illiakim and the technician Ibris remained in place as did Varik who had been forbidden to go. Wurbl walked over to the assistant cook Imyor and begged him quietly not to go. After listening wide eyed and tearfully to the chef, the assistant cook bowed his head, sighed, and stepped back from the line of volunteers. Zorig, who felt unworthy to be part of the effort, had actually stepped several paces back and stood forlornly in the shadows of the decontamination chamber as his shipmates volunteered. The professor stood between Falon and Abwur, a look of relief on his face that Ibris had not volunteered. He smiled with understanding at Illiakim and looked with compassion over the students' heads at the crestfallen chief technician. Then it dawned on him that only nine had volunteered when, in fact, they needed twelve.

"This is not enough," he announced solemnly to the group. "We still have one more crawler to fill."

“Well?” Falon looked at the shirkers, his insensitivity showing again. He didn’t even look at Varik or give Zorig a glance but focused on the emotionally shattered Ibris and Illiakim. This struck the professor as absurd, since they needed three more willing team members to fill the third crawler and the commander and his chief cook had already eliminated two. Perhaps, he reasoned, Falon planned, after all, to allow Abwur or himself to join in the hunt, but more likely he wanted Varik and Zorig to stew in their own guilt awhile before allowing them to absolve themselves in the rescue.

“I’m waiting,” Falon folded his arms. “Does my chief cook, communication officer, and I have to go ourselves to make up the deficit made by those too cowardly to volunteer?”

“I’m sorry,” the professor spoke softly to Illiakim and Ibris, “it looks as if at least one of you must volunteer. Varik and Zorig must be given another chance to redeem themselves with your shipmate Rifkin. You, however, have nothing to prove. As Falon has made it clear, we can’t ask children to do an adult’s work and yet one more of my children will have to go out again in place of me.... The question is who?”

“I shall go for Tobit,” Ibris stepped forward finally, a look of resolve on his face.

“And you,” Arkru looked over at Varik, who nodded numbly but didn’t reply. When it came right down to it, Falon, he knew, would not stop the medic from doing what was right.

Zorig, who felt the most ashamed, now stepped forward as if this meant he was volunteering to join the team. But Arkru ignored him a moment and focused on Varik, who was being held back by the commander’s fierce gaze.

“Well, young lad,” he seized the young medic’s trembling hand, “you certainly acted bravely, if not foolishly, out there. Do you want to try one more time?”

“Yes, professor,” he nodded eagerly, “I would be honored!”

“Very well,” the commander acquiesced, “but I want no more heroics out there. You obey orders and stop showing off, do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” Varik nodded eagerly. “Thank you sir!”

Suddenly Zorig uttered a broken cry. “I-I want one more chance.... Please professor give me one more chance!”

“Well, I don’t see any other volunteers,” Arkru said, almost playfully, reaching out to motion him forward. “All right Zorig, but we’ll let only Remgen, Imwep, and Alafa drive.”

Zorig said nothing. Varik received an approving nod from the commander, while the chief technician stood there torn between guilt and fear.

“All right,” Arkru clapped his hands at them all, “I think Remgen, Rezwit, Shizwit and Vimml should remain teammates in Rescue Team Two. Imwep, Kogin and Zither will stay together with Ibris joining them in place of Illiakim in Rescue Team One. Since I am not going this time, I will allow Alafa to drive the crawler, though Zorig can still be in charge. Varik and Dazl will round out this patrol vehicle as Rescue Team Three.”

“You will be allowed to refresh yourselves and eat a hasty lunch,” Falon informed them. “While you get a second wind, you’re life support systems will be checked and cleaned. There will be fresh canisters on your backs. I’m sorry but you must be suited up again within the hour.”

No one so much as groaned. They all knew that time was working against them and that they had but a few hours of daylight left.

“Zorig,” Arkru called to the chief technician as he broke ranks with the others, “go fetch me another gas canister for Rifkin. He’ll be running low.” “.... I know you feel badly Zorig,” he said, as the technician returned with a canister. “None of us could have been prepared for the

dangers of this world. We have all learned bitter lessons here on Irignum. Rifkin has learned the most bitter of them all.”

“If not for him,” Zorig murmured stubbornly, “none of this would’ve happened!”

Patting Zorig’s arm gently, the professor nodded but found himself incapable of replying. Tears ran down his aged face. He knew that, after these perilous days, his students and technicians would never be the same. They had gained much in knowledge on Irignum but they had lost far more than what they gained in their innocence and trust of nature. Tobit was dead and Hobi had been seriously injured. He blamed himself, and no one else, for this state of affairs. Zorig, he reminded himself, was only a few years senior to the oldest student Zither. It was not fair that he carried so much guilt when he, too, was still a child.

Now that he had made his magnanimous gesture, Falon, with Navigator Orix and Communication Officer Abwur following behind, stepped out into the passageway and returned to the bridge. As quickly as their exhausted limbs could move, the rescuers took the elevator up to their quarters, hastily bathed and dressed, then joined the commander, his officers, and the professor in the dining hall for a short meal.

The mood was both somber and reflective. It might be, everyone agreed, the last time many of them would see each other alive again. During their brief lunch, Eglin came in to solemnly inform them that Hobi never regained consciousness, which now brought the number of Revekian fatalities on Irignum to two. They would have a special service for their fallen comrades when the last rescue attempt was over. Everyone, especially Doctor Arkru, prayed there would be no more souls requiring commemoration at that time.

Chapter Twelve

The Adventures of Rifkin

Rifkin had learned by now that most of the forest dangers were closest to the water. It was by the river that they had first seen the giant leaper, and it was in the water that he was attacked by the dragon. All such creatures fed and drank by the river, so his path must naturally led him away from the river, since he was now on foot and most vulnerable as prey. But now he must head back the same way that he had come, looking for the crawler in the most dangerous part of the jungle: the river's edge. What made his goal even more impossible was the fact that the crawler sat on the opposite side of the water on a sand bar—*on the wrong side of the river!*

How could he possibly get on the other side, unless he swam as he had before or found a log to climb onto and somehow paddled himself safely to the other side? He needed another miracle, like the appearance of the giant long-neck that saved his life. As he passed through the forest of conifers, tree ferns, and newly evolved hardwoods, he felt that at any moment another monster might attack him on the trail. Each tree trunk that he passed and every limb overhead harbored potential death for him. Each chuckhole or crunching limb underfoot and each unfamiliar jungle sound jarred his spirit and made him want to duck and hide.

Out of nowhere this time, the most bizarre looking creature he had seen on this planet hopped out from behind a bush, startling him half out of his wits. The small leaper, which was not much taller than himself, was a dark, glistening green. A fan-like crest on its back moved constantly as it stood there surveying him with its large, unblinking eyes. Although quite ugly, the creature struck him as intelligent; it cocked its reptilian head this way and that, its gaze filled with wonder as it sized him up. Soon it was making purring noises as it began to dance around him, each time cocking its head, a long forked tongue darting in and out rapidly from its narrow jaws. Totally unnerved by this strange, effeminate leaper, Rifkin reached down and grabbed the first stick he could find and took a few swipes at the animal. Instead of standing its ground and fighting him, as Rifkin hoped he wouldn't do, the creature immediately ran from him back into the bush from whence it came. Pumped up with nervous energy, Rifkin foolishly let out a war whoop, wringing his club in the air at his vanquished foe.

"You lowly zabba!" he cried, remembering a strange creature on Beskol that also made a big show and then ran. Like the delicate and furtive zabba, who snuck up on its prey, this predator was built rather flimsily. In stead of having powerful jaws and teeth, its head was thin, its jaws narrow and its teeth were quite small. As Rifkin carried on martially a moment, however, he remembered something else about the zabba that stopped him cold. The zabbas hunted in pairs and lured their victims into a trap: one playing a fawning cowardly role, while a second predator suddenly attacked from behind. When the small leaper had disappeared completely into a clump of vegetation and before another fan-headed predator arrived on the scene, Rifkin took this opportunity to run as fast as he could down the path and find some form of cover, just to make sure. The sound of footsteps behind him, whether imaginary or not, caused him the greatest anxiety. He had no weapon, except the makeshift club he carried. When a tiny chicken-sized runner passed him on the path, he heaved a great sigh and allowed himself to slow down to a trot.

As he approached the river, there were a lot more small flyers in this part of the forest, many of which had long, colorful, and furry outgrowths and beaks instead of jaw. He noticed a greater swarm of segmented creatures at each turn, some of them buzzing around flowers that sprouted up in the small sunlit clearings in the forest. The sounds of Irignum's life forms were also more intense here. The trumpet of large plant-eaters on the banks, the hiss and movement of countless snakes and lizards, constant whoop and chatter of flyers, and rustle of small furry creatures seemed so much louder now. He realized he was near the river now, closer to danger and the constant battle for survival at the water's edge. But he was also closer to the crawler, his best means of escaping danger and returning to the ship.

At the first clearing in which he could look out and see the water, he moved cautiously to its edge, scanning each way for the crawler, wondering how it would be possible to cross the river without having to swim to the other side. He could see the silhouettes of great denizens in the distance similar to the giant who had protected him from danger and a pack of duckbills drinking on the other side of the river. A water dragon moved passed menacingly. A sudden flapping sound overhead alerted him to the passage of a giant flyer, the shadow of its monstrous wings spanning half the river. With mounting anxiety, he noticed there was no sign of his crawler on either side of the water.

Moving cautiously along the bank, he followed it until he was near a small clearing in which a large club-tail lie basking in the sun. Creeping cautiously around the beast, praying that it was asleep, he found himself passing through a copse of ferns and stepping onto a flat rock by the water—a perfect lookout point on which to survey the scene. A large tree had fallen across the river only a small distance away. Unfortunately it had fallen short of the other side by several feet. Its topmost branches rested on a boulder jutting up from the swirling water. The closer he came to it, the longer the distance between the treetop and shoreline seemed to be. He knew that he would have to swim a small distance to shore, and he still didn't know where the sandbar and the crawler might be. It was even possible that he had overshot his mark and traveled too far up the path.

When he had walked to the middle of the fallen tree, shakily holding onto its limbs, he felt as if he had passed the point of no return. Pulling himself step-by-step to the tip, he positioned himself above a patch of white water that seemed closest to the outer bank. Noting that there were few rocks projecting from the current, he leaped clear of the lower limbs of the tree and found himself out of control for several seconds as he tried to scramble ashore. The white water had ended soon enough for him to begin moving on his own in the river, and yet he had the same problem he had before as he tried swimming in his bulky suit. Though buoyant and airtight, the life support system was not intended for swimming; he moved as would an Irignian water bug across the river. The longer he lie in the water, the greater were his chances of being eaten by a dragon in the river or by another predator lurking by the water's edge. As he saw movement at the corner of his eyes, he thought another water dragon was about to attack him, until he discovered that it was merely a log floating his way. No sooner had this potential threat vaporized before him than a school of fish began darting around him, nipping at his life support system as if they had just found themselves something yummy to eat. The sensation was quite terrifying. He thrashed around hysterically in the water until he realized that they couldn't damage his suit. He had begun now to appreciate his bulky life support system, with its apparently invincible and water tight outer sheath. If he had been allowed to breath the air as in Revekia or Beskol, he wouldn't have been wearing his suit and would have been eaten alive as he swam. What he didn't know, of course, was that the material was quite penetrable to spike-

toes, who had sharper, more powerful teeth. Without fear, he grabbed one of the snapping little fish as he dragged himself up out of the water and analyzed it as he continued moving down the riverbank. The fish was practically all head, he noted with a collector's eye. It had a mouthful of teeth that were each as large as his thumb and yet it's body was not much larger than his fist. Although the thought seemed foolish at this point, he would have liked to present it to the professor.

He waited until he could see one of those large tree lizards scurrying up a limb by the water and tossed the fish its way. Instead of landing below the tree, the fish wound up falling into the water and was soon wriggling its way through the shallows until it could rejoin the school of killers lurking in the depths. For several moments, he walked slowly and stealthily along the shore and saw no sign of the crawler. In the distance the long, graceful necks of giant sauropods could be seen poking lazily above the trees. Across the water, a large sail-backed meat eater, similar to the one he saw by the leaper's nest, was savagely biting into the neck of a small sauropod that had been ambushed at the water's edge, while several juveniles of its kind hovered at the kill site, waiting for a chance to slip in and tear off a piece for themselves. In a small clearing further up the river, a swarm of flyers and an assortment of carrion-eating lizards were finishing off the carcass of a large unidentifiable denizen lying in the shallows. Not far from this carnage, as he moved down the sandy bank, he could see several of those dreadful pack hunters, the spike-toes, harassing one of those strange armored dinosaurs that Collection Team Three had caught. The club-tail, as he was nicknamed, flicked its tail back and forth, knocking the little pests this way and that without a care, as it drank from the river.

He didn't know yet why his side of the river was so peaceful. Everything seemed to be happening on the opposite bank. Down the river, just past the comical action of the club-tail against the spike-toes, a third clearing opened up in the dense jungle near the water's edge. He froze in his tracks, as several species of dinosaurs, including duckbills, bone-heads, and crested dinosaurs intermingled with other plant-eaters by the shore. In the background, peeking through the foliage, waiting for an infirmed adult or juvenile to separate from their group, were the shadowy shapes of countless predators. He had never known a planet so filled with potential death. A trio of intelligent looking, large-eyed cousins of the dromaeosaurs, who would someday be given the lengthy title *stenonychosaurus*, hopped suddenly out of a thicket. Unlike the pervasive dromaeosaurs, these illusive predators moved furtively in smaller groups through the forest. One day Doctor Arkru would dub this advanced suborder *iliops menglum*, which meant "savage-clawed leaper." Rifkin, in spite of his dilemma, was momentarily fascinated with these fierce-looking beasts. Immediately now, as if on cue, they began that familiar dance of head-bobbing and bodily gyrations as they surrounded a juvenile duckbill separated from its group, making the same variety of chirping, mewing, and hissing sounds the spike-toes had made. Fortunately for the youngster, several dozen three-horns began nosing their way up to the water's edge, every creature in their path, including the duckbills and their relatives, giving them a wide berth. The *iliops menglum* trio darted promptly into the bushes, while the juvenile duckbill was able, after running across the shallows in front of the three-horns, to rejoin its herd.

The honks, bleats, whistles, chirps, whoops, and hisses of hundreds of dinosaur, reptile, bird, and mammal species now seemed deafening to Rifkin's overwrought mind, but the most frightening noise he could hear during his trek was the flapping of the giant flyer's wings as it flew back and forth over the river searching for prey.

He had never seen anything to even remotely compare with this planet. What he had just seen in such a short span of time was far greater than all the wonders witnessed on other worlds.

But the excitement of Irignum had been worn off for the adventurous lad. He wanted nothing better now than to be back on the ship, heading into deep space away from this dangerous and inhospitable world. Right now the endless deserts of Orm, green fields of Beskol, and featureless plains of his home planet Revekia looked rather good to him. He would not mind whiling away his time as they traveled toward their next destination, reflecting upon his good fortune just to be alive.

