



Survival's Song

by

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All Coalition emissaries were selected from among the most conservative of the human culture by deliberate design. There were already enough problems interacting with the thousand or so non-humanoids -- smoothing over misunderstandings from language hurdles, compensating for physiological equivalents of territorial imperatives, bringing to conscious forefront of both species, or all involved species, subtle, unconscious conditionings and behavior patterns -- to risk any sort of ill feelings within the species.

Thoas Jord represented humans well because, like others of his exceedingly delicate and high calling -- rank equivalent to and sometimes even exceeding that of 'Fleet Captain -- he came from Terranian Galaxy, where four thousand years earlier a non-individuated human colony had been established and, after hundreds of years of blood-shed among themselves, had come to grips with that facet of their inner natures by restoring behavioral rules that any ancient history student could quickly identify as Puritanical. For them was hearth and home, monogamy, partnership for life, sharing of open-communication, honesty, integrity -- and strong taboos against nakedness, taboos against over-familiarization with unmarried members of the opposite sex, taboos against use of scientific chemicals or devices designed to alter their genetic course, and so on.

The shuttle eased away from the powerful contact-vessel's port, Thoas its only passenger. Windows would clear on reaching atmosphere, below Paraisa's ionosphere. Until then he had the undecorated blue walls to study, or his own thoughts, and, of course, he chose the latter.

"We don't need the planet, nor its people in the Coalition," Thoas Jord had been informed during his all too abbreviated briefings, "but Parans are biologically closer to us than the Jerraans, and we think they deserve to have their request reviewed and approved."

"What of the Jerraans?" he'd asked. "Will they permit it?"

"I've taken the matter up with the security council. The Jerraans have already decimated all other Paran worlds, within their own domains -- genocide of the worst kind. Only the colony world, Paraisa remains.

While Thoas' nervous system had been trained to block emotional surges, he'd found the procedures less than adequate, and even now was vaguely aware of involuntarily stifling down on an urge to vomit. Whole planets -- thousands of millions of humans or near humans -- decimated -- for reasons yet to be fully understood by the Coalition's council.

"You may die during the contact," he'd been told when accepting the assignment, "but remember that the Coalition's Council determined the action, and not all the might of Jerraans will avail against such a force."

He sighed deeply. He would have taken the assignment in any case, for humanitarian reasons alone. But on repeated reflections, it seemed little consolation, knowing that Coalition's fleet would retaliate which presumably could and would include his own death.

They landed on glistening white concrete aprons. The sky was noticeably bluer than his home world, and the clouds were strangely mixed, both higher and lower at the same time. Gravity average, normal for his own variation. A brisk, cooling breeze touched his dark skin when he stepped down. He blinked from the direct light and then noted a tall, well-formed and slim humanoid approaching.

Hands were shaken -- a familiar enough gesture -- and he was ushered to a waiting car. As they walked, the emissary's host said: "I am Celin, Spokesman for our Council of Fifty."

The humanoid's step was light and as self-assured as Thoas', and, although his skin was lavender, he had a mane of thick curls either painted or grown with a natural color of stark purple.

While Thoas' dress was strictly protocol -- close-fitting, dark blue trousers and button-up coat, with



Coalition silver shirt and dark blue scarf -- Celin's dress might have passed human inspection on a majority of planets, a white, blousy shirt and loose pants edged narrowly in green.

Celin was quiet during the virtually noiseless ride. Thoas took the opportunity to study faces and to absorb behavior patterns of all they contacted, or passed.

His first contact lesson some fifteen years past had come from an aging anthropology instructor, who'd taught: "The fundamental rock of all communication is body-language."

Celin's home was not at all pretentious, but adequate, and styled in the manner of others, being cast in molds and then embellished according to personal whims. They entered a door that sensed their approach and opened silently. Then Celin spoke, bowing first. "Emissary Jord, please forgive my tardiness. There was a matter that required my immediate attention. I did not wish to send anyone in my place, so I simply rushed through the matter, and came as quickly as possible."

"No need to apologise, Spokesman," Jordan answered with equal congeniality. "I wasn't inconvenienced. I'd just opened the hatch, when you came."

Jord was taller even than the Parans, and darkly good-looking, with black hair and clear blue eyes, startling against his olive skin. He gestured toward a vacant seat, saying: "May I say, Sir, that your command of Coalition standard is remarkable?"

Celin seated himself at the Emissary's gesture, and smiled. "Many of us speak the tongue, Emissary Jord. We've waited a long time for this moment -- thirty of your years. While we've all been raised speaking Jerraan -- officially, that is -- we've also kept alive the hope of returning to our genetic heritage, and so we've taught our children.

"By the way. I've been curious. I'm told that the Venture, although a contact ship, is also destroyer-class. I'm not really familiar with either. However, I have two daughters, Vana and Leris, who serve aboard surveyor-class vessels. Vana is on the Ariadne, and Leris the Isis."

