

BABE IN THE WOODS

by Varya Kartishai

I.

He glanced at the archaic wall clock. As he had thought, a quarter hour remained before his first appointment. Lifting the crimson robe of office from the rack, he slipped his arms into the sleeves and pinned the high collar closed with the golden healing serpent brooch. Everything seemed as usual, until he noticed the sealed official envelope in the day box. The last had been nearly six months ago, and he had hoped there would be no more. He smoothed his bush of graying hair, picked up the bronze paper knife from the desk and carefully slit the envelope open, leaving the wax seal intact. Unpending it, he watched the thin slip of paper drift to the desktop - this time the number on it was 5. He tugged at his regulation mustache, then forced himself to pick up the daybook and look over the morning schedule. Two couples with the right qualifications - young, healthy and reasonably intelligent - would be here for

their antifertility prescriptions. He sat down, swiveled out the keypad and typed a name; as the dispensing screen came up, he replaced "Nonbryo" with "placebo" and repeated the sequence. Neither couple would suspect a problem for a month or two. At times like this he hated his profession. A tone signaled the first appointment - the rest could wait until morning hours were over.

II.

Seven weeks passed; as frost time turned to greenseason, it became more difficult for Lura to ignore the morning bouts of nausea and the swelling of her abdomen. When she was a child she had overheard her mother speaking to a neighbor about the problems she had had when she was pregnant. This paralleled every detail she could remember. "I haven't missed one dose of Nonbryo, how could it have happened?" They had never applied for a baby permit; It had seemed futile to start a baby when the government could claim it. What would the authorities do to her when they found out? The rumor was that they didn't take babies over a month old; if they could keep it hidden long enough, maybe they could apply for a permit after the fact. Pushing back her fears, she told herself firmly, "I'll tell Keren; maybe we can work out a way to keep it. I won't leave the house when it really starts to show." She patted the

slight bulge affectionately. "We'll manage something, little guy."

The light striking through the glass block walls indicated late afternoon. The front door slid open and closed with a soft hiss; Keren must be home. "Ker? I'm in the bathplace." He came in smiling, but as he crossed the tiled floor he looked at her sharply, "Lura, are you gaining weight?"

She had forgotten that the thin fabric of her house robe revealed the added roundness at her waist. "Not exactly; I think we're going to have another family member soon."

He paled, so that the freckles stood out against his fair skin; fear sharpened his tone, "How could you be so careless? We have no permit; you know what'll happen to it."

"It wasn't my fault." She reached into the med cabinet and pulled out the pillbox, "Look, I haven't missed a dose."

"Let me see those pills; maybe he gave you the wrong ones." He took one from its compartment and examined it. "They look the same, but didn't the last prescription have a name stamped on each pill?"

"Yes ..." she looked at the box, frowning.

"These don't. How long have you known about the baby?"

"I've been suspecting it for over a month, but I wasn't sure till now."

"The physician couldn't have made a mistake, it's done automatically. Can we go into the lounge; we have to talk."

As they settled on the easiest, Keren took her hand. He said nothing for a few minutes, then the words came tumbling out, "I think we have a big problem ... there's a rumor at work that they're about to make prototypes of a new spybot, and they'll need embryos to man them."

"No," she pulled her hand away, her voice strident, "not my baby ... I won't let them!"

"Keep your voice down, we don't want the neighbors to hear. It's going to be hard to hide ... they know where we live and when to expect the birth."

"I'll go stay with my family."

"They'll have both our families in the record." He sat, his eyes screwed nearly shut with thinking, as the light began to dim into sunset. Lura was ready to scream with frustration, when he finally said, "Wait ... there's Uncle Chal."

"Who? You never mentioned him before."

"You've never met him. He's not really my uncle, but I always felt close to him, and after my father died, he kind of filled in. He's a primitivist - my family was never comfortable with him. Then, after we got engaged I hardly saw him. He lives way out in the hills, and I was spending all my

spare time with you ... why don't we take a chance and go up there?"

"He didn't even come to our wedding!"

"Maybe he didn't get the invitation; he doesn't come into town much."

"You can't just show up at his door with a strange pregnant woman and ask him to take us in. At least call him first!"

"He doesn't have a telecell. Anyway, ours might be monitored."

She looked around nervously, half expecting to see an observer in the room, then persisted, "There must be some other way."

"It's the only way I can think of for us to keep this baby. It would just mean living rough for a few months."

Tears welled from her eyes as she whispered, "I want my baby."

"Then it's settled. After we have some dinner, you pack the kind of stuff you would take for a camping trip, and some supplies. When it gets darker, we'll go up there and beg for his help."

"Let me get some clothes on, then I'll put dinner in the warmer."

"I'll do it." He took two meal packs from the freezer, and began to set the table.

They ate automatically, hardly noticing what they were eating, threw the utensils into the disposer, then Keren followed Lura to the bedroom and stood watching her pack.

"I'll come back after I get you there safely, and if anyone asks, I'll say we had a fight and I don't know where you are."

She looked at him in sudden realization, "You aren't going to stay with me!"

"I'll visit as much as I can. If we both disappear, they'll start looking right away."

"What will I do about a physician for when the baby comes? I don't know how to have it. Ker, I'm scared."

"Where will you get a physician that isn't part of the government?" He tried to project a confidence he didn't feel, "Maybe Uncle Chal will know a woman up there that can help you, or maybe I can bring your mother. It'll be all right."