In spite of the fact that he hadn't been attacked or chased now that he was on this side of the river, he began to panic when he considered how far he had walked without spotting his vehicle. What if it had been up the river and north of the fallen tree rather than down the river and south of it as he had thought? What if he had marooned himself needlessly on the opposite bank of the river and he would be caught in darkness again before he had time to find the crawler? He was hungry and exhausted from his efforts. His nerves were frazzled and the grip of terror had never left him since this terrible odyssey began. Just when it seemed that he had gone too far down river to be anywhere near his episode with the dragon, he looked up from the ground to see the outline of the crawler straight ahead. Unfortunately, he would have to walk out to the sandbar, a distance in Revekian measurement equivalent to over one hundred feet. Though it seemed logical that it shouldn't be that deep so close to the shore and the sandbar, Rifkin felt as if this was just too good to be true. Surely a water dragon, perhaps the same giant that had tried to get him before, would be lying in wait, a giant flyer would swoop down from the sky, or a pack of spike-toes would ambush him before he reached his goal. The distance from the peaceful stretch of shore he was currently crossing and the crawler ahead was not great, but there could be any manner of creature lurking nearby. Rifkin tossed his small club aside and picked up a large rock in each hand, just in case something approached. The closer he came to the crawler, the more peaceful it looked. He also noticed how quiet it had become. It was as if this neck of the woods was suddenly taking a nap. It reminded him of the period right after their vessel had landed on this planet, a phenomena caused by the electronic ambience of the ship. The racket of the forest had lessened greatly now, so that all he heard was the chirp of insects and buzz of gnats by his helmet.... Something was not right here, he told himself, as he began wading out to the crawler.... It was too quiet and too peaceful on this side of the river. He looked across the water and noticed that all of the creatures he had seen eating and drinking by the water's edge, except the club tail and the three-horn herd, had disappeared into the jungle. Nothing could faze those armored giants. Where was everybody else? Where were all the herbivores and carrion-eaters he had seen by the shore?... Why was it so quiet?

And then it appeared: the largest leaper he had ever seen, perhaps even larger than the leaper witnessed in his viewing screen when the ship was landing. It was simply moving to the water's edge to apparently drink its fill, nothing more, and yet most of the creatures within a radius of a quarter of a mile had fled. The exceptions did not surprise him. There were a few of the smaller meat-eaters looking quietly from the shadows on the other side of the river. A giant flyer flew back and forth overhead. Other than the club-tail and three-horns now turning their attention to water plants on the opposite bank, the silence deepened as the ruler of the jungle approached. The great leaper settled down on its haunches in the shallows to slurp water. Rifkin moved ever so quietly over to an overhanging bush and waited breathlessly. It rose up quizzically, approached within only few feet of the crawler, eyed it passively, slurped up some more water, then moved, with rumbling strides, back up the bank and into the jungle beyond.

"Praise Izmir!" Rifkin whispered, looking up to the sky. "It's now or never!"

He waded as quickly as he could through the shallow water to the sandbar and crawler sitting precariously on its top. Climbing up into the vehicle and into the driver's seat, Rifkin couldn't help whooping with joy, though he did so in a subdued fashion, looking around nervously at the river and nearby trees. He could hear the static in his communicator and realized he had again slugged it up. Since it was already damaged, it would make little difference. Nevertheless, praying for a miracle, Rifkin tried reaching the bridge once more, just in case it might work.

"Doctor Arkru, are you there?" He called softly while turning the ignition over several times. "I've found the crawler. I'm coming home!"

A sick feeling of defeat gripped him as he continued turning the ignition key, and the engine responded with a sputter and cough. For only the third time in his short career as a collector, as he listened to both his motor and radio fail him at the same time, Rifkin found himself weeping. The first time, he could recall, found him stricken with great pain after being bitten by a habot, a crab-like creature inhabiting the dry desert of Orm. But that was only physical pain. The second time was of course the moment he discovered that he had lost his stunner in the water. At that point he had wept out of frustration for being such a fool. What Rifkin felt now were emotions he had been shielded against for most of his life: total helplessness and an uncompromising terror. It was as if he were being punished for all of his misadventures. He was finally being paid back for all the trouble he had caused Doctor Arkru and other members of the ship.

"You'll be better off without me!" he cried into his transmitter. "This is all my fault. I'm going to the Outer Reaches... or the dark sleep!"

As he continued winding his ignition, he heard the most beautiful sound in all Revekian creation: the sound of a motor running. Next, he heard the sound of traction, as the vehicle's plates rotated sluggishly on the mud. Making sure the crawler was set to amphibious operation, he prayed that the rotating plates would break him free enough of the sandbar so that the propeller would not also be caught in the sediment. For a moment it appeared as if he had truly marooned himself on the sandbar after all. His muffled squeals of joy now echoed hollowly in his skull. He began screaming aloud in rage at this new turn of fate, until finally the crawler, now officially an amphibious vehicle, began to break free of the mud. Unfortunately, as an amphibious vehicle, it moved even more slowly than it had as a land craft when Rifkin gave it full power. To make matters far worse, the water dragon appeared directly in front of him, sliding surreptitiously in a liquid movement across the water and heading his way. At that very moment, as he called upon Izmir and his angels, his crawler lurched clear of the sandbar. He swung it sharply away from the advancing dragon. His only hope, since the remaining force field poles were not close enough to grab, was to outrun the beast. To do this he would have to drive up the closest bank and move down river, skirting the jungle until he could find a safe spot to enter. At this point, the ragged edge of the rain forest looked virtually impregnable.

As he headed toward the south side of the shore where Zone Two's path actually began, the dragon swam swiftly across the water, leaving a great wake in its path as it glided toward its prey. Quickly shifting to land operation, Rifkin found the metal plates sliding momentarily in the shallows, gripping the wet sand then floundering awhile in the sediment as the plates began to bog down.

"Not now," he cried, "I'm almost there!"

Once more he believed that it was the Outer Reaches for him. He was too exhausted and too hoarse to even protest as the great dragon came closer and closer to his crawler. Then his

plates, having gained traction on something buried below the sediment, jerked forward just as the crocodile's monstrous jaws began snapping at the back of the vehicle. Unfortunately, the plates continued to stall at various times on the bank. Too stupid it appeared to figure out how to dislodge him from the crawler, the crocodile moved along snapping and chewing at the crawler, instead of the driver, an action that proved futile since the crawler was built of nearly impregnable material. Sooner or later, he was quite sure, it would realize its folly and attack him personally. He could either jump off now and make his getaway by running safely into the jungle and hope that he could come back later to reclaim his vehicle, or he could stick it out until he could drive it out of the shallows into the trees and put this dreadful fellow behind him once and for all.

The choice was made for him as he found his plates on solid ground and he finally broke free of the monster's grip. Suddenly, he was moving up the bank away from the deadly jaws of the crocodile and into an unknown patch of jungle. He knew that other great meat-eaters lurked on this side of the river, but he believed that he had a fighting chance to get back to the ship now that he had gone this far. Blazing a trail into the jungle, his crawler mowed down a swath of ferns and scouring rushes, until he was virtually stopped by the jungle itself. Without a beaten path created by the forest denizens, he would have to struggle blindly through the prickly underbrush and leafy forest. At this particular turn, a wall of hardwood and conifer trees prevented his passage. He was, he realized as he stared up at the trees, at a dead end in this sector of the forest. He knew now that he must wait for the creature to swim away from that portion of the river he just left, so he could skirt the shoreline until he found a clear passage through the trees.

"Oh," he wailed, "I don't want to go back to the river's edge!"

The sound of splashing and thrashing in back of him could mean that the water dragon had found other prey, but it could also mean that only one particular dragon had found prey and that another lie in wait not far away. Backing up and turning around on the road he had created, Rifkin drove the crawler slowly over the crushed foliage to avoid entering too abruptly, looking both ways before entering the water. He could see in the distance a most amazing sight: to his right, two great water dragons were wrestling with a carcass, probably a duckbill that had floated down the river, and to his left, entering the shallows from the south bank was the largest long-neck he had ever seen on this planet. Though the sauropod might even be the great beast he had encountered in the river yesterday, this dinosaur was out of the water and the full extent of its tremendous size was exhibited. From the tip of its incredibly long tail to its extraordinarily long-neck, it waddled ungracefully to the edge of the lake totally oblivious of the great meat-eater poking its head up suddenly from the other side. For reasons, Rifkin's tired mind could easily imagine, the long-neck was unafraid of the meat-eater and the dragons. Because of its great size it was either the true ruler of the forest or the great leaper preferred smaller game than something that was five or six times its size.

While the long-neck slid into the water, a great wake followed its movements and caused Rifkin's crawler to bob in the water as he re-entered the shallows of the river. For a moment he had almost decided to wait it out, but now he decided just as suddenly to take advantage of the passage of this leviathan and move alongside of it, hoping, as he did so, not to be whacked by its monstrous tail. He had to find an entrance to the forest *now*.

"Here goes again," he whispered prayerfully. "May the Celestial Spirits go with me. Please Izmir, Master of the Cosmos and Outer Reaches, give me one more chance!"

The side of the great beast moved past so slowly this time, its wake caused only a minor stir for his crawler, but as its tail came in sight, Rifkin swung sharply to the left again, hoping that another dragon wasn't lurking just out of range of the tail. When he spotted a familiar patch of riverbank, he noted the imprint of the juvenile long-neck and the discarded net and knew he was heading the right way.

"Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!" he cried, looking heavenward, convinced he was being guided by God.

Soon he was on the same animal-beaten path he had originally traveled to reach the river's edge, but this time going the opposite way. If his fuel held out and he wasn't stopped by another monster in the forest, he could make it back to the ship before nightfall.

"Please, just let me make it back to ship!" he kept saying over and over again as he drove down the trail.

Looking back at his remaining three poles, which were potential bombs, Rifkin continued to drive south on the beaten path that ultimately led back to the ship. Now that he was no longer hampered by fears of water dragons or being lost, his alien heart swelled with hope and excitement. At first, because of the roar of his vehicle's engine and rumble of its plates, he could barely hear the threatening sounds of the forest. His attention was focused on his destination. His goal was to return to his people and survive. Nothing mattered to him but to live and return to the cosmos as a collector, as his mentor Doctor Arkru, and leave this dreadful world behind.

In spite of not having a stunner, Rifkin felt that he was out of harm's way. This period of euphoria, however, lasted for only a few moments on the path. When he had broken free of the bumpy clearing and gotten used to the rumble of the motor and sound of the metal plates crunching the ground, he could finally make out the commotion on each side of him and on the road ahead. His feeling of well being evaporated with his courage, as the sounds of mayhem returned to his ears. He began fumbling with the poles behind the driver's seat with his free hand while trying to steer the crawler. He found himself veering recklessly toward bushes and trees on each side of the path. A huge flyer zoomed past him at one point, causing him to jerk instinctively away from its monstrous shadow on the path. After dodging a volcanic boulder looming beside the road, he barely missed hitting several tiny squeaking and jittery bipeds streaking across as he surged ahead. A pair of those big-eyed leapers he had seen by the river darted in front of him, chasing a young scoop-mouth, and, not far beyond that, a club-tail lazily crossing the corridor, unconcerned by the appearance of another giant flyer overhead.

Despite his legendary reckless bravery, he really didn't want to confront the horrors lying ahead. He had been through too much in the past twelve hours to act the part of the hero or bold adventurer anymore. He was both mentally and physically exhausted and consumed with mounting guilt. Somehow, he promised both Izmir and himself, he would make it up to his shipmates and convince the professor to trust him again. Although he had no knowledge yet of the disaster in Zone Two, he was certain that he had caused them all great dismay.

He was driving the crawler back to the ship with little joy and self-esteem when another duckbill clamored passed his vehicle, nearly colliding with him as it made its escape. A pair of juvenile leapers, each over ten feet high, also appeared on the beaten path, and Rifkin's instincts came into play. He was too exhausted now for outright terror. His common sense, after his experience in the jungle so far, told him that the single-minded predators would pass him by as they surged after their prey. It seemed that such predators were unable or unwilling to focus on

two possible victims at the same time. And yet the young explorer found himself turning his wheel sharply and detouring into the dense jungle, as if by magic a clearing or beaten path would suddenly appear for his sake. Luckily for him, he was able to find a trail wide enough for his vehicle to navigate. He found himself racing through the forest, his helmet and life support system whipped by ferns and the limbs of bushes and overhanging trees as he sought to distance himself from the leapers chasing the duckbill down the main path.

Stopping his crawler to gain his bearings, Rifkin perked up his ears and heard the terrible caterwauling sounds of the leapers as they evidently found easier prey. He couldn't believe the leapers caught the duckbill; it had too great a lead on its pursuers and had hopefully rejoined its herd in the northern woods. When several spike-toes appeared on the path behind him, he stomped the accelerator and began racing through the trees.

He wondered if his best chance might be to plunge his crawler into a thicket and crawl underneath the vehicle and wait for the predators to leave. He could think of nothing else to do. It seemed so hopeless. He didn't expect another avenue of escape to avail itself as he hurled his crawler toward a thicket directly ahead. When his vehicle arrived on the other side of the foliage, he found himself in the midst of a forest meadow. A herd of those wondrous three-horns, the professor pointed out during their nature hike in Zone Three and he had seen by the riverbank in Zone One, stood closely packed together munching on the ancestors of modern alfalfa and wheat. Juvenile three-horns moved inside the group, protected from predators lurking on the perimeter of the herd. Even now he could not help marveling at the possibilities of bringing back an infant three-horn—perhaps several males and females in order for them to procreate on another world.

But Rifkin was in no position to daydream about collection. He realized that it might be a stroke of good fortune that he fell into a herd of these plant-eating giants or it might be just another way to die. The great beasts were suddenly turned from docile browsers among the ancient grasses into a defensive circle around their juveniles and infants. When the pack of spike-toes, who had been chasing Rifkin, finally broke through the bushes, they appeared startled that they had stumbled into this formidable defense. As Rifkin paused in his crawler on the perimeter of the herd, one of the three horned brutes broke ranks to charge his vehicle. Foolishly it seemed, several of the spike-toes charged the solo triceratops at the same time it was charging the crawler. As its horns engaged the front end of the crawler, Rifkin found himself sailing into the air and landing on a clump of ferns nearly a hundred feet away. He could hear the chirping and mewing of the pack hunters and rose up shakily, thankful he had not been injured by the fall. Peeking over the ferns, he could see why predators would not trifle with these strange looking beasts. As soon as the pack began attacking the triceratops, there were four other giants breaking ranks to assist their comrade. The dromaeosaurs were no match for their adversaries this time. The armor of the three horns and their ability to trample and toss their attackers into the air by the upward thrust of their horns was enough to stop two or three dozen of these predators in their tracks. *Apparently*, thought the light-headed Rifkin, *the spike-toes are not very smart*. Suddenly, however, in successive waves, dancing and cocking their heads, hissing and clawing the air, the predators moved toward the first three-horn with the same persistence demonstrated during the siege in Zone Two, not even pausing to size up their foe. Watching the deliberate, almost crafty movements of these predators, Rifkin was reminded of that trio of big-eyed leapers he had seen by the river earlier in the day. They were, he was convinced, playing with the three-horn before attempting to bring it down, similar, he recalled, to the darters and skippers on Tomol who tortured their prey.

With this last thought in mind, Rifkin felt even worse. For all practical purposes, his crawler, which lie upside-down in the meadow, was out of commission. In addition to the threat of being trampled by the single-minded three horns, he could be torn to pieces by playful spike-toes—just for sport. Although Rifkin was marooned in this dinosaur infested neck of the woods as Rescue Teams One and Four had been in Zone Two, he wasn't in danger as they had been. He would be safe as long as he made it to the vehicle and kept quiet. He couldn't risk running back into the forest and confronting more of the spike-toes. Seeing that the three-horns were so occupied, he ran back to the crawler, scrambled beneath it into the seating compartment, and prayed that they would leave him alone. From this vantage point, he watched the three-horns make short work of the waves of spike-toes. Unlike the fate of the previous spike-toes who had attacked the tyrannosaurus rex, however, they were not torn to pieces by the triceratops horns or crushed to death beneath their elephantine feet. Only one of the dromaeosaurs seemed seriously injured, and even it was able to scramble away from the butting horns and trampling feet. Those spike-toes who had been tossed into the air demonstrated to Rifkin just how agile these predators were. Almost always they landed on their feet, whereas the ponderous three-horns moved as armored attack vehicles which were intended for major defense rather than offense. Brute force and the ability to work as a team, instead of a snarling horde, was winning the battle. After a feeble effort, the spike-toes wisely retreated. Rifkin could not imagine anything, even the big leapers, attacking such immovable and well-armored beasts. He was, as they returned to their browsing, surrounded now by these lumbering giants, a virtual prisoner in their camp.