"Those are Coalition ships," Jord said, surprised, especially because he hadn't been briefed on that aspect.

"That's correct. A few Parans emigrated very quietly after we declared our independence. Already this colony reaps benefits which will become permanent and assured with acceptance by the Coalition.

Thoas Jord, despite his conditioned formality, found himself unavoidably warming to Celin, whose frank and open manner invited trust. He reminded himself, too, that Paraisa was a fine world, and could make a valuable addition. And Parans were reputed to be a wise, courageous people, the first within the Jerraan tyranny to rebel -- if one could call virtual suicide successful. He had yet no working knowledge of their conduct code, their behavioral relationships upon which the Coalition's -- and his -- actions must hinge. Inwardly he shrugged, reminding himself that he could not hope to know everything instantly, that he must feel his way, reporting back as best he could, trusting that the professional diplomats who would follow might be able to correct any damage done by any wrong decisions or conclusions.

Celin continued: "We would have petitioned to join the Coalition when we first broke free, but the Council considered the timing wrong. We were still weak, and vulnerable. Our success so far is as much attributable to the tyranny's internal power struggles and political intrigues as to our own efforts. We expected to be forcibly yanked back into the fold, but this hasn't happened, possibly because our little colony is considered too insignificant. Then, too, perhaps they have failed to recognize our strategic importance in the long run, and have allowed their internal unrest to pre-occupy them."

"I don't understand how your people were able to withstand the Jerraans for so long," said Thoas. "One small group against a hundred worlds, and that hundred better equipped, more advanced technologically. . . ."

Celin's eyes were shadowed, yet he spoke with a tinge of humor. "We are a stubborn people, Emissary. We took the risk gladly."

"But aren't you still running a great risk?"



“A worthwhile one in our view. The memory of subjugation is fresh. Once we're accepted, the tyranny will not attack, nor try to recover this small colony. They wouldn't dare break their non-aggression pact with the far more powerful Coalition.”

They were to dine and, against the background of official opulence, Jord found Celin's own modesty of dress and manner admirable. As the Emissary accepted a proffered frosted goblet, Celin sat down, motioning for him to do likewise. “We are honored to have you as our guest. It is of the utmost importance that we waste no time preparing for this alliance, before the tyranny can intervene. While the outcome of our discussions is fairly certain, I'm sure that things will move more smoothly with you here.”

“I agree completely, Spokesman.” Jord sipped his drink slowly, appreciative of its sweet potency. “As you know, we humans have begun speciating because of gross environmental differences. While Parans appear to follow closely our own biologies, it is your customs and attitudes that must be assessed. After all, from one viewpoint, the Jerraans would be wholly acceptable, too, were it not for their behavior and customs, reflecting, of course, the extent of their individuations.”

“I understand completely, Emissary Jord. And we are confident still.”

“I've been empowered to act as proxy for my government, and any decisions made by me will be considered binding, although in practice an Emissary merely collects and passes on impressions to policy makers.” Thoas paused, reflecting on his observations thus far. All the Parans with whom he'd come in contact, shuttle personnel, ground transportation workers, and casual strangers, had exhibited the same quiet geniality as his host, open and unstrained. So far as he could judge, they were all healthy, handsome, of easy disposition, and apparently highly intelligent -- but then, his sample had been, of necessity, a small one. Where appearance was concerned there was great diversity within humanity -- and those colonists he'd met were affable, concerned, apparently -- well -- Coalitionlike.

Celin interrupted his thoughts. “I think we'll find it easy to come to terms, Captain. In fact, the proper documents are already being prepared, pending final approval, of course.” He turned his attention to his own drink.

The Emissary settled back into soft, colorful pillows, relaxing in spite of himself. The room temperature was controlled, as well as humidity, and close to his own comfort levels. He sniffed. An almost unsensed odor, an alien sweetness, pervaded the room, perhaps synthesized essence of some Paran blossom from the now extinct home world on which it had flourished. He felt a twinge of guilt at having to scrutinize colony survivors so closely.

Both he and the Spokesman were mildly startled when, a short time later, a soft tinkling sound announced visitors. Celin smiled as he rose to greet them, saying: “That will be my daughters, Emissary. I'm anxious for them to meet you.”

“I thought your daughters were serving aboard Coalition vessels.” Jordan also stood, straightening his uniform.

“I'm blessed with four daughters in all, great comforts to me since the death of my mate. The younger two are still here with me. Ah, . . .” Beaming parentally, he led the two toward Thoas. “My youngest, Ria,” he said, as a slim girl with short mauve curls and a friendly, infectious smile put her hand out. “Ria is a student at the fourth level. She plans to enter 'Fleet training the year after next, having been seduced by her sisters' tales of adventure.”