With his vehicle wrecked, the question for Rifkin now was “how did he get out of this meadow without being attacked himself?” For the time being, the three horns were apparently going to ignore him and the crawler as long as he didn't move. No one dared walk freely amongst this herd, unless he was able to creep out of the clearing soundlessly without being seen. ...This was Rifkin's plan.

His options were few, and his chances seemed bleak, but he was alive. He had survived attacks by a water dragon, giant flyer, spike-toes, and a three-horn, who had destroyed his crawler. The shadow of a pterodactyl had crossed his path more than once today. He had climbed a big rock, lived through a night of terror in a small cave, and managed to find his way at least half-way back to the ship. All in all, he thought, after little sleep and no food or water, he hadn't done too badly. Perhaps Izmir didn't want him to die after all. It would all be for nothing if he gave up now.

As Rifkin waited for just the right moment to escape, he reached out slowly and carefully to grab handfuls of grass to use for camouflage. If he didn't escape during the daylight, he would have to wait and attempt his escape at night, which was the most dangerous time in the forest. He had to escape soon. He couldn't wait for the perfect moment. In these circumstances there wouldn't be a perfect moment. There was only a best chance, which depended upon speed and luck. No amount of calculations beyond this point would increase his chances. The mere effort and time necessary to perfect his getaway would only delay his departure. Night was his greatest enemy. Speed was his only salvation.

Rifkin tried with limited success to camouflage himself by tucking grass in his belt and around the various tubes and recesses in his suit. When he had done as much as he could, he had no way of looking at himself, but he was sure that he looked ridiculous. His classmates would have a good laugh if they saw him now. When it appeared as if the three horns had all congregated at the far end of the meadow and he had a clear path ahead, he edged out from under the vehicle. In a crouching position he began walking toward the trees. He had walked several

yards when a large female, who stood alongside three young juveniles, spotted him. Lowering her massive head, she began a terrible charge. Fortunately he was close enough to the trees to scramble behind the nearest trunk, which was enough to save him from being crushed to death but not from being pelted by several long yellow objects growing on the tree as the three horn slammed into its trunk. The foliage also vibrated with the sounds of countless startled mammals, birds, and insects. One especially angry lemur-like mammal hissed at him from an overhanging limb.

“I’m sorry,” he bowed to the little creature. “You have my sympathies for living on this dreadful planet, but at least you have a place to hide.”

Moving as stealthily as an alien wearing a bulky life support system could through the forest, Rifkin kept his eye peeled for spike-toes and other creepers. He glanced down at his grass skirt and mantle of vegetation and realized that it could still serve as a camouflage. If he didn’t make very much commotion and kept to the sidelines he might melt somewhat into the trees. But then again, he thought with a shudder, it might not make any difference to predators on the prowl. The last time he started out through the forest he ran directly into two juvenile leapers and a strange, dark green creature with a sail on its back. Only moments ago he had been chased into a thicket by a pack of spike-toes and had been attacked by a three-horn after emerging on the other side. Without any weapons, he was in great peril. He was exhausted, hungry, and more thirsty than he had ever been in his life, which made his wits that much duller. Far more important than anything else, was the gauge on his life support system, which now registered barely half full.

After detecting several of the spike-toes ahead of him lurking in the shadows of the trees, Rifkin feared entering the beaten path. This type of predator seemed to be everywhere in the jungle. Although the beaten path leading to his ship was only a short distance away, it was also a main highway for the beasts of the forest. It seemed foolhardy and even suicidal to attempt to walk back on this path without a weapon and mode of travel, and yet that was exactly what he must do. His other option, which was even more unacceptable to him, was to wait in the meadow with the three-horns and hope to be rescued there. The spike-toes were not going to leave. They seemed bound and determined to make him their next meal. He realized, with mounting terror, that there simply was *no* safe passage whatsoever in the forest. He had only two choices: the three-horn clearing or the beaten path ahead.

Rifkin again felt trapped in the forest. Between the two horrors of asphyxiation in the meadow and being eaten by predators, he chose the lesser of the two dangers. But it gave him little satisfaction to know that he might be eaten alive by spike-toes instead of being trampled by three horns or suffocated in his life support suit. Dead was dead, he reasoned bleakly. There were many paths to the Outer Reaches or Dark Side. He didn’t want to die here on this lonely god-forsaken world, especially asphyxiated and without trying. At least, if he attempted to cross through the forest and walk down the path, he would be heading into the right direction and might be found.

With such determination, Rifkin continued through the forest wearing his grass skirt and mantle, surrounded by danger at every turn. The spike-toes had momentarily left the vicinity, but he spied a pair of fan-heads and a large juvenile sail-back stalking through the trees. Countless smaller predators darted suddenly past, tiptoed furtively in the foliage, and slithered and crawled everywhere over the leafy ground. As he swung a large stick he found on the way, he was able to scare away most of the smaller creatures as he walked, including several knee-high predators, who he was able to literally kick out of the way. Yet he knew there were spike-

toes not far ahead. If it were not for them, he was certain that he would be relatively safe until he made it to the main path where all the large denizens roamed.

When he was about half way through the jungle, he could see the shadowy bodies of the spike-toes moving covertly through the forest and quickly climbed the nearest tree. There were many low-hanging trees in the jungle. Fortunately for him, the spike toes, like many bipedal predators, were unable to climb trees very well. They could hop up but, after attempting to use their weak arms and ungainly spiked claws to hold onto branches, they would lose their grip and tumble or slide down to the ground. Rifkin clubbed the head of one of them as it came close to his limb. He knew that his suit protected him against the insects, small reptiles, and furry creatures of this planet, but it might not protect him against the sharp teeth and toes of these beasts. The only treetop dwellers he had to fear were the flyers with their sharp beaks, but these fellows were relatively fragile in the trees when they were unable to fly.

Rifkin climbed as high as he possibly could this time to put distance between himself and the pack below, until he could peer out and see the top of the great space ship beyond. He could also see the great volcano in the north, spewing an ominous funnel of smoke high into the sky. Below him, the raptors congregated, apparently confident he would come down and become their next meal. Several of the spike-toes attempted to climb up but continued to be encumbered by their disproportionate arms and legs and that great, gleaming spike on each foot that continued to get caught up in branches and leaves. Clearly this was not their domain, but just as clearly he was trapped.

And then it happened—an event so terrible that even the forest’s worst killers fled in panic. No one, not even the professor, could have known that one of the volcanoes in the vicinity would suddenly erupt. It was the same smoldering northern peak Rifkin had seen from his rock and just now glimpsed from the tree. He could see it spewing more black smoke and debris now, a great column rising higher and higher into the darkening sky. The ground shook terribly, his tree swayed, and, as if the volume had been turned up sharply, a terrible cacophony of cries, squeals, chirps, and groans filled the canopy and jungle below.

He had seen such eruptions on other worlds. He knew that it could be just a sporadic eruption or the main event. Perhaps the volcano periodically and even frequently blew its lid Or perhaps this one would be the catastrophic “big one,” destroying aliens and natives alike. Looking down through the branches, he could see the spike-toes scattering as cracks appeared below them and the ground continuing to shake. Rifkin realized that it was his opportunity to escape but, in many ways, it was a worse disaster for the ship and its mission on this planet than anything else could be. The fact that they were not even close to finishing their collections on Irignum added the element of sorrow to his swirling emotions. What if a lava flow caught the ship in its path or, at the very least, a hail of lava bombs damaged it beyond repair? There was no time now to contemplate on the possibilities. Rifkin knew that he must somehow make it back to the ship during this disaster. The thought that his fellow shipmates might even leave without him filled him with a dread far greater than what may lie ahead on his path.

When the shaking ceased and all he felt was an occasional tremor, Rifkin quickly began his descent to the jungle floor. Climbing down in a more reckless fashion than he ever demonstrated before, he ignored the occasional hiss or squeak into his ears or the furtive bodies and shadows swarming through the tree, until he reached the ground. At that point, he looked around for another stick to use as a weapon and found a likely club, shaken down by the commotion, not far away. Moving quickly yet stealthily through the forest, Rifkin couldn’t see any predators about, but he couldn’t believe that one volcanic eruption would have any lasting

effect on such single-minded brutes. It might even be a normal occurrence here in this corner of this world.

As Rifkin exited the tree line and emerged on the beaten path, he headed in the direction of the ship. It seemed foolhardy to be out in the open, especially with no real weapon or means of transport, but there was no other avenue for him to take. He prayed to Izmir, the great and all powerful, wondering if his life had been blameless enough to merit celestial light, the Outer Reaches or eternal darkness in which there was no consciousness or existence at all after death.

Chapter Thirteen

Disaster Strikes Again

Rifkin stumbled through the jungle, puffing and panting with each step. He was ready to drop any moment from exhaustion, hunger, and thirst. His life support system was apparently malfunctioning. He was sweating profusely inside his suit. After his latest physical exertions, his air supply registered at barely one sixth full. The gauge indicated that he had approximately two hours of air before he died of asphyxiation. Proportionately, even after such physical activity, the gas level should be much higher. The fear that, during his struggles, he might have sprung a leak in his air supply system was too horrible for him to comprehend. He was having enough trouble just worrying about the volcano and the spike-toes who recently fled the scene.

As he followed the beaten path, his oversized boots left large impressions in the leafy jungle floor. Although he was not even four feet tall, it would appear to an observer that a six foot man had just passed through. Without his stunner, the baldheaded little alien in the cumbersome life support system might have seemed rather pathetic against the dark jungle setting. His large, feline eyes in his sweat-drenched head were at half-mast now. The slit that acted as his mouth was opening and closing constantly as he gasped for air.

Heading north on the same road Rifkin had taken were members of Rescue Team Two—Remgen, Rezwit, Shizwit, and Vimml—unaware that Rifkin was less than a mile away. Hopefully, for Rifkin’s sake, Remgen would drive past his exit point in time to save him from another volcanic eruption or an attack from spike-toes lurking in the trees. Time, as always, was Rifkin’s greatest foe. The present eruption had shaken everyone badly but no one had been injured during the quake. Though many of them were mentally traumatized by the experience, no one was in any immediate danger this hour... no one, that is, except Rifkin. Because of his deteriorating physical condition and the latest threats to his well-being, Rifkin was more vulnerable now to Irignum’s dangers than at any other time on this world.

When he reached the edge of the forest after following the path created by the tracks of the crawler, he halted just in time to avoid falling into an enormous chasm caused by the churning earth. The quake had cracked the ground open in front of him in a north-west and not an east-west axis, which left the main path intact. As it was, he would have to walk a long ways to go around the fissure and reach the path, perhaps too far and through too much jungle for his exhausted body to achieve. He was too worn out and physically drained by his long hours of struggle and lack of food to even weep. Slumping forlornly against a tree, he dropped his stick onto the ground, heaved a broken sigh, and stared vacantly into space.

During the eruption, there had been pandemonium in the forest and great anxiety on the bridge. For a short while, all three crawlers were stopped virtually in their tracks. After collecting his shattered thoughts, however, Commander Falon was back in control. Doctor Arkru sat quietly next to him as roll was called from the bridge.

“Rescue Teams One, Two, and Three,” the commander shouted excitedly. “Is everyone all right? Imwep, Remgen, and Zorig, *please report in!*”

The first and second mates responded immediately to Falon's call. The remainder of the rescuers, who answered more slowly, appeared to be in various stages of shock.

"Don't you worry sir," Imwep rasped, as Zither slumped over the steering wheel and Ibris sat traumatized inside his suit, "Rescue Team One's doing just fine. We're sitting in Zone Two's clearing, hoping that our young explorer arrives."

"Everyone's holding up pretty well here too, sir," Remgen followed hoarsely, looking around at his group. "I'm proud of these children, commander! They're our best team!"

Commander Falon acknowledged the two officers' promptness and diligence. He insisted that their teammates speak for themselves. Zither, Ibris, and Kogin were prodded by Imwep into speaking up. Remgen managed to get his shell-shocked group (Rezwit, Shizwit, and Vimml) to respond too. Alafa and Varik needed little prodding by Dazl, but Zorig, who had gone through much today, sat muttering incoherently to himself.

"Zorig, team leader three," Falon called impatiently, "why haven't you reported in? Are you all right?"

"Am I all right?" Zorig came suddenly alive. "We're in the midst of a major eruption and earthquake. We're surrounded by carnivorous monsters. You ask if I'm all right?" "If that isn't the mother and father of understatement, commander!" he cried in disbelief. "No, I'm not all right, sir. None of us out here in the *Outer Reaches* will be all right until you let us return!"

"He's just worn out," the professor read Falon's expression. "Like yourself commander, he needs several hours sleep."

The commander's haggard face broke into a smile. Zorig's familiar brand of sarcasm caused laughter on the bridge now that all of the rescuers had been accounted for and would soon, Falon prayed, be out of harm's way. Doctor Arkru was worried about his chief technician's mental state, but Commander Falon was mostly irritated now and wanted to put this whole 'Rifkin madness,' as Kogin had called it, behind them once and for all.

"I understand how you feel Zorig," the professor said calmly, heaving a sigh, "you've been through too much lately. I should never have let you go out again."

"That goes for you too, Remgen and Imwep," the commander cut in brusquely. "Just sit with your teammates and watch out for Rifkin until we call you in."

"Yes, but stay alert shipmates," Arkru continued, unruffled. "We must give poor Rifkin one more opportunity to show up. If you all return now, the search will be over. This is Rifkin's last chance!"

"Yes, yes," Zorig uttered wearily, "... we've got to give poor Rifkin a chance. How many *is* that now professor? Ten, twenty, a hundred chances? How many chances does Rifkin get?"

"Rescue teams One, Two, and Three," Commander Falon's voice was now ragged, and he paused a moment to gather his thoughts. "... I don't know how much longer this rescue operation is going to last, but Doctor Arkru convinced me that we must try. It's our hope that our teams will find Rifkin soon. I don't like endangering all of you for the sake of one shipmate. I know we're running out of time. Soon we'll be running out of daylight too. Stand fast crew members and students: *it won't be long!*"

"Izmir, the great and all powerful, go with you!" Eglin uttered prayerfully, raising his palms.

Now that the transmitter was turned off on the bridge, an argument broke out finally between the professor and the senior officers for and against canceling the rescue attempt to save Rifkin's life. The commander rose up inexplicably during the disagreement and left the room. The question posed by Communications Officer Abwur summed up the officers' sentiments: "What's good about saving one life if we continue to lose crew members each hour?" Doctor Arkru couldn't face the fact that Rifkin was lost, but even his most stubborn resistance was no match for the overwhelming vote against the rescue now. As he argued with Orix, Eglin, and Abwur, he realized that when Falon returned to the bridge, the commander would begin calling in the teams.

In Zone Two, during the professor's efforts, Imwep, Kogin, Zither, and Ibris sat in their crawler near the river hoping, as everyone else, that Rifkin would suddenly show up or that news that he had been found by one of the other teams would soon be heard. It didn't matter to Zither and Ibris which team found him at this point, just so they could return safely to the ship. Imwep and Kogin, tough old veterans that they were, were ashamed they could do nothing more than sit in the crawler waiting for Rifkin to appear. Not knowing where the student might be, their best hope, like the other rescue teams, was to remain on the main paths, hoping he would show up on his own. In spite of the apparent uselessness of Rescue Team One's vigil, no one complained. After what had happened to Rescue Team Four this morning and the failed effort of Imwep's team to save them, no one wanted to leave the crawler. The volcanic eruption had given them all an additional reason not to disembark from their vehicle nor attempt to travel the side trails. In Imwep's words, as they sat contemplating their fate, "the volcano is just warming up!" Both the second mate and Third Mate Kogin were certain that a much greater eruption would soon occur.

Since none of them could exit the crawler, their silent vigil amounted to nothing more than a futile demonstration of loyalty to a lost shipmate. The two adults in the vehicle cursed silently amongst themselves, while Ibris wept quietly in the back seat for Tobit, his dead friend. Zither, who was in the very throes of hysteria, himself, gripped the steering wheel fiercely with one hand, while the other hand was poised at the ignition and a boot was ready to stomp the accelerator when the order came from the bridge to return.

For several moments, the volcano remained inexplicably quiet, though the sky continued to darken with smoke and ash. Rifkin, who was trying to muster up enough energy to pick up his club, was certain, as Imwep and the others, that it was just a matter of time. An occasional tremor in the ground and sporadic rumbling from the mouth of the volcano were proof of this. The worst eruptions were yet to come.

The volcanic eruption and earthquake had, in fact, shattered Zorig's fragile nerves. Rescue Team Four's leader had tried to act bravely after making such a poor showing for himself this morning, but he had failed. Without being told to do so, Dazl, who had spent most of his life in the engine room of the ship, had effectively taken charge of the team. Zorig was even more miserable than he was before, because Alafa, Dazl, and Varik wouldn't even talk to him as they sat in the crawler waiting to glimpse Rifkin emerging from the trees. Alafa thought he was a coward, while Varik saw him as a fool. Dazl merely considered Zorig a misfit, whose brain had been softened by too much learning and not enough practical knowledge in the field. The only one who had truly respected him had been Tobit, and he was dead. He knew that his sister loved him and the professor counted him as his friend, but he couldn't think of anyone else who would

mourn his passing if he left for the Outer Reaches this hour. As they sat in the security of their crawler, everyone except Varik was resigned to waiting it out. The assistant medic felt cheated that he had lost his chance to redeem himself and save face.

“What have we accomplished?” he complained to Dazl, the acknowledged leader of Rescue Team Three. “We might as well have stayed on the ship.”

“You heard the commander. We’re ordered to stand fast,” the chief engineer explained lamely, with a shrug. “We did our best, Varik. What else can we do?”

“We’re cowards,” Alafa tried to sound convincing, but sounded petulant instead. “We should’ve gotten out and looked for him. You wouldn’t have stopped Rifkin from looking for *us!*”

“You think, with these puny stunners, we should get out of the crawler?” Dazl shook his head in disbelief. “Are you insane or just plain stupid? How long do you think we would last against these beasts?”

Alafa couldn’t answer Dazl’s question. Everyone fell silent, knowing in their hearts that Dazl was right. Zorig felt guilty about it, while Alafa didn’t know what to feel. Varik continued to feel cheated of his moment of glory, but the wise old engineer just felt relieved.

“I’m sorry for Rifkin,” Zorig summed up his disgust, “but he brought this on himself!”

“You never liked him,” Alafa sneered. “At least Rifkin was brave.”

“Rifkin was a fool,” Dazl murmured almost to himself, as a faint tremor shook the ground. “All this is being done for one incorrigible student... who might already be dead.”

The only vehicle even in motion at this point belonged to Remgen’s team. Instead of sitting and fretting about the volcano or the jungle around them, Rescue Team Two continued to move north, a painstaking process due to the crawler’s slow speed and the need to drive over and around the debris caused by the quake. From a bird’s eye view, all looked well below. Even with all the debris on their path it appeared that they would reach the imperiled Rifkin in time. In theory all they had to do was toss him a line across the fissure and pull him to safety, at least this is what Remgen told Rezwit, as he looked ahead at the abyss.

At the very moment that Rifkin could see the oncoming crawler and hear the distant cries of greeting from Rescue Team Two, the spike-toes returned suddenly to the scene. He was surrounded this time, with only a silly stick to swing at his attackers. Attempting to bite Rifkin from each side, the predators inched in closer and closer as he wildly swung his club. He was certain that the dark sleep was near. The spike-toes were nearer to him now than they had ever been before. Prancing around him and leaping high into the air as if to demonstrate their élan, they seemed to be playing with him, as the spike-toes attempted to play with the three-horn today.

“Izmir is good, Izmir is great,” intoned Rifkin wearily. “Blessed be the name of God, who forgives sins freely and welcomes penitents to the celestial sleep.”

Just when it seemed that young Rifkin was doomed to suffer Tobit and Hobi’s fates, the ground shook even more violently than it had before. This time great cracks appeared everywhere on the jungle floor. Izmir had apparently answered his prayers again, but Rifkin was not sure if he wasn’t showing his anger for all the mischief he had done. This time the shaking continued for a few moments. There were several loud explosions from the volcano’s mouth. As Remgen and Rescue Team Two came within a hundred feet of the scene, the monstrous chasm formed in the quaking earth widened even further. Several of the spike-toes, who had come too close to the edge, fell squealing to their deaths. Skittering immediately from the scene, the remaining pack left Rifkin standing there, looking across the fissure at the first mate and his

friends Rezwit and Vimml. Shizwit stood next to Remgen, a stunner clutched in her tiny hand, after the first mate managed to back the crawler up to the abyss. Although he was spared the greater horror of being eaten alive by spike-toes, he now saw his position as utterly hopeless. There seemed to be no way of crossing this gulf. How long could he expect his shipmates to wait before the ark and its crew were destroyed?

“Go,” he cried out to Remgen, “leave this planet before it’s too late. You can’t save me now. I deserve what I get!”

Though Remgen and his friends wouldn’t have been able to hear him above the rumbling volcano and shaking earth anyhow, Rifkin remembered that his radio was dead. The first mate had brought, among other things, an emergency lifeline that was used to navigate hills and cliffs when collecting specimens on rocky worlds. It had an anchor-like device on one end to moor itself onto a rock or bush when set in place and then pulled from the other side. It was not intended for a life or death throw across a volcanic fissure that would hold fast enough to allow someone to cross. Both gravity and unstable ground made the task seem much more improbable to achieve. Nevertheless, Remgen, who was much larger and stronger than the others, tossed the line. When Rifkin saw it coming, he dropped his stick and hastened toward it, being careful to avoid being knocked senseless by the metal anchor coming his way.

“This is not going to work!” he shouted, yet he wasted no time in trying to find a place to fasten it to when it arrived.

A small outcrop of volcanic rock near the edge of the path appeared to be perfect for anchoring the line. He yanked on it several times to make sure, then turned to wave at the others, who stood anxiously waiting for him to cross.

“How’m I suppose to do this? This is impossible,” he groaned, looking down into the darkness below.

The black abyss seemed to stretch down to the fiery heart of this world. In spite of the apprehension he felt, Rifkin knew that it was now or never. He had but one more chance to live.

“Come on boy,” Remgen called from his side, “you can do it! You’ve got the spirit. Don’t hesitate lad. That volcano’s just warming up!”

“Come on Rifkin, grab the line!” Vimml shouted, as he checked the winch in back of the crawler.

“Yes, Rifkin,” cried Rezwit, looking across anxiously at his old friend. “Take hold of it and cross. It’s easy. Just move hand-over-hand instead of step-by-step, until we can reach out and grab hold of you.”

As Rescue Team Two waited for Rifkin to respond, the commander began calling in the other two teams. There was great relief in his voice after hearing the good news. Because it was an open line, everyone knew that Rifkin had been found, and yet the bridge was restrained. There were no cheers this time for the prodigal explorer. Afraid, during this early stage of rescue to rejoice, himself, Arkru sat there anxiously with the others as the commander explained to Rescue Teams One and Three that they were no longer needed in the forest. Before the volcano erupted again, they were to hurry back to the ship. With hoarse and careworn “thank you’s,” the crew members and students complied.

As Rescue Team Three was rushing back to the ship, however, the volcano began its eruption in earnest. They found themselves once again rocked to and fro by the shaking earth and threatened from all sides by frightened creatures fluttering this way and that through the trees. Unbeknownst to anyone yet, a large stream of magma had flowed into the river, causing the water to boil up and slosh over its banks. Eventually the accumulating magma caused

rivulets of the steaming water to spill over the jungle floor. A mudflow was created at just those points where magma had entered and displaced water. The ill-fated Rescue Team Three was moving parallel to the river when the mudflow began to overtake their road.

“Look,” Alafa shrieked, “it’s coming our way!”

“There’s nothing we can do,” Varik looked at death bravely as Chief Engineer Dazl began uttering a prayer: “Izmir is good, Izmir is great, blessed be the name of God...”

At just that moment, the mudflow caught the crawler and began to carry it into a clearing directly ahead. Varik, who, for some inexplicable reason, had not been wearing his seat belt, was dislodged from the vehicle and carried suddenly away, while Zorig looked on in horror, and the others remained fastened in their seats. The vehicle began to slow down as the mudflow gradually halted before a wall of trees.

“What’s going on out there?” The commander was shouting frantically. “Rescue Team Two, has Rifkin began crossing the fissure? Rescue Team One and Three, are you heading back to the ship?”

“We’re in route,” Imwep responded first, “shaken, but unhurt.”

“We’re trying to talk Rifkin into crossing,” Remgen was the next to reply. “I think he’s going to do it. He’d better hurry it up, before we get another shake.”

There was conspicuous silence from Rescue Team Three. Alafa had managed to climb onto a low hanging limb, but Zorig and Dazl were trapped on the mired vehicle. The fact that Varik had become a casualty of the mudflow fell heavily upon the survivors. Hardest hit was Zorig, who had seen him torn from the crawler but had frozen so characteristically in his seat.

“Come on Rifkin,” they heard the professor coax, “don’t make all our efforts a waste. Cross the fissure. If you can do all those other wondrous things you’ve done in the past, you can do this!”

Rifkin, of course, had no functioning radio and couldn’t hear Doctor Arkru’s encouragement, but the professor was beside himself with excitement. When the bridge awakened to a brand new disaster in Zone One, their joy evaporated in stunned silence as they listened to Rescue Team Three’s call for help.

“Help!... Someone help us!” Dazl shouted into his transmitter. “A mud flow overtook us. We’re stranded in the jungle!”

“We’re close to the ship,” Alafa observed calmly. “I remember these surroundings.... If we can climb out of this mud puddle, we can skirt around it and get back onto the path.”

“Yes,” Dazl cried enthusiastically, reaching up to grab a limb, “we’ll get on the path and someone can pick us up.”

“We don’t want to sink into this muck,” Zorig muttered, looking fearfully at the mud puddle below. “We need assistance! We need assistance *now!*”

“Rescue Team One, did you hear that?” The commander’s voice broke suddenly in.

Swept with *déjà vu*, Zither’s mind reeled with fear. Ibris was praying feverishly. His eyes shut tightly in a childish effort to make it all go away.

“Yes sir,” Imwep heaved a ragged sigh. “You want us to go fetch those morons?” Under his breath he mumbled to Kogin and the others “You know what this means lads?”

“Oh no,” Zither and Ibris groaned simultaneously, “not again!”

And then the terrible reality settled over the professor, the commander, and everyone else listening to the conversations between the team members and the bridge.

“Where’s Varik? I haven’t heard Varik!” Eglin uttered in a strained voice.

“Varik’s gone,” Alafa spoke calmly again, obviously in shock.

“What do you mean Varik’s gone?” The chief medic screamed into the transmitter now. “Where’s my assistant? By all the spirits in the cosmos, are you telling me that Varik too is dead?”

“Begging your pardon sir,” Dazl sighed brokenly, “Varik is dead!”

Chapter Fourteen

The Rescue of Rifkin

As Rifkin slumped down by the ledge of the fissure with his boots dawdling over the side, he felt overwhelming remorse for what he had caused. Because his radio was not working, he had not heard about Varik's death. He didn't even know that Tobit and Hobi had also died. As a dreadful silence filled his radio, he slipped down gingerly after gripping the line and began the hand-over-hand motion across the gulf. It would be the most physically exerting thing he had ever done in his short life and the most important. As he clenched the line and changed hands repeatedly, he felt his energy waning. The eager faces of Remgen and his friends seemed a million light years away.

"That's it," he could hear Vimml cry, "you can make it Rifkin. Just a little further. Come on Rifkin, you can do it! You really can!"

Not knowing what else to add, Shizwit echoed Vimml sentiments and prayed softly to herself.

"Get another line," Remgen ordered the students, as Rifkin reached the mid-point of his journey.

"Yes-yes, we can anchor it on the winch too," Rezwit replied eagerly. "If Rifkin gets too tired we can pull him up ourselves."

The second line was anchored to the winch and a lasso was constructed by Remgen. Delirious from fatigue, hunger, and thirst, Rifkin saw what they were doing. He had to get close enough for them to lasso his lower half. At that point, he could let go of this terrible line that was tearing his little arms out of their sockets and let Rescue Team Two do the work.

Midway in the chasm, there was another tremor, not as great as the ones before but severe enough to shake the line and almost send him to his death into the darkness below.

"Oh, please, I can't do this much more," he whimpered, as he tried to edge close enough for Remgen to lasso his frame.

Suddenly, the rock that had held the anchor was uprooted as the earth shook. It looked very much to everyone, including the hapless Rifkin, that it was the end. The line broke loose. Rifkin found himself banging against the wall of the fissure on the other side of the abyss. Now that he not only had to navigate the line but also had to climb up vertically instead of merely crossing, it seemed to be a hopeless task. He would have to rise several feet before a second line could be fastened onto his body.

"Oh Rifkin," Shizwit cried this time, "you can do it. You *must* do it! Just a few more feet that's it... Hand-over-hand... Get the line on him Remgen. Hurry!"

Remgen tried desperately to lasso Rifkin's dangling body, tossing the lasso again and again and pulling up quickly in hopes of snatching his lower half. Rezwit was frantic. Vimml and Shizwit began weeping as the line again and again missed its mark and dangled uselessly in space. Finally, as he saw the hoop moving up past him, Rifkin let go with one hand and stuck his arm in the hoop.

"Quick! Give me a hand children. Let's pull him up!" Remgen ordered, out of breath and on the verge of collapse himself. "He's got an arm through. It'll be our only chance! That's it Rifkin, let go of your other hand. *We got you lad!*"

Rifkin felt a sharp pain as the hoop tightened around his arm. He tried to hold on with his other hand, but found himself losing consciousness as his body banged repeatedly against the rock. For an unknown period of time, lost forever in Rifkin's memory, he hovered between life and death in that dark twilight world where the voyager knows not what bridge he'll cross. Remgen and his team pulled him up, hastily untangled him from the line, placed him in the crawler, and headed back to the ship. There was no time now to even make certain that Rifkin was dead or alive.

As Rescue Team Two headed back with their precious cargo, the survivors of Rescue Team Three had managed to climb off the crawler and wade knee deep through the mud to the edge of the trees. It had been Alafa, who, poking a long stick, had shown them that the mud flow wasn't that deep. Somewhere in the mud poor Varik was entombed—the first step toward fossilization, along with countless small animals that had been caught in the flow. During another brief lull, which allowed Rescue Team Two to move more safely toward the ship and Rescue Team One to search Zone One until the muddied figures of Zorig, Dazl, and Alafa emerged onto the path, the professor ordered the anguished Urlum and guilt-stricken Illiakim off the bridge. The commander likewise ordered all unnecessary personnel to leave. Orix was discussing the damage the ship could suffer from pyroclastic bombardment and magma, and the disconsolate Eglin was being comforted by Abwur, when the welcomed news that Remgen's Team had rescued Rifkin was blared over the bridge.

In spite of his grief, Eglin followed Orix down to the hold to prepare the decontamination chamber for Rescue Team Two. The commander and the professor held fast on the bridge more concerned with Rescue Teams One and Three making their way back from Zone One.

"Rescue Teams One and Three sound off!" The commander barked.

"Imwep, sir... Kogin, sir... Zither, sir... Ibris, sir... Zorig, sir... Dazl, sir... Alafa, sir," the roll call droned. Everyone, including the distraught Urlum, rejoiced at Rifkin's rescue and the news that that Zorig, Dazl, and Alafa had survived.