The second woman was a few years older than Ria. Where the youngest was merely very pretty, this one was startlingly beautiful, with pale lilac hair drawn back to accentuate perfect features, including extraordinarily large eyes, almost black. She wore a loose robe of soft green, unlike her sister, who was dressed much like their father. Taking her hand with justifiable pride, Celin introduced her. “This is Phaela, who has elected to stay here with me. She's a socio-historian, an honored profession on Paraisa.”

Thoas realized with a start that he had been staring in a most unmannerly fashion. He bowed deeply. “My congratulations, Spokesman. You are truly blessed to have two such lovely women in one family.”



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The younger girl laughed liquid bubbles. "You make a liar of yourself, Emissary. I'm well aware that my sister outshines me like the sun. No, you needn't bother," she continued, as Thoas started to protest. "I saw your face. We're all familiar with that reaction. We've gotten quite used to it over the years." She giggled pleasantly.

Phaela glanced at her ruefully. "Please excuse her, Emissary Jord. She's very young -- a little silly." Her voice was unexpectedly low and rich.

"She's also quite right," he grinned. "You really are beautiful. May I escort you to the dining chamber?" As he held out an arm, she graciously took it.

At the moment he held Phaela's seat for her, and pushed it in, her condition became apparent to him for the first time. He sat down beside her, quickly covering his momentary disconcertion, but was a little subdued by his discovery.

The others chatted amiably for a few moments before his silence was noted. "Our guest seems to have lost his tongue," Ria commented, her eyes twinkling in amusement.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," her sister scolded gently. "Emissary Jord probably hasn't been able to get a word in, for all our chatter."

"Oh, no, Phae. It's more than that." She leaned across the table to look directly into his eyes. "I do believe he's embarrassed -- about you! It bothers him that you're pregnant. How amusing!"

"Mind your manners, Ria," Celin sharply admonished, and then turned to Thoas to say, "I'm dreadfully sorry, Emissary. We were unaware of any pregnancy taboos. Phaela will retire immediately."

Thoas was embarrassed, not because of the taboos, but because he'd failed to hide his reactions from even a youngster. He breathed deeply. "Please don't. While your youngest daughter has guessed correctly, I've also been trained to adjust to others' patterns, and it is all part of the gestalt, the things I search out for recommendations. I'm the one who should apologize -- and please believe me when I say that emissaries do not have taboos that in any way reflect our conglomeration of customs. We're -- well -- selected from specialized lines."

When Phaela had started to rise, he waved her down, continuing with: "I should have known that someone so lovely wouldn't still be unattached. I was merely a little rattled."

Phaela smiled. "Apologies and flattery both accepted, Emissary, but your first impression was the correct one. I have never mated. In fact, I fail to understand what mating has to do with reproduction."

He did not quite succeed in swallowing the mouthful of wine he had just taken.

After the fit of coughing had passed, he stared at her. "Then I don't understand."

"Allow me to explain, Emissary." If anything, Celin seemed excessively amused. "A woman on Paraisa has children whenever she chooses to do so, provided she takes out the proper licenses, showing that she is physically and mentally qualified. My mate had two children before we signed our pair-bond contract, the two who are with your Fleet. Later she decided to have these two. All four are now my daughters under the law."

"You aren't their biological father?"

The Spokesman drew back, slightly affronted. "Assuredly not! I wouldn't presume to such a thing. It would do me great honor to someday be chosen for the banks, but that would be up to my posterity. No, I find it more than sufficient to have fathered my children since their birth."

Thoas was not completely baffled, although his thoughts were reflected in his face. Phaela appeared to take pity on his seeming confusion. "It's really not so complicated. When a Paran woman wishes to have a child, she applies for permission, stating her choice of male donor. If the request is granted, which is usually the case in a tiny colony struggling to increase its population, she is impregnated with the selected sperm from the banks. Donors are chosen from among our great men, and our women select those whose traits they wish to see perpetuated."

"I don't believe I've run across a method of reproduction like yours, although some in the Coalition use



artificial insemination effectively, though not as an exclusive method” He reflected further. “. . . and parthenogenesis, where two female eggs are mixed, producing another female of virtual clone characteristics. Are there never exceptions?”

“We are as much a product of our past culture as you are of yours, Emissary. I can’t think of a single instance in many centuries. Because of this tradition, we have achieved a race of superior qualities. Of course, we choose a donor very carefully. The father of my baby is Thas, one of our greatest historians, who died over four thousand years ago.”

Later Thoas surveyed the morning’s paperwork with great satisfaction, and some fatigue. Hearing a soft rustle, he looked up as Phaela strolled through the conference chamber door carrying a large-handled case painted with bright designs. “Father tells me you’ve been working hard. We don’t want our guest over-extending himself.”

“I’ll have more than enough time to relax once this is cleared up, and it won’t be much longer. Things have fallen into place very nicely. This colony, Paraisa, will be a Coalition planet in a few short weeks.”

Her face lit, and he could have sworn he heard a faint trilling, almost a cat’s purr, but perhaps he hadn’t.

“Wonderful! We’ve waited so long.” She indicated the case at her feet. “I’ve come to invite you to a picnic. Father felt that you should get to see more of our world than dusty conference chambers. I’m to escort you. Later he and Ria will join us.”

“That sounds marvelous. I’d like to see something of the colony’s ‘other’ life.”

Phaela’s pride was visible as she guided Thoas through the bustling citiplex. Tall spires and pillars gave way eventually to squares lined with low one-story family dwellings, and farther on to open fields. They climbed out of the bowl-shaped valley to the forested rim, where she chose a spot overlooking the sole Paran settlement on this world. The countryside was reminiscent of his home world except that its colors were softer, more muted, and a faint haze gave everything the dreamlike quality of an impressionistic landscape.

Thoas, admonished to “Just sit back and stay out of the way,” entertained himself by watching her as she laid out the case’s contents. Her lithe grace belied her expectant state, and for a fleeting moment, he allowed himself a twinge of self-pity. How much more interesting might this visit have been if she had not been indisposed.

Tall virgin timber formed a lovely background for their picnic site. Their color was wrong by his standards, a shade or so, and the mosses that covered every trunk and limb created a fairy-tale mistiness, since they softened the sharp lines, causing each bush and tree to blend into the other in graceful transition.

Phaela looked down at the peaceful scene spread so wonderfully below them and sighed. “Father is late. But then, Father is always late, as you’ve undoubtedly noticed. Perhaps we’d better start without them.” As she turned back to Thoas an unknown spacecraft winked into visibility above the citiplex. Obeying instincts derived of long, rigorous training, he seized Phaela and flung them both to ground, shouting, “Hide your eyes, and cover your head!”

The air reverberated with sound and light, deafening and dazzling, as they attempted to shield themselves. The ground rose and shook as though a wild carnivore had seized them and now shook them like freshly killed meat. Terrifying winds howled while timbers cracked sharply.

She struggled, pulling free of his grasp. He tried to shield her further, to stop her from looking at what must now be, but she pushed past him. She knelt there for a long moment, her eyes wide and lost, then she crumpled against him. Pulling her close he smoothed her hair consolingly, then raised his own eyes. His mouth tightened to grimness as he gazed out over the smoking ruins far below. Blinding destruction still lanced downward in the distance, probing and roaring in an apocalyptic nightmare. The colony was savagely put to death as he watched in helpless fury.

Phaela moaned against his chest, deep in shock.

Coming to his feet at last, he bent and swung her limp body up, cradling her gently. Surmising that the danger lay in the open, he turned his back on the devastation, heading deeper into the hills.



Thoas knelt beside a narrow stream and brought water to his lips with cupped hands. Shaking his fingers lightly, he pressed their cool dampness over Phaela's hot cheeks and forehead. She sat listless at his side as he drank again, refusing the water for herself. Wiping his hands on his thighs, he pushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. Suddenly, she buried her face in her hands and wept, great wracking sobs torn from deep within. He held her close and rocked her like a child. "Let it out. You can't let them go until you've mourned them. Let it all out," he murmured. After a while she sat erect and rubbed at her eyes. He captured her wrists gently. "Don't do that." With a corner of her robe, he dabbed clumsily at her face. Phaela attempted to smile, but with little success. "We've got to find others," he said. "Where would we be most likely to locate them?"

"Out here, I would imagine." She was calmer now. "Some of the colonists elected to live in the forest, disliking the press of city life. They're scattered, but if they're still alive they'll be out here - somewhere."

"And the survivors from the city? Do you think they'll head this way?"

She stared at him. "What survivors, Emissary? The Jerraans are notoriously thorough. There are no survivors. No one could have lived through that." She gestured behind them.

Thoas rose, helping her up. "We won't get anywhere sitting here. Let's head farther into the forest. Hopefully, that's what others will do."

They walked close together, drawing mutual strength from nearness. She had not once alluded to her condition, nor shown any sign of weakness or fatigue, but he was worried. Knowing the magnitude of the shock to which she had been subjected, the depth of her grief and desolation, he needed no experts to tell him that her pregnancy might be adversely affected. More and more, he felt drawn to her, attracted by her beauty, courage and intelligence.

They stumbled across the first bodies before they'd gone much further. Both were male, cut down by some weapon that neither recognized, something that seemed to be able to slice through flesh and bone like a scythe through ripe grain stalks. He began to regret his own lack of defense.

They went on, finding increasing evidence that the enemy had gone before them.

The dismembered corpses of men, women, even an occasional child littered their way.

Oppressed by a rising foreboding, Thoas began to move more cautiously, taking pains to keep as well hidden as possible. When he heard faint sounds from directly ahead, he put a hand over Phaela's mouth to prevent her instinctive shout. Then, keeping her close beside, he slipped from tree to tree until he reached the edge of a large clearing. A knot of terrified Parans had been herded into its center. At intervals around them were stationed ice-pale Jerraan soldiers, their unfamiliar weapons trained on pathetically distraught and hapless captives.