"I imagine it's a tight squeeze," the professor tried to sound glib.

"It's damn near impossible professor," Dazl grumbled. "I don't fancy sitting on Kogin's lap!"

"It's only a short stretch from there," Arkru gave them encouragement. "Hold fast and don't think about what's behind or around you, only what's in front... *Life!*"

Due to the added weight of the vehicle and debris strewn on the ground, the crawler ambled even more slowly back to the ship. As fate would have it, when all that remained of their ordeal was a mile of jungle path, the overcrowded vehicle ran straight into a pack of spike-toes coming the opposite way.

Zither, who was driving the crawler, was the only one unencumbered with someone on his lap. With no time for equivocation, he jumped up on the hood and fired wildly at the pack. Alafa, who had been sitting on Ibris' lap, turned fearfully to the technician as a pair of gargoyle heads popped up over the side. Fortunately for Alafa, the spike-toes began snapping and gnawing at the air canisters on the back of her suit instead of her front. Their salivating jaws could do no more than scratch the canisters and partially tear one of the straps. At the same time, Zither was unable to fire upon the creatures without hitting Alafa, who, if he didn't move quickly, might be pulled bodily from her seat. He knew that she could suffer Tobit's fate if the predators drug her into the trees. At the very least, she might be injured like Hobi and die slowly inside her suit.

With a sense of déjà vu again, Zither stepped boldly over the front seat, brandishing a large flashlight discovered on the floorboard below. Praying for strength, he frantically beat on the spike-toes to prevent them from damaging Alafa's suit. The two predators lost their footing and fell spitting and clawing to the ground, but the vehicle remained surrounded by spike-toes waiting for their chance. By now, most of the rescuers were stationed at various points on the crawler firing continuously at the pack. Dazl, who had been sitting on Kogin's lap, was soon standing beside him in the vehicle's hold, blasting at predators climbing up the back. Zither and Alafa stood on the back seat cushions firing at spike-toes climbing up the vehicle's sides. Zorig, who had been on Imwep's lap, was rudely awakened when he was dumped onto the floor. With his weapon drawn, he climbed without hesitation onto the hood to give Imwep support. Since the first spike-toe attack, Ibris had been in a state of shock and sat traumatized in his seat, but, after seeing his leader's response, he stood up on his seat cushion and fired his weapon too.

The good news, which would have made the professor proud, was that the students and crew members were making this "last stand" together as a team. There were no barriers or hostilities between them now. It almost seemed as if they had a chance against the pack. The bad news was that the pack was relentless and seemed to be increasing in numbers by the moment. The beleaguered group was having the same problem with these thick-hided brutes that Zorig's team had in Zone Two. Unless they scored direct hits at close range upon the spike-toes, all their stunners could accomplish were momentary knockout blows upon their foes. When they were far enough away, the predators' nervous systems were virtually immune to stunner blasts.

During this hour, the bridge, still stunned by the most recent disaster, was gradually alerted to the new disaster in Zone One. To make matters worse, tremors, foreshadowing another eruption, shook the jungle. As Rescue Team Two moved cautiously over Zone Two's badly fissured path, the bridge held its collective breath. Though the path had seemed clear for Remgen's team, the going was slow, and the dangers of falling trees and sudden cracks opening up to swallow the crawler still great. Rifkin, the object of the rescue, hovered between life and death. The tragic accident occurring in Zone One made his deliverance more important than ever. If he died now, it would be all for nothing: the deaths of three shipmates and the loss of three crawlers with force field traps in their holds.

Now the sounds of mayhem from Zone One returned to the airwaves, filtering as background static into the conversation on the bridge. Craning his neck toward the radio, Falon held up a hand, motioning for silence in the room.

"Listen," he said in disbelief, "Rescue Teams One and Three are in trouble.... Can you hear it? That's the sound of stunners!"

"Yes, I hear it," Abwur leaned forward excitedly. "It's a crackling noise.... They're under attack!"

"Oh please, Arkru groaned, shaking his head, "not again!"

Falon, who had been talking from the intercom about Rifkin's health, responded belatedly, "Rescue Teams One and Three report in!"

As Eglin waited grimly for Rescue Team Two to arrive, Orix returned quickly to his post. While the bridge reeled in shock, Falon turned the receiver up full blast in order to isolate the transmission in Zone One. In the silence, broken only by an occasional gasp or sigh from the bridge, they could hear, in addition to the crackle of stunners, the grunts, groans, and intake of breath of marksmen muted in terror, and finally one loud, heart rendering lamentation from Zorig: "This is all Rifkin's fault! We're going to be torn to bits for the sake of that incorrigible fool!"

“Rescue Teams One and Three!” the commander shouted. “Imwep, Kogin, and Dazl report in! What is going on out there?”

“We’re under attack,” answered Imwep finally

“Help, save us!” Ibris screamed.

At that very moment, Ibris was saved from certain death as a spike-toe, coming within inches of his arm, was shot point-blank by Zither and fell lifeless onto the ground. Crumpling into a fetal position on his seat, Ibris murmured his appreciation to Zither “Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!” All the bridge could hear at this point, however, was an increase in stunner fire, which corresponded to an increase number of spike-toes attempting to rush the group.

“Rescue Teams One and Three are you all right?” Falon asked in a strained voice.

Remembering the commander’s earlier understatement, Zorig laughed hysterically to himself when there was no response. “Are we all right, he asks.... After all that concern about Rifkin on the bridge, he finally tunes in.... We’re surrounded by monsters, commander—hundreds of them. We have no apparent avenue of escape. All to save one worthless, malcontent, who’s probably dead!”

“No,... that’s not true,” Remgen’s reported hoarsely from Zone Two, “I see signs of life I think Rifkin’s alive.”

“Signs of life?” Arkru heaved a sigh. “That’s good to hear, Remgen!”

“Yes,” Eglin replied from the ship’s hold, “that’s good news, Remgen, but how can you be sure? You can’t check his pulse or listen to his heart.”

“No,” the first mate said raggedly, “but his helmet’s fogging a bit. That mean’s he’s breathing. He’s unconscious, but his lips are moving. I’m certain he’s alive!”

“Hah,” Zorig responded bitterly to the news, “who cares if that rogue is *alive*?”

In spite of Remgen’s good news, there would be no rejoicing on the bridge. Seven shipmates were on the verge of being slaughtered by spike-toes, with no one this time to come to their aid. Rescue Team Two’s crawler, carrying the reason for their sacrifice, was forced to navigate around countless obstacles—tree trunks, fissures, and panic-stricken beasts moving back and forth across its path. After checking in with the bridge, Rifkin’s rescuers were plunged into silence, holding their collective breaths until they reached the ship. If Rifkin could hold on for a little while, they wanted to believe, they might make it in time.

For Zither, Zorig, Imwep, Kogin, Dazl, Alafa, and Ibris, the outcome was far less clear. In the past several moments the spike-toes had been unable to climb onto their vehicle. It appeared as if their stunners were having some success upon them, especially at close range. Unfortunately, no sooner had the first batch of attackers been stopped from climbing aboard the crawler than a second wave was trying to rush the group. The spike-toes were circling and snapping at the vehicle, as if it was a living thing. As the crawler was surrounded by more and more of these playful killers, everyone, even the badly shaken Ibris, remained fixed at their stations, firing continually at the pack. In spite of his bitterness toward Rifkin, Zorig remained at his post too, discovering as he had in Zone Two, how fundamentally restricted their guns were. When a predator was knocked off the crawler, another would take its place. Unless it was shot point-blank in the head, it would soon be back on its feet ready to try again, a pattern that wore heavily on the group.

When it appeared as if this would go on indefinitely or until one of them had been dragged off the crawler into the trees, Zither again took matters into his own hands—or so it seemed. Perhaps, he later reflected, he had temporarily lost his mind and had deliberately jumped into the pack,... but it was more likely that he had lost his footing and accidentally

dropped to the ground. Suddenly, the cautious and conscientious student found himself landing squarely on his boots, standing up shakily on his legs, and firing point-blank at a spike-toe racing up to his face. Whether or not it had been an accident or had been done purposefully, it was a wonder he had not injured himself during the fall. At such close range, the creature he fired upon promptly fell unconscious at his feet, but he was now surrounded by a swarm of predators, dancing and cavorting around the new morsel in their midst.

At that point, everyone was shooting at Zither's attackers. But it was Zither, the "Brave"—his newfound friend Ibris would call him—who seemed to have deliberately jumped into the fray. Firing and cursing at the spike-toes, he was quickly dragged back onto the crawler by Imwep and Kogin before being shredded over the jungle floor.

A volcanic tremor may have explained the pack's sudden dispersal. To his teammates, it was just one more miracle that had protected their group. Izmir, in his infinite mercy, prevented the spike-toes from dragging Alafa and Ibris from the crawler. And he had rescued Zither from the very jaws of death. During this interval, the bridge was gripped with foreboding as they wondered what was happening in Zone One. Was that not Zither calling Izmir to smite his tormentors? Did this mean another shipmate was being killed this hour? Would there be several more shipmates killed? Perhaps none of them would survive this time!"

Another telltale tremor rumbled through the forest, that was barely felt by the bridge. Taking advantage of the lull, Dazl jumped into the driver's seat and stomped the accelerator while the pack regrouped. They rolled about ten miles per hour over the scattered limbs and volcanic debris. It was not very fast, but it made them feel as if they were escaping just to be moving at all. Everyone was still standing expectantly on their feet, their weapons smoking at their sides. Dazl, who was the ranking crewmember, reported now to the bridge: "Dazl to Commander Falon. We're alive and well and we're returning to the ship!"

In what eye-witnesses would claim was his finest moment, but Zither, believed was the most reckless thing he had ever done, the senior student managed somehow to grab a force field pole, push the red button and toss it at the advancing pack.

"Hold your helmets!" he cried. "Everybody *down!*"

After hearing his exclamation, the professor knew exactly what was afoot.

"No, Zither," his voice broke, "there's not enough range!"

But it was too late. The "Rifkin bomb" had been thrown high into the air. Imwep, Kogin, Dazl, Zorig, Alafa, and Ibris began praying aloud as it fell to earth: "Izmir is good, Izmir is great..." When the pole exploded, it left a small crater in the path, spraying everyone with plant matter and mud. Because it landed directly in front of the spike-toes, it knocked down only the first row, and yet it scattered the remaining dromaeosaurs into the trees.

It worked, Zither thought to himself light-headedly as he settled back onto Kogin's lap. *The Rifkin Bomb worked!* Unless the volcano erupted again, all they had to do was head back to the ship. He prayed to Izmir that, when they were all safe and sound aboard the vessel, the commander would take them into deep space. He never wanted to see Irignum again.

Zither, a most reluctant hero, had saved the lives of seven shipmates. The remainder of their trip back to the ship, in which Dazl continued as pilot, found him sitting contentedly on Kogin's lap. Though silent this time, the old veteran was very proud of him for what he had done.

"Rescue Teams One and Three are returning to ship," Dazl called to the bridge. Looking back at Zither now, he added with great respect in his eyes "You did good lad, very good! Now, Izmir-give-us-speed, *let's go home!*"

The commander, professor, and senior officers gave the three teams encouragement as they returned. Rescue Team Two, they were informed, was still having trouble returning to the ship. Though Zone One had a much greater lava flow, Zone Two had far more fissure activity, making it more difficult to traverse. Remgen had to blaze his own trail in places where the original road was heavily cracked. Unlike Zone One, the pack hunters appeared to be lying low now. Time was the only factor against Team Two's safety. If Remgen could navigate the crawler over the cracked and debris-filled ground, they could make it, unless the volcano erupted again or a swarm of predators overtook them on the way.

As luck would have it for Rescue Teams One and Three, another gang of spike-toes—probably from the same horde—appeared suddenly on their path. This time Dazl deliberately turned the crawler in their direction, almost squashing several of them as the vehicle lurched ahead. Unfortunately this multitude of killers was three or four times the size of the last. A collective gasp went up from the bridge as the sound of stunners started up again. It had struck everyone as out of character for the scholarly and circumspect student to have acted so bravely this hour. As he sat on Kogin's lap attempting to fire his stunner, his hand shook violently and his teeth chattered in his head. He was certain he would lapse into cowardice again. Courage didn't come easily for him. If it had not been for the resurgent volcano, Zither and the other children sitting on various laps would have been dragged kicking and screaming off the crawler while the three adults were torn to bits in their seats.

When the ground shook beneath their spiked toes, the predators had but one emotion in their dim-witted brains: panic. The dromaeosaurs, as all other jungle creatures who were dodging falling debris and sidestepping cracks in the jungle floor, fled through the trees. Terror once more struck the inhabitants of this sector of Northern Arizona and made many of the Revekians wonder if this planet was coming to an end. At the same time that it seemed Izmir had chosen to save the teams, it appeared as if he had decided to destroy this primeval world once and for all. The air grew thick with smoke and the stench of flowing magma oozing through the trees. The earth shook more terribly than ever before. A monstrous column of smoke from the volcano now blanketed the sky and began dropping ash onto the forest canopy and jungle floor. For the members of Rescue Teams One and Three, it was a wondrous sound. It had saved their lives. No one could be more surprised at this feeling of jubilation than Zither. He could rest easy on Kogin's lap as Dazl navigated around falling pyroclastics and limbs and brought them slowly but surely back to the ship.

A recurrent roar, like thunder, rolled across the darkening sky as night descended early upon the land. The volcano was erupting repeatedly, issuing a noise that sounded like a titanic cannon firing again and again. For Rescue Team Two, less than a mile from the ship, it was simply more bad news. Cracks were opening up everywhere on the ground and countless uprooted trees blocked passage on the jungle floor. In spite of their close proximity to the ship, the effort required to avoid fissures, potholes, and debris caused the crawler to move slowly over the ground. At times it stopped altogether as a tree toppled in front of them or a new fissure opened up directly ahead. To further dampen their spirits, was the continual rain of ash and pyroclastics, as a massive pillar of black smoke rose from the northern cone.

As he watched the sky darken, Remgen listened to arguments from the senior officers about saving the ship. Both the professor and the commander wanted to wait as long as possible before lifting off. The first mate agreed, as he reached out and hugged his teammates. If need

be, they must save the vessel at all costs, but he would do everything in Izmir's power to reach the ship.

"Very well," the navigator replied gravely, "but lava streams and fissures will soon threaten the integrity of our vessel's hull. We must get the ship in the air before it is mired in magma or damaged by the shaking ground."

This grim statement from Orix was followed by an equally grim nod from Falon. The professor sat wide-eyed and pensive in his seat now that closure of this nightmare was so near.

"We will be praying for you Rescue Teams One, Two, and Three," Falon said huskily, rising up to look out the window. "Izmir give you speed!"

When they were at the edge of the meadow, so close to the ship they could see light from the bridge shining brightly in the false night, Remgen held his breath as he gauged the lava stream inching toward the ship. Orix's fears were justified. The ship *was* threatened. Time was running out. Fortunately for the returning team, there was no magma flowing where they must enter the ship. But countless creatures streamed across the meadow to avoid the flow of lava through the trees. The field of grass ahead had changed color, from yellow and light green hues to a swarming silver, brown, and emerald mantle of living things running, slithering and flying to safer ground.

"What do we do now?" Rezwit asked, as Remgen brought the crawler to a stop.

"They won't be interested in us," the first mate waved a hand. "They're running for their lives!"

"What if they *are* interested in us?" Shizwit asked in a small voice.