From the opposite side of the open area, a small cadre emerged, led by an officer of some rank. He addressed the nearest guard in Jerraani.

Suddenly a young male prisoner, infuriated by something the officer had said, threw himself at the man, screaming in inarticulate fury. He was instantly sliced nearly in half by an invisible beam, his blood staining the pale grass with purple.

Phaela gasped, her nails digging painfully into Thoas' palm.

The Jerraan stepped back, calling an order to the squad. With a detachment as icy as their coloring, they and the guards slaughtered the helpless prisoners.

It was over in a heartbeat, as a hideous stench rose on the light breeze, a reek of life's fluids and death. It had happened so quickly that Thoas had not been able to turn away, nor to cover Phaela's horrified gaze. He struggled to hold her as she finally pulled away, vomiting with terrible force. Numb with horror, he was unable to move for some time, watching almost in a trance as the soldiers marched from the desecrated glade.

Presently, when he'd shaken it off, he whispered, "We've got to get away from here."

Receiving no answer, he turned to Phaela, who sat motionless, her face blank.

He touched her arm gently. "Come on. We'll find others, get in touch with my ship." He touched his communicator for re-assurance he didn't feel. "Come on. . . ."



She spoke through his words, her voice distant and flat, a mechanical drone.

“There are no others. That’s what the Jerraan commander was telling his troops. I told you how efficient they are. That group in the clearing was the last remnant. Paraisa is dead. The tyranny has subdued its rebel element for all time.”

“Phaela. . . .”

“All gone. There is nothing left but the ashes of our hopes.”

He pulled her up to face him. “We’re still here, aren’t we? So much for Jerraan efficiency. If we were overlooked, there’s every possibility that others were.” He shook her, gently. “You can’t give up now. For your sake, as well as the baby’s, you’ve got to keep going. This is your world, not mine. Don’t expect me to fend for both of us. I need your help.”

She raised her eyes, her expression bleak and stony. “Is that your argument, where there’s life there’s hope? A cliché? The little pep talk really wasn’t necessary, Emissary. My people aren’t prone to suicidal tendencies. I have no intention of giving up.” She turned away, motioning toward the east. “There are caves in that direction. If we’re to have any chance at all, we’ll need shelter and a defensible position.”

She started to walk, not even glancing back to see whether he followed. Thoas stared for a moment, amazed by the sudden transformation, then, giving himself a firm mental shake, rushed to catch up.

A week had passed without any sign of fellow survivors, although Thoas had ranged widely in their search. Now, he was settled back against their cave’s wall, absently braiding a bowstring from thin strips of sun-cured hide. They’d finished an evening meal, fruit and meat roasted over the small fire. Game had proved easy to catch at first, but had become wary of snares, so that they had switched to crude spears and bows and arrows.

Phaela knelt at the far side of the fire, deftly chipping at flint-like stone destined to provide a new spearhead. Holding it up in the flickering light, she caught his eye, and laughed musically, a throbbing sound from deep within that had been stilled far too long. “Being a historian has its good side,” she commented. “This particular point was used quite effectively during our last ice. Do you need more arrowheads?” She tossed the finished point to him.

“No, I’ve still several.” He fingered the sharpened stone admiringly. “If I’m not careless, they should last awhile.”

She rose to fetch more firewood from a stack near the back of the cave. He returned to plaiting, but looked up sharply as the wood clattered to the stony floor. Phaela was bending over, her breath coming in ragged bursts. On his feet at once, he reached her in a few hurried steps. She sagged against him, her face pale in the firelight.

Catching her up in his arms he carried her to the bed of soft mosses and leaves at the cave’s far wall. As he laid her down carefully, his mind raced over half-forgotten scraps of Fleet first-aid training, and Emissary Generalist classes required of all. He wished desperately he could remember more, or that he’d been more alert during the droning recitals. Pushing up his sleeves, he brought the rude clay container of drinking water closer and knelt beside her. “I don’t know much about this,” he confessed miserably.

She tried to smile reassuringly, grimaced instead as the contractions swept across again, hard. “For now, just hold my hand. I need something to grip, so that I can bear down.” A moan escaped as she took the proffered fingers and squeezed. Again the rhythmic pain subsided. “There should be time,” she gasped. “When the final push comes, you’ll have to help. Guide it by supporting the head. As soon as it’s born, lay it on my stomach while you deliver the afterbirth.” She writhed, moaning more loudly. “Maybe not as much time as I thought -- then you tie the cord -- tightly -- about an inch from the navel. Tie it again about an inch above that, then cut between the two. Got it?” Her eyes searched his, crinkling slightly as she read deep concern, and perhaps fear. “Don’t worry. I’m quite healthy, and there shouldn’t be complications.”

“Complications?”

“Have I scared you?” She paused and gasped as another pain struck. “We’re a robust people, we Parans.



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Childbirth is a simple procedure for us.”

He answered with more courage than he felt. “If it’s as easy as all that, I think we’ll manage.” She suddenly clutched at his hand with such force that he almost feared his fingers broken, as a scream was torn from her. Looking down, he saw that things were preceeding too rapidly for further musing.

He handed her a stout length of firewood to grip and moved down into position.

Long moments passed as he helplessly watched her slim body violently contorted by wave after wave of agony. When at last the head appeared in a rush of purple blood, instinct took over and he moved with quiet competency, gently placing the tiny squirming body on her abdomen as he performed the necessary tasks.

At her whispered suggestion, he ripped two long strips from her robe, wetting one to wash the baby, then using the other as a makeshift blanket to wrap it.

Cradling the small creature clumsily, but with care, he placed it in Phaela’s arms and finished cleaning up.

When he returned a few moments later with clean water and his freshly rinsed uniform tunic over one arm, Phaela had pulled herself up to a semi-reclining position and was holding the infant to her breast, where it nursed contentedly. He sat down beside them, exhausted but spellbound.

“Well, Doctor,” she joked weakly, “mother and child are coming along very nicely, all things considered.” She traced the tiny lavender nose with a fingertip. Seeming to well up from deep within her, a beautiful melody now burst from her lips, a fluttering trill which began softly and grew into a tapestry of bell-like notes, woven into a music which reminded Thoas of the swirling dance of many birds singing together. It was a lullaby, an anthem, a canticle, all mingled in harmony so achingly beautiful that he was struck into silence until it ended. As her joy subsided once more, it became the quiet almost unconscious trilling he remembered having heard once before.

He leaned closer to examine the delicate miniature infant features now lost in slumber. “A girl -- let’s hope that she’ll grow to be as lovely as her mother.”

A shadow flitted over Phaela’s face, and the gentle music stopped abruptly. “My father would have been so happy. He liked girls, fortunately.” She studied the sleeping infant, tears glittering like tiny dew drops on her long lashes. “It would break the tradition, I know, but I’ve decided to call her Ria, rather than Thassa. Tradition just doesn’t seem too important anymore.”

He rose reluctantly. “You ladies will be more comfortable by yourselves. I’ll make a bed for myself over there.”

“I’ll miss your warm back, Emissary.”

He leaned down to give the diminutive chin a chuck. “My name’s not Emissary. It’s Thoas.”

“Thoas,” she conceded sleepily. “Good night, Thoas.”

Returning to their cave after a successful afternoon’s hunt, Thoas came upon Phaela at the edge of the small creek which also served as their water supply. She’d just washed her hair and was combing the still-damp locks gracefully with spread fingers. The baby lay asleep nearby on a fur blanket pieced from the skins of small animals. He paused, pleased by the peaceful scene. Slim and lithe again in the remnants of her old robe, Phaela had become, if anything, more ethereal in the past weeks. Shaking his head at the vagaries that had forced a carefully nurtured conservative into exile with such a beautiful woman -- and all the temptation induced thereby -- he admitted that he could have done worse.

There wasn’t much chance at rescue, though he kept careful watch on his small communicator, and kept it safe from potential danger. The Jerraans weren’t likely to care anymore about fate of the ruined world, and probably, to be brutally honest, neither would his own Coalition. The Venture? His contact-vessel? Long overdue! Either that, or he’d missed vital signals during periods of hunt, which were increasing in scope and time of late.

She glanced upward, sensing his presence. “Hello! You’ve had good hunting, I see.”

“Good enough.” He held up a string of vaguely rabbit-like carcasses, and splashed across the shallow



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water to Phaela and the infant.

She stooped to pick up the drowsing infant, her eyes darkened with concern.

“Still worried?”

“She sleeps so much -- and hardly ever cries.” She raised her eyes to his. “This morning she wouldn’t nurse for more than a few minutes. Thoas, I’m frightened.”

He squeezed her hand briefly. “Don’t be. You said yourself that premature births can cause problems the first few weeks. She’s got quite a bit of growing to catch up on.” As she gathered up the small bundle, he was painfully jolted in noting that the diminutive features did seem alarmingly pale and shrunken.

Summoning up a false smile, he met her gaze. “Let’s go. I’m hungry enough to eat these things raw, almost.”

Later, after tossing the last fragments of their dinner into the flickering fire, Thoas wiped his greasy hands on dirt-stained trousers. “All right, all right. I’ll get around to my laundry soon.” He noted her disapproval. The pants and silver shirt were pretty grubby, the inevitable result of continuous wear. He’d tried to keep up some standard of personal neatness, but the urgency of day-to-day survival, coupled with lack of both privacy and soap, had made it difficult. The net effect was somewhat gamey.