"Believe me, children, it can be done," Remgen insisted, as the crawler entered the meadow and began rolling across the field. As he watched an assortment of predators and plant-eaters cross the meadow, he had almost convinced himself of this. They would make it, he promised them. Had they not survived another eruption? Could they not see the lights of the ship? They were very close. Everyone was familiar with the single-mindedness of these beasts. When the predator's bellies were full or they were frightened, they ignored everything in their path. The professor had told him this. He had seen it for himself in the forest. He now attempted to convince them of their safety in spite of what they knew. But then Remgen saw another familiar sight bolting through the trees: a great leaper, the largest he had ever seen, leading a procession of juvenile tyrannosaurs and smaller meat-eaters, including swarms of spike-toes who passed it on the way. It was the spike-toes who were the greatest threat and yet they ran ahead of the crawler without looking back.

"I have this feeling," he tried to sound convincing, "if we drive carefully toward our ship and give them plenty of ground, those brutes will leave us alone."

"Uh uh," Vimml shook his helmet emphatically, "we might run into *him!*"

The great leaper ran ahead of them that moment, passed three-horns and club-tails, through scoop-mouths, sail-backs, and bone-heads, without so much as a second glance.

"Oh that fellow," Remgen pursed his lips and squinted his eyes. "He's too far away lad. By the time we're halfway across the field, he'll be long gone!"

"Oh yeah," Rezwit pointed to the other predators following behind, "what about *them?* I've never seen that many killers in one bunch!"

"We should wait," Shizwit agreed with Vimml and Rezwit, as she held Rifkin's helmeted head in her lap.

Shielding his eyes against the sun, Remgen marveled at the shaft of brilliance breaking through the smoke. The light grew, moving across the meadow toward the ship as the column of black smoke was blown by the wind. Remgen believed this was an omen. He had grown fond of these children. After what they had gone through so far, he felt a profound responsibility for each one of them, including the unconscious Rifkin they rescued today. He knew what they must do. They couldn't wait for another big shaker, especially with Rifkin clinging to life.

"If you care about your friend," he declared, looking into his clouded helmet, "we must go *now*, not later when there's another eruption. We're almost there, children, mere moments from the ship. Trust in Izmir, if not in me!"

Without further argument, Rezwit, Shizwit, and Vimml nodded their heads, ignoring the monsters in the meadow and the cracked and cluttered ground. So close but so far from the safety of the ship, the crawler now made its way across the trodden field, encountering all manner of runners, flyers, and crawling things.

Fortunately for Rescue Teams One and Three, they were no longer close enough to a water source to suffer Varik's fate. Few of the hardy forest trees were uprooted or broken by the eruption. Except for smaller limbs crunched under the crawler's blades, an occasional lava bomb falling from the sky, a persistent rain of ash and occasional creatures moving onto their path, the road ahead was at least passable if not free and clear. Such minor obstacles simply made the journey slow and nerve-racking for a group who had suffered so greatly today. Countless species of dinosaurs ran passed and alongside of them, terrified by the sound and shaking ground, and yet for Rescue Teams One and Three all that remained was the path ahead.

With so many impediments in the way, Dazl was forced to drive slowly. Team Two's crawler, however, though it moved amidst great streams of dinosaurs crossing the meadow, could move at a moderate speed. This heartened Remgen's team for several moments, until they began bumping against and crunching over creatures on the way. It was a dreadful but awesome sensation to watch such a horde and have to dodge long necks and three horns suddenly appearing in their path. Almost lovingly, Shizwit held the unconscious Rifkin in her arms. As Rifkin awakened momentarily to look up into her tearful face, the specter of this mysterious female became forever imprinted in his mind. Remgen was uttering the familiar "Izmir is great, Izmir is good" refrain, as Rezwit and Vimml stared numbly into space, wondering if they and their friend would live or die. Rifkin's eyes closed too soon for anyone to notice. The overwhelming cacophony of sound around them was hardly noticed by him as he returned to his dark, dreamless sleep.

There was no way for Remgen to even know if Rifkin was adequately breathing because of the damage to the gauges on his suit. The chief medic Eglin would have to examine him when the suit was removed—"if," he muttered to Orix, "I don't not strangle him first!" His lifeless composure made it appear to his comrades that he was dead. Everyone, except the hardened first mate, was crying now. Doctor Arkru, who had followed the entire episode from the bridge, could not allow himself to believe that Rifkin was dead. So much had been risked to save this foolish lad. Now Varik was dead too. If Rifkin also died, the professor would have imperiled them all for nothing. In spite of his anger for Rifkin, the collector already mourned his stricken student. It was the darkest day of his long, long life. He had grievously placed his students in harm's way. Three shipmates were already dead, and one of his most gifted pupils might die too.

As the crawlers approached the vessel, the commander and professor could see from a video monitor a stream of lava edging dangerously close to the landing gear of the ship. The ship's crew and the remaining students had been informed of Rifkin's condition and were

waiting outside the decontamination hatch with mixed emotions. Many of them were angry with Rifkin for the problems he had caused. Those closest to him, pitied him or felt angry with him for what he had done.

The ramp was lowered and Rescue Team Two's vehicle, with the unconscious Rifkin, arrived first into the decontamination portion of the hold. As Remgen motioned to his teammates to begin unsuiting, Eglin and his assistants stood in back of the hatch waiting for the chamber to be sanitized so they could begin their work. After removing their life support systems, Rescue Team Two hastily took off Rifkin's badly damaged suit. When Eglin entered the decontaminated chamber, he immediately checked Rifkin's vital signs with his equipment. With a frown creasing his brow, he signaled grimly that Rifkin was at least alive. Gennep and Jitso then placed him on the gurney and carried him out of the room. While the medical team rushed him to the infirmary, his teammates were too hungry and exhausted to give him a second thought. Remgen, Rezwit, Shizwit, and Vimml left almost deliriously for their quarters, hoping that food and drink would soon be prepared. Doctor Arkru, hand-in-hand with Urlum, and several concerned students and crew members held vigil behind the hatch in expectation that Rescue Teams One and Three would finally arrive.

When the ramp lowered again and Dazl drove the crawler up into the chamber, it was as a hero that Zither entered with his teammates this time. From the hatch window and decontamination monitor, his shipmates could see him on Kogin's lap and their laughter and cheers were audible over the speaker in the room. Everyone appeared to know about his brave deeds, except himself. "We were being attacked by the beast," he had muttered to Kogin, "what else could I have done? Let's just be glad we're alive!"

While they unsuited, all he wanted to think about was a warm shower, dinner, and many hours of dreamless sleep. But he knew that his life would never be the same now, and Kogin knew this too. A great and mindless joy had filled him. Like it or not, he had savored raw, unintellectual, and unwanted glory. So instead of going straight to his quarters, he paid the comatose Rifkin a visit in the infirmary to look down at his old enemy and gloat a spell before taking care of his private needs.

"Well, my old adversary," he murmured to the sleeping student, "this time you've outdid yourself. All I ever wanted was a scientist's life. Now, because of your antics, I have a reputation that I can't possibly live up to. Thank you very much Rifkin. Thanks for nothing my old friend!"

Zither wanted to pick up one of the jars of medicine in Eglin's infirmary and smash it over Rifkin's head. But it was not for what happened today; it was for what had and had not been happening ever since the voyage began. There had been a constant and unwanted rivalry between them. Insults had been made to his face. Jokes had been played behind his back. Not once had this obnoxious young student ever treated him decently or given him the chance to be his friend. Just at this moment of unexpected anger, after he carelessly uttered his thoughts aloud, Rifkin opened his feverish eyes to look up at Zither. A faint smile trembled on his infantile, simian face.

"Well, well, that was a pretty speech," he murmured, his eye-lids remaining at half-mast.

"You were awake all that time?" Zither's mouth dropped in disbelief. "That's just like you Rifkin.... It's true, all of it. I don't want glory. That's what you wanted. And it's what caused the deaths of three of our shipmates!"

"I know that now Zither," Rifkin nodded faintly. "Through my deliriums, I heard the news from Eglin. I think he wanted to kill me.... Is that what you want to do now Zither?"

It was at that point Zither realized that the typically smug expression on Rifkin's face was actually a sad, careworn smile. The enormity of his guilt must be overwhelming. He felt pity for the broken hero now. He still wanted to smash Rifkin's head, and yet once more he realized it was not because of what Rifkin had done, but what he could have done.... He could have been his ally instead of his enemy.... He could even have been his friend.

"No," he said after a long pause. "... I'm sorry this happened to you Rifkin. But you brought this upon yourself."

"That's what everyone is saying," Rifkin's voice came out thinly now. "I wish I was dead. My parents could not deal with me either; that's why I'm here."

"At least you had parents," Zither said thoughtfully. "I was not sent here, like you. I requested it at the academy. From what I've gathered Rifkin you were incorrigible on the home planet too. You've always been a reckless glory-seeker out to impress your peers. Instead of wishing you were dead, have you given any thought to changing your ways during your convalescence on the ship? You could become a great scientist and collector Rifkin, if you could just stop showing off!"

Rifkin reached up and gave him a weak handshake. Without words, he conveyed his apology to Zither by a faint nod of his head, his eyes filling suddenly with tears.

That moment Eglin and his new assistant Gennep entered with a tray of medicine. Though they said nothing to Rifkin, it was plain they hated him for the deaths of their friends. Zither's pity for Rifkin grew in the silence. Both students had matured greatly in the past few days. Rifkin had learned humility. Zither had found courage in himself. Rifkin's spirit appeared to have been broken, while Zither's spirit, as a result of his experience, now soared. Zither hoped that the old Rifkin—that happy-go-lucky adventurer—was not totally shattered by his ordeal, but he looked so small and helpless in the large infirmary bed. He lie there looking forlornly up at the doctor reading his vital signs, crying softly to himself, wishing he had never been born.

The sudden and inexplicable heroism thrust upon Zither seemed almost dream-like as he recalled the episode in the forest today. Even more incredible to him, was how one episode could reverse the statuses of Rifkin and himself. Rifkin's short life had been filled with brave deeds, while he had shown such bravery for only one hour. Nevertheless, the younger student, who had caused so much suffering during the mission, had become, understandably, a pariah on the ship.

So why did he feel sorry for Rifkin? He had no one to blame but himself! What did it matter if Rifkin built his reputation in courageous exploits when had caused so much tragedy during the past few days? Had he not given Zither much personal grief? When a tear began rolling down his own cheek, Zither brushed it away irritably and made a hasty exit from the room.

Suddenly, he felt very foolish. On the way down the corridor leading to the elevator, he first ran into Urlum, who had been hovering outside, hoping to see her lover again. Urlum, who was accompanied by Illiakim, said nothing to him as she entered the room. Illiakim gave him a strange, guarded smile. He loathed Urlum for her mindless devotion to Rifkin. Then, as if it wasn't bad enough to see two female students rushing to Rifkin's bedside, he passed Shizwit, the "Key Master," in the hall—another Rifkin devotee. As he continued on this way, he felt irritation at himself for not properly dressing down the incapacitated Rifkin. He had squandered a perfect opportunity. What he did instead was so typical of him. He made peace!... Peace to someone who had not given him a moment's peace for months... Peace to someone whose

popularity soars even now, at least with the opposite sex, no matter what he has done or what disasters he has caused.... Peace to a rogue and exhibitionist, who had made his life miserable at each turn.... Peace to someone who had caused the deaths of three shipmates and done great damage to their mission on this world!

As Zither reached the student quarters, receiving respectful glances, hellos, and even an element of awe from fellow students and members of the ship's crew, he found himself walking straight toward the female counterpart to Rifkin in almost every way: Alafa. She stood there waiting for him to approach, an enigmatic smile playing on her athletic face. He didn't like Alafa. Whenever voices of derision echoed Rifkin's example, he could always count on her, and yet here she was blocking his path.

"Excuse me," he said irritably, attempting to pass.

"You surprised me today," she said mockingly it seemed.

"I surprised *myself*," he confessed with a snarl. "I surprised *everyone* on the ship. Now I'm tired, dirty, and hungry, Alafa, so let me pass. I'm in no mood for your begrudging admiration. I did what was necessary and no more."

"I think it was more than that," her tone changed and her eyes sparkled.

Bending forward in uncharacteristic feminine fashion to give him a kiss on his mouth, she then whispered into his ear before she fled, "You are a real hero Zither. Unlike the fearless and mad Rifkin, you were afraid out there, and yet you rose up against your nature and acted for the benefit of your team!"

"You think *I'm* a hero?" Zither could only mumble in amazement as she disappeared down the corridor into her room.

As Rifkin lie in critical condition in the infirmary, three important events involved the entire ship. The first event, which was the most important, was done quite unconventionally, since no one was warned ahead of time to go their stations and prepare for lift off from this world. The dreadful pool of lava gathering below the ship had already caused damage to one of the landing pads and was threatening to engulf the second and third pads when the navigator was able to get the ship airborne. Everyone braced themselves as quickly as possible, as the commander's voice blared over the intercom, "Now here this: all personnel brace for takeoff!" Moving as light as smoke, the great trilobite-shaped vessel was rising into the air to avoid more damage from lava flows and pyroclastic bombardment to its hull. Before the ship's company even knew what was happening, it was zooming to a temporary "volcano free" location and then descending back down to earth. A great flat desert replaced the featureless green. No one but the commander, navigator, and professor were worried that they had made the move. Everyone assumed that it was done as a temporary expedient: to get the vessel ready for travel and assess damages to the ship in anticipation of the final lift-off into space.

The next important event was an announcement from the chief medic. Although only one of the three shipmates killed on this world had been brought back to the ship, the ship's company were informed over the intercom by Doctor Eglin, who also acted as priest, that a ceremony for the three shipmates would follow dinner tonight. It was mandatory that everyone attend. Hobi would not lie on this dreadful planet, but later, after final lift-off, would have a proper cremation and his ashes would be sprinkled in space after they left Irignum for good. This news was followed by the belated announcement from the commander that the ship had moved to a safe location on this world. It appeared to be the bottom of a long since dried up sea.

Afterwards, the professor spoke emotionally over the intercom of the meaning of what had happened and how much they had learned by these tragedies. But the only information that interested most of the ship's company tonight was the promise of imminent dinner, which it was rumored, was another fine feast. No mention had been made by Eglin that Rifkin had survived his ordeal. The good doctor would remain Rifkin's enemy for the rest of his life.

After the rescuers had cleaned up and put on fresh clothes, another sumptuous dinner was served by Wurbl and Imyor. The dining hall was in a more festive mood when all were assembled to eat. With the exception of the commander's table, barriers had been broken down again as everyone sat with everyone else, regardless of age, gender, or class. Zither therefore sat next to Alafa, his new admirer, whether he liked it or not, alongside of technician Ibris who had also been saved by his heroic action today. At his table were, of course his fellow rescuers Imwep and Kogin, who treated him as a colleague and equal, since, in their minds, he had proven himself in the field. Throughout Zither's long life, they would remain his steadfast friends.

At Zorig's table sat his sister, who acted as the loving sibling again now that the technician had no friends. To offer his support to his long time assistant, the professor had reluctantly decided to sit at Zorig's table too, along with young Lumnal, who had no prejudices to bare. Otherwise Zorig, like Rifkin, was persona non grata with most of the children and many members of the crew.

Grummel, who was now one of the caretakers of Irignum's enclosures aboard ship, naturally shared the table with Jitso, his co-worker, who had not volunteered for the second rescue attempt, and also Illiakim, who, after opting to stay on ship, herself, sat forlornly next to him, staring into space. Only three chairs were occupied at this table, the fourth to be used by the cook Imyor when he was finished with his galley duties and was ready to eat. Dazl, like the solemn Jitso, blamed Zorig for his friend Hobi's death. He naturally sat close to his superior Remgen, already in his cups, and shared the table with Commander Falon, Doctor Eglin, and the Communications Officer Abwur, who were in deep discussion on what lie ahead. Rezwit and Vimml, who sat boasting of their courage today, seemed on the surface to be their old, obnoxious selves, but the commander had ordered their table placed in the furthest corner of the room as a sort of punishment for their many antics in the passed few days. At several other tables situated around the room sat the remaining crew members, who had not taken part in the adventures this week. For the most part, except for normal conversations, it was a subdued time. There was much more than food to digest during the feast. For the first time in anyone's recollection Rifkin's voice and gestures did not grace the festivities, and even his friends had fallen out of grace with the commander and his crew.