Phaela set aside the shallow bowl in which she’d rinsed her own hands, as he wondered silently at her ability to remain, if not perfectly tidy, at least far less unkempt than himself. “I’ll see if Ria is in the mood for supper,” she said, preparing to get up.

He waved her down. “I’ll bring her. Rest, and we’ll visit. We haven’t seen much of each other today.” He went to where the baby lay on the soft mosses. Leaning down, he reached for the infant, but drew back suddenly, his frame rigid.

Behind him, Phaela scrambled to her feet. “What is it? What’s wrong?” she pleaded, her voice edged with panic.

He jerked off the covering blanket, and, with controlled strength, began exerting pressure on the tiny chest, using only his thumbs. Concentrating desperately, he worked over the still form, willing it to breathe again.

After a small eternity, his face soaked with perspiration and tears, he sat back on his heels, hands limp between his knees. Pushing past him, she picked Ria up and cradled her close, her features pallid with weeping.

Thoas became gradually aware that Phaela still held the body tightly, rocking it to and fro, tears streaming. Moving with difficulty, he knelt beside her, his voice painfully hushed. “Give her to me, now. I’ll take care of her please.”

Eyes slowly focusing on his face, she answered sadly, “No, Thoas. I’ll hold her. You -- get things ready. I can’t let her go. Not yet.”

By the cold light of the stars, he scraped out a pathetically small grave a short distance from the cave. When he returned, Phaela stood at the entrance, wearing a short shift she’d improvised from extra hides he’d tanned. The baby was in her arms, wrapped in the ragged remains of her old green robe, its tiny, sweet face hidden. They walked down together.

Afterward, she stared at the night sky, pale but dry-eyed. “They’ve taken it all now,” she mused stonily, “my family, my home, my past -- and now my future.” Her hand sought his in the dark, and tightened. “You understand. The pain is in you, too.”

And it was! Celin had been so right. Biology had nothing to do with fathering.

He, too, had lost a child!

They slept that night huddled close together, soundly exhausted.

Weeks passed in their patch of solitude, weeks in which Phaela had proved that, like Thoas, she was a survivor. She’d mourned deeply and sincerely, but in time had put her mourning aside, and begun the slow return to living. Searching for ways to assuage her grief, to busy her hands and mind, he’d taught her to use



® a bow, and to track. Today she was out alone, trying her new-found skills. He decided to take advantage of her absence. A half-hour's walk from the cave, he'd once chanced upon a secluded glen with a small lake fed by an underground spring. Having had a boyish yen to swim in it, he headed there now, to get himself and his clothes really clean for the first time since the disaster.

The pool, though very deep, was crystal-clear and just short of icy. Thoas sat down at its edge, pulling off the worn boots, then stripping off shirt and torn trousers, tossing them into the shallows to soak. The slight breeze caressed his skin as he climbed to a small rise above the lake and dove in. He emerged spluttering and gasping from the shock of icy water, and began swimming across the lake's length with long, smooth strokes, accustoming himself to the temperature. Its chill began to feel unbearably good, and the tenseness and strain of past weeks drained away. He was ten years old again, swimming in his grandfather's farm pond.

Familiar bubbling laughter caused him to turn his head toward shore. Phaela stood there, bow in hand, smiling at him. Suddenly aware of the circumstances, he slipped beneath the surface until only his head and arms were visible, treading water to stay afloat.

"You were right, Thoas," she shouted happily. "A walk in the woods does wonders for the spirit!" She picked her way down to water's edge. "It's hard to stay pessimistic and sad about life when it's all about you, vibrant and growing." Laying down her bow and quiver, she began to unlace the shoulder of her single garment.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" he yelled.

She glanced up. "Joining you, of course. It looks delicious!"

"But I -- you can't!"

Her eyes sparkled in sudden pique. "Well, if you don't want my company, you have only to say so!" She planted fists on her lovely hips, oblivious to the fact that the loosened shift was slipping dangerously.

He watched its progress with natural interest and foreboding. "I didn't mean that, it's just -- I'm not dressed!"

She laughed again, and teased. "Do Emissaries usually swim fully clothed?"

"They don't make swimming nude a practice, especially with the opposite sex."

"Oh fuss. Sounds backward to me." She undid the lacings and let the skin tunic fall. Stepping lithely from it, she kicked it gracefully aside. "We Parans have far more sensible attitudes. Brace yourself, Emissary. I'm coming in."

Unnerved by her boldness -- really a measure of my own conditioning, he told himself -- and her incredible beauty, he was unable to summon up further objections. She walked in, pausing when the water reached above her waist, then began to swim toward him. A lazy smile spread slowly over his face. He shrugged. What else could he do?

The air was aglow with afternoon heat when they emerged. Phaela threw herself down on a grassy spot, shaking the wetness from her vibrant hair. He watched, captivated.

She looked up with an impish grin. "You've forgotten your precious nudity."