Shizwit, the professor noted sadly, seemed to have withdrawn into her shell again and naturally sat next to Omrik, who had happily missed the entire event, and Yorzl and Zeppa, who chattered quietly amongst themselves.

Orix, who was second-in-command on the ship, had volunteered to sit watch while the others ate and was the only one not attending the dinner tonight. After serving everyone else, Wurbl would bring the navigator his dinner on the bridge and then join the others for his own food. The crew, technicians, and students must eat heartily, the commander said during his dinner speech. There was still much work ahead. This cryptic declaration mystified everyone. After three deaths, were they not leaving this dreadful world behind? What did the commander mean by *still much work ahead*? No one dared ask.

As Wurbl sat the tray down in front of the navigator at the bridge, he was the first to ask for clarification of the commander's words.

“You want to know what Falon meant, eh?” Orix replied, immediately attacking Wurbl’s famous stew.

“Yes sir,” Wurbl nodded respectfully, “everyone does.”

“Oh, our commander loves to be dramatic,” Orix remarked sarcastically. “He’ll wait until dinner is halfway through to clarify himself.” “... All right,” he acknowledged Wurbl’s curiosity, after chewing a mouthful of stew, “if you insist, my fine chef, you shall be the first to know.”

Looking up at Wurbl, after washing down his food with half a mug of beer, he watched the cook squirm awhile, and then, after scooping up more stew, said, while lazily chewing his food: “Our good professor... talked Falon... into continuing our mission on this world!”

The portly Wurbl did a comic double-take and almost dropped his tray. “What?” he sputtered. “I-I thought we were leaving this dreadful place. I was hoping that when we lifted off we’d keep on going into deep space.”

“Tsk-tsk, you know we all have to be battened down before we do that,” Orix chided him gently, surveying the other delicacies on his plate, “... but the fact is we’re going to do our repairs in this safe zone I picked out, and then its *on to greater things!*”

Wurbl fell heavily into the nearest seat and poured himself a mug beer. The navigator laughed as Wurbl took a long swig and wiped his pudgy mouth with his sleeve.

“Greater things, my fat foot!” spat the cook. “I’d love to see the rear end of this dung-heap world. You can quote me on that!”

“Listen, my fine cook,” Orix, already slightly tipsy, bent forward conspiratorially to say, “things are going to be a lot different after the next landing, and you can quote *me* on that. We’re going to spend time in this desert upgrading our weaponry and getting all our other equipment up to speed. There’ll be no more student field trips next time. This time we’ll use the leadership we used in the rescue of Rifkin, without, I daresay, that renegade and his cronies involved. You mark my word; there’ll be no childish antics *then!* We’re going to fill our enclosures with this planet’s creatures and be on our way.” “We’ll send out adults for an adult’s job and then, praise Izmir,” he belched happily, stabbing a mushka drumstick with his fork, “we’ll be back in the dark loveliness of space!”

As Doctor Arkru looked down sadly at the great desert below the bridge and reflected on the wondrous and treacherous world on which a technician, storeroom clerk, and medic had been killed, he wondered if their mission could ever be considered worthwhile. Everything from this point on would be anticlimactic compared to that hour when the planet’s treasures loomed below them and they first spotted the great leaper bounding toward its prey. Everything started to go wrong when they set foot on this dangerous world and allowed children to run amuck. How could he justify the loss of three shipmates, two of whose broken bodies had been left on the forest floor? What effect this would have on the lives of this planet’s creatures the professor had not even considered. All that mattered to him was that they had been forced to leave Tobit and Varik where they had died, without burial or death rites. It seemed unthinkable that their ashes would not join Hobi’s in space.

After leaving the dining hall for his quarters, the professor found himself walking aimlessly through the ship. He had been in no mood to celebrate this time, so he drank moderately, while eating modestly, during his meal. When he found himself in the corridor leading to the infirmary again, he turned his thoughts to Rifkin, whom Eglin and his assistant had

halfheartedly brought back to life. When and if he recovered fully from his injuries, what would the commander and himself do with this wayward student? What punishment would be fitting for his rebellion or the destruction he had unwittingly caused?

It almost seemed better if Rifkin had died, he told himself, as he watched Gennep, the medical trainee, check Rifkin's vital signs and then leave the room. Currently the lad was unconscious or merely asleep. Arkru didn't want to deal with him when he came to, yet, as Rifkin's beloved mentor, he bent down and kissed the student's ashen brow.

"Sleep my little warrior," he whispered faintly. "You've got much to answer for when you wake up."

The professor felt tired and out of sorts. After returning finally to his quarters, he allowed himself a period of quiet and reflection in his room. Night, he could see from his porthole, had descended fully on the ship as the vessel sat jewel-like on the desert and reflected lunar light. *Oh, would that the ship break free from Irignum's gravity and sail into deep space!* his mind cried out, as he settled down in his pod for sleep.

Most of the ship's company and children likewise took their positions in their pods for sleep, each crewmember, technician and student exhausted and filled with woe for their friends. Many shipmates hoped to hear the thrusters roar again, the bulkhead and ceiling of the ship tremble faintly, and feel that special security as their vessel rose effortlessly back up into the sky. But their mission was not finished here on Irignum. When they did lift up once more they would soon be landing again at a different spot on this hostile world. Doctor Arkru knew this more than anyone else, for it was he who had convinced the commander to select another location on this world.

The professor awoke eight hours later and emerged from his pod. After getting dressed and sprinkling water on his face, he set out immediately for the infirmary to check on Rifkin again. To his amazement, he found several visitors standing around a blinking and unsteady Rifkin, who was sitting up in his bed talking to his shipmates in the room. Except for the bruises and welts on his forehead and arms, he looked much better than he did when Zither visited him yesterday. The pale pink skin tone of his species was returning as was the devilish twinkle in his eyes.

Rifkin, it appeared, was being welcomed back to the living by students and members of the crew. For those congregating in the room, there didn't seem to be an ounce of ill feeling for the tragedy he caused. Everyone in the room was just glad that he was alive. There were no complaints, even from Zorig about his misadventures. Now that the ship had relocated to a secure place, they were all safe from this dreadful world. Those shipmates who had been fortunate enough not to have suffered what Rescue Teams One, Two, and Three experienced, had a chance to see this miraculous young lad. Rifkin had survived an ordeal that should have been certain death to anyone else. On this point, everyone agreed, but an undercurrent of hostility was detected by the professor as he approached Rifkin's bed.

For those who had lost friends because of Rifkin, his survival was an outrage. They lined up in the corridor for a chance to give him a piece of their minds. Three shipmates were dead, partly if not directly because of his foolishness. What kind of miracle was this that good shipmates should die? Why should Rifkin be welcomed back to the living as a hero when he had caused three deaths? Doctor Arkru had passed several of these disgruntled shipmates in the infirmary corridor outside of Rifkin's room, taking mental note of their remarks. Yes, indeed, Rifkin must be punished severely for this, he thought, clenching and unclenching his fists. Zorig, in spite of his own guilt, had been right all along. No one dare argue against this now! He

wouldn't let himself soften again. He would not allow sympathy for Rifkin's wounds to cloud public judgment. He would make his recommendation to the commander and insist that there be a vote taken as there was for all such issues on the ship. Falon, who was the leader now and in control of the ship, had the final say-so in all matters, but Arkru was certain he would agree that punishment should be meted out.

Not long after the professor arrived on the scene, Falon and his staff also crowded into the small room. It seemed as if the entire ship's company had finally been alerted by Eglin and Gennep that Rifkin had survived. Rifkin's shipmates arrived continually, either singly or in groups until there was barely enough room to stand, spilling out into the hall and down the passageway, eagerly waiting for news of Rifkin's condition or punishment today. Later, Arkru would learn that Zither had been Rifkin's first visitor. Of all the students aboard the ark, Zither had proved to be the greatest surprise. His exemplary behavior in the forest now buoyed the professor's spirit as he searched the faces in the room.

"Students, technicians, officers, and crew members," Arkru announced, looking sternly at the patient in the bed. "It is my belief that Rifkin must be isolated for the remainder of our mission. He is to be shunned until we arrive at our next planet and will be forbidden to disembark when we arrive at our next location on this world. He is restricted to the ship and forbidden to talk to the students and the crew. In olden times he would have been banished for his behavior, but frankly, now that our world is dying and our solar system is doomed, there is no place to banish him to. He has only one place to spend such an exile and that is on this ship."

"Does that mean that we can't see him anymore?" Urlum, who stood closest to Rifkin, plaintively asked.

"Of course Urlum," Arkru replied testily. "What do you think shunning is? You must not fraternize or talk to him for this period of time."

"How long will that period be?" Vimml asked anxiously. "Are you just counting the time we're on Irignum or even after we land on the next world?"

"No, I just explained that Vimml!" Arkru shook his head in disbelief.

At that moment, Commander Falon, after remaining aloof in the background, made his way up to the bed.

"Let me have a look at this rascal." He cast a jaundiced eye.

"Do you concur, commander?" Arkru asked, bowing deferentially as he approached.

"Whatever you think necessary, professor," replied Falon, with a shrug. "Frankly, I would have left him to rot rather than go through what we have in the past few days!"

"I think it's fair," Zither offered from the back of the room.

"You would!" Rezwit glared, looking protectively down at his friend.

"After all he should have *some* form of punishment," agreed Imwep, who, with Kogin right behind him, elbowed his way through the room.

"He should be shunned! He should be punished!" Gennep and Jitso murmured amongst themselves, as Ibris and Omrik nodded their heads.

A consensus was growing after Zither's opinion, and yet several shipmates, including even crewmembers, were shaking their heads.

"All right," the commander took control, "let's have a show of hands.... I see some hesitation in half of you. This is unacceptable. Imwep, go into the corridor and count those not in this room. What will happen to our ship if we don't put a stop to Rifkin's antics once and for all?" "You Zorig," he pointed accusingly, "where's your hand? I thought you, of all people,

would like this rascal punished. Have you honestly changed your mind? Or is it your sister Urlum, Rifkin's sweetheart, that makes you equivocate now?"

"No sir," Zorig made a face, "it's not Urlum. Under normal circumstance, I would think you're being too lenient, but the fact is I deserve punishment myself. How can I vote to punish him if my incompetence caused the death of Tobit and Hobi too?"

"Those were accidents, Zorig," the professor corrected him irritably. "You did your best to save your team!" "To tell you the truth, my shipmates," he turned to the crowd, "with the exception of Zither, *most* of my students acted like cowards on this world. Rifkin was foolish, though he's still very brave." "But that is not the issue here, Zorig," he reached out in the crowded room to touch the technician's trembling hand. "You must not blame yourself, Zorig.... I take the blame for sending out children to do adult's work. But, Izmir help me, I did it in good faith. What Rifkin did was against our codes. He deliberately acted against the welfare of his teammates. He did it for glory and not science and caused the chain of events that culminated in three deaths!"

"So what do you suggest Arkru?" Falon asked, as Imwep returned with his count. "What?" his eyes popped wide as the second mate whispered it into his ear. "Humph," he frowned in disbelief. "... Strangely enough, after Imwep's tally, we appear to be evenly divided. Shall we let Zorig be the deciding vote before we make up our minds?"

"Go ahead, it's all right," Rifkin smiled wanly up at Zorig now. "I'm lucky to be alive. I'll take my punishment. Perhaps on another world I can someday prove I can behave!"

"Perhaps," Zorig said dubiously, "but I vote no. What purpose is there now? What good would it do for those who have fallen or for the mission lying ahead?"

"I vote yes," Rifkin said in a cheerful voice. "I shall cast the deciding vote."

"You vote against yourself?" Arkru frowned thoughtfully, moved by the Rifkin's response. "Do you agree that you should be shunned during the remainder of our mission?"

"Yes." Rifkin looked around at the others with a fading smile. "I've had enough of those beasts for awhile. Give me other chores on the ship. Let me feed them and clean up their messes. I don't care."

In spite of Zorig's self-abasement and generosity, the professor saw a slight majority of the shipmates crowding into the room nod their heads. Many of them, he was quite sure, felt that Zorig needed punishment too. Everyone knew that Rifkin lied when he said he didn't care, but it wasn't easy to argue with the leniency of the commander and professor's decision. It included only the remaining collections required for this mission on Irignum, not their future collections on other worlds and that day when they would populate another planet with the creatures they found on this world. It wasn't as if they were shunning Rifkin forever or making him stay permanently inside the ship.

The professor, with Imwep's assistance, took another vote to make sure this is what most of them wanted. It didn't really matter, since Falon's word was law, but he wanted Rifkin to see that most of his shipmates were more or less in agreement on this matter too. The final vote showed that barely over half of the ship's company wanted Rifkin to be punished at all, but it was enough to reinforce their decision. Even those who voted in Rifkin's favor realized how lenient the punishment was.

Commander Falon, who had already decided that Rifkin would be punished no matter how the vote turned out, now had the last word. Standing close to Rifkin's bed, his arms folded and lips pursed in thought, he reached out slowly with one hand.

“You heard it lad,” he said, gently patting Rifkin’s head. “No talking, no fraternizing and no leaving the ship!”

“Yes, I heard it, sir.... Thank you for saving my life,” Rifkin replied, looking around the room at Remgen, Rezwit, Vimml, and Shizwit, his eyes resting on the professor’s face. “I’m lucky just to be alive!”

Epilogue

Written In The Rocks

Somewhere on the planet Irignum, far beyond the desert on which the ship temporarily sat, Tobit had been chewed and mauled by the spike-toes, but they had found him just too distasteful to digest. His life support system, though torn in places, was not palatable, and it was actually toxic to alien life. Smaller scavengers, including other bipeds, crawlers and flyers managed to eke out a few bites of meat by sticking their heads into the torn openings of the suit to get at the flesh. They too found the experience distasteful, so it was up to the insects and bacteria to finish off Tobit's remains. The tough digestive tracks of the planet's predators and scavengers may not have been poisoned outright by the microbes filtering out of the alien's suit, but a new creature had invaded earth's air that was particularly lethal to dinosaurs and their kin: a crystal-like structure that was necessary for Revekian metabolism but would prove to be fatal to many creatures during this age.

Earthlings would one day call it a virus. Within a few millennia it would have spread around the globe and caused the extinction of the dinosaurs and many orders of reptiles on earth and allow the mammals to finally take control. Flying reptiles and the dragons of the ocean would also become extinct, as would several other unrelated species in the sea. It would, during its early stages of mutation, have no effect on mammals, birds and other reptiles of the planet, including the crocodiles and their kin. Turtles, snakes, and lizards would continue to thrive, as the mammals and birds took over the niches once occupied by dinosaurs. The new plants would continue to encroach upon the receding margins of the jungle, as the climate also began its climactic change. A vastly improved order of insects, who depended upon the flowering plants, their pollen and fruit, would continue to converge upon the rain forest, prairies and ever-expanding fields of grass, flowers, and fruit bearing trees. Meanwhile the virus would mutate during the evolution of the planet to become the worst killer of all time.

While poor Tobit lie in the forest to be consumed by insects, microorganisms, or small scavengers who were able to tunnel into his suit, Varik would lie intact inside his muddy tomb. The stream of mud that had overflowed the banks of the nearby river had covered the surrounding floor of the jungle, so that small lizards, mammals, insects, and even birds would become part of the strata in which he was entombed. Quickly covered in advancing mud, they too were encased forever in the sludge. As Varik decomposed slowly inside his ruptured suit, he would gradually deteriorate away as would the muscle inside an ammonite shell or the flesh of the dinosaurs who became fossils in the earth. The metallic and plastic substances making up the alien's life support system had a far greater half life than such materials on earth but would gradually be dissolved and replaced by the earth's own minerals, until they too became fossilized: a crystalline replica of Varik's life support system and bone structure, an enigma for geologists and paleontologist to ponder someday when Varik was discovered in the rock.