He grinned back, still self-conscious about crude attempts to break old patterns. "I am trained to adapt to circumstances." He seated himself beside her.

She lay back and stretched luxuriously, an action he found immensely gratifying. He turned to face her, propping himself up on one elbow, unable to tear eyes away.

Her own eyes half-closed. "Such an obtuse human," she murmured after a bit. "Obtuse -- or cold!"

Surprised, he looked down at her. "I don't understand."

Her lips curved sensuously. "A Paran male would be carved from marble to ignore such a blatant invitation."

Thoas was at that moment anything but stone. He felt, in fact, more like a figure molded of candlewax, melting slowly over low flames. He bent closer. She raised her head slightly, offering her mouth. Smothering a groan, he crushed her to him, greedy for the taste of her, hands taking firm possession.



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Flames leaped higher, enveloping them.

What had been late summer was fast slipping into glorious autumn, lit with incandescent colors. They walked hand in hand among the brightening trees immersed in the bittersweet beauty of the season.

Thoas entranced by the deep cloudless blue of the sky was brought back to himself with a jerk as Phaela tugged at his wrist like a playful kitten. "Come on. Let's swim," she pleaded, suddenly childlike.

"You go for a swim," he laughed, pulling free. "The water's too cold for me."

She grimaced in mock disgust. "Poor Emissary. Your skin's too thin. All right then, let's go back to the cave and eat. I'm starving." She turned back the way they'd come.

Instead of following, he flopped to the ground, reached out and grabbed one slender ankle, tripping her so that she sprawled beside him, pale hair flying. "I'm not hungry, and I don't want to go back to the cave," he grinned. "Poor Paran. Your skin's too thick." He tickled her unmercifully, yanking her closer when she tried to break free.

Pulling away at last, she struggled to a sitting position, pushing hair back in a gesture of irritation. "This, Emissary, is conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman."

Frowning: "I'm no longer an officer, nor, in this situation, a gentleman."

Phaela had managed to guide their conversations from the subject uppermost to Thoas' mind, but she knew that inevitably it would come. "This situation?" she joked.

"On Earth, Adam and Eve were the mythical first man and woman," he explained, putting his arms about her. "There's a very old bit of doggerel -- 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'" She seemed suddenly remote. "Adam and Eve? We called our progenitors Galada and Thiel."

"We'll be found, Phae. Believe me. And when we do we'll be properly wed and. . . ." He released her and leaned back against a convenient tree, subdued by the puzzling change in her manner. He paused before speaking again. "Phae? What's wrong?"

"Sorry, Thoas. I was just remembering that the other side of creation is destruction," she answered, not quite truthfully. "The Da'hon, the end of the world." She looked over at him. "A tale used to frighten naughty children - but the Da'hon has come to Paraisa," she frowned bitterly, "and there will be no more children."

Feeling a little helpless, he remained silent, stroking her shoulder consolingly. Suddenly, she sat up straighter, her face aglow. "I'm such a fool! I've been mourning the death around us -- but Paraisa isn't dead! There are several thousand of us alive, scattered about the Coalition. If we could all return, we'd rebuild, start over again!"

"And the Jerraans?"

"If the Coalition will accept us as an outpost colony, we'll be protected, and free to grow again!"

"The Coalition knows nothing of this," he reminded her gently. "And we have no way of informing them."

"But you continue to reassure me that we'll be found!"

He scowled. "Perhaps I was wrong. Give it up, Phae. You're tormenting yourself with long-shots, false hopes."

"Emissaries have short memories, I see. 'Where there's life, there's hope,' remember?" She smiled at him with a fond patience.

He changed the subject, drawing her close. "I don't want to go back," and they kissed slowly, deeply -- cementing a relationship bounded by lonely circumstances.

It was dark when they returned to the cave. Phaela had begun to hum the gentle melody he'd come to identify with her happier feelings. The song had never failed to bring him pleasure, and he'd once asked about it, only to be rewarded with a blank stare.

"Name? How can such a thing have name? Don't women of your race sing unconsciously when happy?"

"Some do, but not like you. Our songs have words, structure, melody, and they are greatly varied. Both men and women sing."



She had looked thoughtful. “How strange. I’d never really thought about it. The music comes from inside me, as part of my instinctive nature. There are no words, no set pattern, no one structured it. It just is. When I’m happy and content, it simply wells up within. Since all Paran women have this -- this gift, I hadn’t considered that maybe others don’t. I didn’t think of it as a -- a gift ‘til now, but rather a part of natural life.”

Now, moving about the cave, preparing the evening meal, she’d begun to hum again, and he recognized that she was well content. For that matter, so was he!

When he went to the cavern’s rear to get his jacket against the cooling air, he accidentally knocked off his communicator, which was lying atop it. Stooping to retrieve it, he froze, heart pounding. The instrument had begun to beep frantically. He flipped it open, fumbled at it, and finally succeeded in attaching to the signal.