The lush rain forest of Northern Arizona gradually gave way to a changing landscape, a process that took many millions of years. Mountains rose and fell, the sea moved in and out, and countless species of mammals and birds evolved, lived for a spell, and then become extinct,

until, after the last great ice age, there was a great desert filled with ancient wind-worn rocks, much similar to the desert on which the aliens' ship had escaped to so long ago. The remnants of ancient volcanoes, lakes, and great forests (now petrified as multicolored rocks) stretched over the landscape of Northern Arizona where dinosaurs and aliens once roamed.

Into this scorched and tortured land, a sound broke the stillness. A cloud of dust marred the cloudless horizon. Once again in this no-man's-land, bipeds appeared. This time they did not come as a great vessel out of the sky or migrate as primitive hunters and gatherers from the north as such nomads had done for thousands of years before the White Man appeared. This time they rolled across the desert in a small, compact vehicle that threw up a great dust cloud in its wake. From the jeep, an excited sound from one of the bipeds burst forth as he pointed at a likely outcrop of rock. Out jumped one of the bipeds, with the other not far behind.

"Look at the fossils in that rock!" the first one cried.

"It's a bonanza!" the second biped crowed, doing a clumsy jig.

For several moments the excited amateurs pecked away at their discovery, their geological picks ringing discordantly in the desert air, until the first biped stopped suddenly, slapped his forehead in disbelief, and pointed down at the rock. There, after a large chunk of late Cretaceous shale fell away, were the remains of Varik's life support system, preserved almost perfectly in the rock. While Varik had long ago disintegrated inside, his suit had been replaced by minerals that defied rust. His arms, legs, torso, and helmet segments were perfectly preserved, but, as seen in fossil seashells, the inside of his suit was made up of the matrix of the rock.

"Jeezuz, Ralph," the first biped seemed to shudder, "it looks like a space suit in this rock!"

"Impossible, Hank." Ralph shook his head. "It's gotta be a fluke! I'm sure it's something else!"

"No... Ralph," said Hank slowly, bringing his eye right up to the rock. "It's too uniform.... It looks like there's an inscription of some sort on this fossil." "Ralph," he whirled around excitedly "do you know what this means?"

"I dunno," Ralph sighed wearily. "... Sunstroke? We couldn't *both* be having the same dream! I've never seen a fossil like this before!"

"Ralph," Hank slapped his forehead again in disbelief, "this rock is sixty-five to seventy million years old. It's late Cretaceous. When this thing—whatever it is—began to fossilize, there were still dinosaurs around." "Tyrannosaurus rex, the tyrant king, still ruled," he framed his words carefully. "... Now it turns out that they were not alone. If what I see isn't a dream or we're both not stark raving mad, this is an alien, Ralph. During the Age of the Dinosaurs, extraterrestrials once visited earth! Look how small it is and how large its helmet is, as if it had a tiny body and yet a great big head."

The alien shared the same slab of rock with countless fossilized mammal, reptile, and avian bones, but so far the two explorers had not seen dinosaur bones, which had been the original goal of their expedition today. For several hours Ralph and Hank dug around the fossilized space suit, until it was almost completely uncovered. As Hank took one more peck at the rock, however, the fossil began disintegrating in pieces before their horror-stricken eyes. As they tried to hold various sections in place, the suit continued giving way, until the remains of Varik, the Revekian, looked like potsherds of a bygone race, everything that is, except one perfectly preserved boot, which Hank quickly and almost tearfully protected with both his hands.

“I hope your brought some glue,” he muttered to Ralph, as he lifted it carefully out of the rock.

The End

Glossary of Revekian Terms and Concepts

Irignian Creatures

Leapers - Revekian nickname for Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of the meat-eating dinosaurs.

Scoop-mouths - Revekian name for anatosaurus (duckbill), a herbivorous dinosaur, the females of which care for their young.

Three-horns - The Revekian nickname for Triceratops, a ten-ton herbivorous dinosaur, who roamed the meadows like the contemporary buffalo of the plains.

Bone-heads - Revekian nickname for a peculiar relative of the duckbill, with thick bony crest on its head.

Long-necks - Revekian nickname for alamosaurus the giant long-necked sauropod of the Late Cretaceous, who resembled the Brachiosaur of the Late Jurassic Age.

Spike-toes - Dromaeosaurs (close relative of the velociraptors of Mongolia), spike-toed predators who were the main threat to the Revekians on Irignum.

Sail-backs - Revekian nickname for a relative of spinosaurus, a mysteriously built sail-back predator, who ambushes its prey.

Fan-heads - Revekian nickname for small two-legged, fan-headed predators, who attack in pairs after spitting a noxious substance into victims eyes.

Club-tails - Revekian nickname ankylosaurus - large armored dinosaur with a club on its tail.

Flyers - Revekian's generic name for Irignum's flying creatures, chief of which was the giant Pteranodon Quetzacoatlus who had a 40 foot wingspan.

Water Dragons - Revekian impression of giant Late Cretaceous crocodiles of Northern Arizona.

Crawlers - Revekian term for all creatures crawling on their bellies

Fuzzy Ones - Revekians general description of early mammals

Feathered Ones - Revekians general description of early birds.

Alien Creatures

Samgar - Long-necked and long-legged kangaroo-sized herbivore specimens from Beskol (main ingredient in samgar stew.)

Vragga - Willowy turkey sized herbivore specimens from Beskol, also supplementing Revekian diet.

Umgi - Specimens from Beskol's ocean resembling a sea urchin, eaten as Revekian dish.

Mushka - Relatively brainless creature of Beskol resembling a hybrid.

Zabba - Elusive creatures of Beskol, who, as ambushers, hunt in pares. Rifkin confronted two juvenile sail-backs during his ordeal in the forest that reminded him of zabbas.

Dakka - Giant multi-legged herbivore specimens from Raethia resembling centipedes, eaten regularly at Revekian feasts.

Hybrid - Strange creatures of Raethia, whose mouth opened where it stomach should be.

Jummi - A small creature of Raethia who inexplicably incinerate themselves when seeing fire.

Werka – Lurking predators of Raethia, who ambush their prey.

Giant Sand Bug - Huge subterranean creature of Orm resembling the earth's trilobite.

Desert Flyer - Flying creatures, similar to birds and pteradactyls, on Orm.

Habot - Crab-like creature, with a painful sting, inhabiting the desert regions of Orm

Vrungy - A domesticated pet of Revekia (professor's pet).

Darters and Skippers - Small flying and fluttering predators living on a few islands on Tomol.

The Revekian Exploration Vessel

The Ship - The Revekian Exploration Ship, which resembles the ancient trilobite, would dwarf any conceivable star ship of literature. The actual definition of the concept "ship" in Ilderan, however, is limited to that portion of the Revekian vessel (communication center, laboratories, infirmary, ship's stores, and propulsion of the ship) controlled by the ship's commander.

The Ark - The name of the vessel, which in Ilderan is 'Vurdun' (literally containment or enclosure). The actual ark, as a sector of the vessel, is limited to that portion of the ship containing the specimens collected on the home planet and other worlds as directed by Doctor Arkru, the science officer aboard ship.

The Bridge - The control deck of the vessel where the commander (Falon), navigator (Orix), and helmsmen run the affairs of the ship. The Bridge includes the basic exploration ship control center (helm, navigational panel, thruster speed, directional finder, protective shield, ship's communications panel, and anti-gravity controls).

Engine Room - The propulsion system (thrusters) and generator of electricity and general power for the vessel, directed by Chief Engineer Dazl. (Located adjacent to the decontamination chamber and main ramp.)

Communication Room - Where the ship's vast computer and communication controls are located, (Controlled by one of the ship's chief officers, Communication Officer Abwur.)

The Dining Hall -The eating quarters, including the *galley* or kitchen for the ship, ran by Chef Wurbl and his assistant Imyor.

Recreation and Exercise Room - Located across the corridor from the *Dining Room* for the ship's company's leisure and to work off excess weight from Wurbl's rich food.

Officer's Quarters - Where the commander, professor, and the commander's officers live. Within this area are located the living quarters, conference rooms, library, and officers' special recreation room.

Crew's Quarters - The largest living quarters aboard the vessel: the crew's quarters, library, and special recreation compartment.

Student and Technician's Quarters - Located in these compartments are the student and technician quarters, their classrooms, library, and special recreation room.

Ship's Stores - Where the vessel's supplies and equipment (including the vehicles and equipment for specimen collection) are stored, repaired, and distributed to the ship's company. The store clerks Hobi, Jitso, and Gennep also assist in ship and ark repairs and coordinate maintenance services on the vessel.

Enclosure and Containment Levels (Ark) - Area of the ship (referred also as the ark) where the animals and plants collected are stored in protected environments. This area is controlled by Doctor Arkru in cooperation with his technicians (Zorig, Urlum, Tobit, and Ibris). Manpower for enclosure construction and other special projects are drafted from the general crew.

Decontamination Chamber - Where the crew is suited up before exploration and, upon return, the life support systems, equipment and vehicles (which are stored in Ship's Stores) are sterilized of alien microbes and then cleansed of toxic cleaning agents. This area is under the control of the ship's Doctor Eglin and his assistant Varik.

Aft Ramp -The ramp on which the aliens disembark to and return from alien worlds, leading into the decontamination chamber.

Landing Stations - Stations where officers, crewmen, technicians, and students buckle-up and prepare for take-off and landing.

Viewing Screens - Screens located on landing stations and on the bridge for viewing scenes outside the ship.

Ship's Telescope - The scope that Commander Falon and his officers use to scan the cosmos for potential danger and potential collection worlds.

Sleeping Pods - Stations used by aliens during prolonged periods of space travel for induced sleep and for normal sleep cycles during exploration and collection on new worlds.

Levels of the Revekian Ship

- Level 1* The engine room and, in an adjacent area, the main ramp leading into the decontamination chamber.
- Level 2* Ship's Stores (equipment and supplies for crew).
- Level 12* The ship's scientific laboratories and infirmary.
- Level 13* The student and technicians quarters.
- Level 14* The crews' quarters.
- Level 15* The ship's officers' quarters.
- Level 16* The ship's dining hall and main recreation and exercise room.
- Level 17* The ship's computer and communication equipment room.
- Level 18* The ship's bridge (control center), headquarters of the commander, navigator and helmsmen piloting the ship.

Levels of the Revekian Ark

- Level 3* The first enclosure area for life forms (amphibian-like creatures and other life forms from Revekia, the home planet.)
- Level 4* The second enclosure area for life forms from Revekia's solar system (including larvae of giant sand bugs from Orm and creatures from Furzi, Rimmi, and Modrit, planets destroyed by the Old Ones during the Solar Wars).
- Level 5* The third enclosure area, mostly aquariums, for primitive life forms from Tomol (darters and skippers and will-o'the wisp creatures from its primeval seas.)
- Level 6* The fourth enclosure area for life forms from Beskol (including long-necked and long-legged shamgar and sea urchin-like umgi, two of the Revekians' favorite foods).
- Level 7* The fifth enclosure area for Raethia's flora and fauna (including the multi-legged

dakka, also a main course for the Revekians).

Levels 8–11 Reserved for enclosures for Irignum and other planets' life forms.

Collection Equipment for the Ark

Life Support System - A watertight, puncture proof and heat resistant suit, with a protective helmet with feeder tubes connected to removable gas canisters in back, an air conditioning subsystem with a rechargeable battery, and a two-way radio for communication with the ship. Included in the suit is a *Helmet Light* and a *Fire Starter* for emergency use.

The Exploration Crawler - Slow moving vehicle, with tank-like tractor technology, for exploration and collection. The crawler can be switched to amphibious operation and contains a winch for hauling specimens in nets or containers up to the back of the vehicle.

Class 4 Stunner - Based upon laser and atmospheric electron capture technology, modified for scientific use by Doctor Arkru, for temporarily stunning specimens, but is also, if placed on “kill” frequency a potential weapon against attackers.

Model 7 Cloaking Force Field Trap - Large specimen trap, invented by Doctor Arkru, in which one or more specimens move unawares into an invisible square, triggering the force field beams between four electronically activated poles.

Nets - Coming in various sizes to entrap cornered specimens. Used in conjunction with *Darts*, which are thrown at a netted specimen until it is tranquilized.

Wrist Communicator - Device for typing data directly into or retrieving data from the ship’s database, similar to future wireless ipad, ipod, and laptop technology.

Important Revekian Concepts

Ship’s Company - Everyone aboard the Revekian Exploration Vessel. *Shipmates* are separate members of the ship’s company, regardless of whether they are students, technicians, officers or members of the crew.

Mother Ship - The main Revekian vessel sent by the Fathers of Science to monitor the scientific missions in the cosmos.

Fathers of Science - Mentioned frequently as the forefathers of the Revekians’ scientific mission and also the new leaders of their home planet after the defeat of the Old Ones.

Old Ones - Semi-legendary Revekian warriors, who nearly destroyed Revekia’s solar system in a series of wars for conquest. They were defeated by the Fathers of Science and their officers (many of whom now serve in the current exploration of space).

Celestial Father - Also called Izmir, which is the Revekian personal name for God. Associated with the Celestial Father are the *Celestial Spirits*, equivalent to earthling angels.

Celestial Lights - Realm inhabited by the Celestial Father and His angels—equivalent to the concept of heaven.

Outer Reaches - Unknown region similar to the Roman Catholic Purgatory where Revekians, who did not merit heaven, go after death.

Dark Sleep - Equivalent to hell or permanent death.

Ilderan - Scientific language (similar to use the of Latin) used by Revekian scientists to name specimens, (example irufum rizolum = leaping killer [tyrannosaurus rex]).

Revekian Planets of Discovery and Conquest

Revekia - Home planet of the explorers where the Father's of Science, who sent their explorers out on their mission, rule a doomed world and where the Old Ones launched their own earlier mission of conquest upon the Revekian solar system.

Irignum - the name given by Doctor Arkru for the planet Earth (Ilderan for "green world").

Orm - Considered a holy planet by Revekians and an important collection sight for the mission, including the giant sand bug, which resembles an ancient arthropod on earth (trilobite). (See Level 4 of Ark).

Tomol - Watery world discovered during the Revekians mission to find animate worlds. (See Level 5 of Ark)

Beskol - Planet providing abundant specimens (samgar, umgi, vragga, etc) for the Ark and also for the Revekian's diet. (See Level 6 of Ark).

Raethia - Planet providing the multi-legged dakkas as specimens for the Ark and also for the Revekian diet. (See Level 7 of Ark).

Lorg - In Rifkin's Ballad, the nearly dead planet on which the Old Ones were exiled by the Fathers of Science.

Furzi - First planet in the Revekian solar system almost destroyed by the Old Ones

Rimmi - Second planet in the Revekian solar system almost destroyed by the Old Ones

Modrit - Third planet in the Revekian solar system almost destroyed by the Old Ones

Oritzim - Distant world, beyond the Revekian solar system, where refugees from Furzi, Remmi, and Modrit were resettled after their planets were almost destroyed during the Solar Wars.

RIFKIN'S BALLAD

Marching gallant through galaxies,
defying the scientists' call.
With the purpose of changing history,
the Old One's conquered all.

Duty became recreation
in that warlike, carefree age.
The sport of annihilation
was played on a cosmic stage.

Death to Furzi, Rimmi, and Modrit
for testing Revekian clout.
Because these planets refused to quit,
the Old Ones wiped them out.

The Old Ones sit in dark, damp caves
their lives a frightful bore.
As penitents now they must behave,
banished forever more.

On distant Lorg they while away;
such exile have they earned.
Yet during the Age of Discovery,
the Old Ones spirit burns.