III.

Keren flew the hovercar without lights until they were clear of the city, steering by the gleaming patterns below. When they were over the dark fields that stretched beyond the city limits, he finally lit the running beam. Lura hadn't spoken since they took off, now she asked, "How much farther?"

"We should be there in about twenty minutes."

"What if he isn't there? What if he doesn't want me to stay?"

"Let's worry about that when we get there." He turned his full attention to finding the tiny landing field. As he cautiously skirted a low hill, he saw what he had been looking for - a dark blotch surrounded by reflectors, and set the car down. A low building with a few of its windows dimly lighted was just visible at the end of a dark path that led away from the field.

"Looks like he's home, come on." Keren helped Lura out of the car. She hung back, feeling as though the hovercar was the last vestige of home. He picked up her small suitcase and the carryall she had filled with supplies, and started toward the building. He was halfway to the door by the time she worked up the courage to follow him. Before he could knock it flew open; a tall, thin man in late middle age, his graying hair pulled back into a braid, stood there.

"Keren, it's been a long time ... who's your pretty friend?"

"Uncle Chal, this is my wife, Lura. I'm sorry to barge in on you like this; we're in a lot of trouble."

"Considering the time of night, I'm not surprised. Come in, boy."

"Thanks."

He stood back as they entered, then closed the door. A plain wooden table holding a lighted oil lamp stood in the center of the room. He pulled out two of the four chairs that ringed it, and ordered in a soft voice, "Now, sit down and tell me about it."

They sat; Keren hesitated, chewed his lower lip, and finally blurted out, "I don't know how to ask ... I was hoping ... could Lura stay here for a while?"

"Did you rob a bank, or commit murder?"

"Nothing like that. Lura's being made to have a baby. We're afraid they'll take it."

The older man looked grim, "Another move by our 'enlightened' government. When do you expect the birth?"

"In about seven months. I don't know where else to go." His voice cracked; he was near tears. Lura had been weeping silently since they sat down.

"I can't offer you much besides shelter ... there isn't even power laid on. But even if you weren't the nearest thing I ever had to a son, I wouldn't turn out your wife and baby. I gather you plan to go back alone."

"I thought I ought to act normally as long as I could get away with it ... if anyone asks, I was going to say we had a fight."

"That should do until we can think of something better. I'll set up a cot in the storage shed. There isn't much in the way of entertainment, but I've got plenty of books."

Lura stared at him, surprised, "Do you mean paper books? I've never seen one, except in exhibits."

"I find I like holding what I read; maybe you'll get used to it." Turning to Keren he said firmly, "O.K., son, I'll take care of your lady. Get on your way before they notice you're gone."

Keren held Lura close for a moment, then in a voice choked with emotion muttered, "Uncle Chal, I'll always be grateful."

"Just be careful, son, and try not to worry too much. I hate that baby thing more than anything else our so-called government has done lately."

IV.

Lura woke to the cheerful sound of a bird chirping just outside her window. Her eyes were swollen from crying herself to sleep. Hoping Chal wouldn't notice, she threw back the blanket, pulled on her clothes and boots and crossed the rough wooden floor into the other room. Chal was doing something at a small cooking unit. An open flame flickered under a wide shallow pan; she smelled hot oil and there was a strong odor of coffee.

He turned, smiling, "Good morning, did you sleep well?"

She had started to answer when morning nausea struck.

Panic-stricken, she clapped a hand over her mouth and looked wildly around for the sanitary facilities.

"Through there," he pointed to a door next to the door of the shed where she had slept,

She was barely in time. Thankful that there was running water, she washed at the small basin and used the clean towel she found on a shelf. Pulling a comb from her shirt pocket, she tried to deal with the tangles of her wavy blonde hair, unset the night before. She finally decided that it was going to be too much to manage every morning, smoothed out the worst of it, and braided it to hang down her back like Chal's. He made no comment when she reappeared - just pulled out a chair for her, then set down a plateful of scrambled eggs and hot biscuits, very different from her usual bowl of cold cereal and soymilk. She was surprised to find her appetite had returned, and she managed to finish everything, settling the last of the nausea with a cup of strong coffee.

"That was really good, thank you ... I don't know what to call you."

"Uncle Chal will do fine."

"I hadn't been eating much at home. Where do you get fresh eggs ... the supplies I brought are all dried and powdered things."

"My neighbor, Mrs. Harris, raises chickens. Your supplies will work fine with fresh food. Now, I have to take care of a few things this morning. Will you be all right if I leave you on your own? You can go for a walk if you stay near the cabin, but don't talk to any neighbors till we work up an explanation for you."

"I brought yarn and needles; I was going to knit some things for the baby."

He nodded approvingly, "Traditional ... I like it."

She got up to carry her plate and cup to the disposer, but stopped, confused ... there was no power. "How do you dispose of the dishes?"

He chuckled, "Just set them on the counter over there. I'll wash them in hot water when I get back. Things here'll take a little getting used to."

"I'll learn."

"Good. See you in a few hours."

He picked up a pack and went out. As the door of the cabin closed behind him, the room suddenly felt very empty. Lura longed to call her mother, but it might be months before she could talk to her again, and she had no idea when she would see

Keren. Tears began to well up in her eyes, then she got control of herself - self-pity wasn't going to help her or the baby. She had to keep her mind and hands occupied ... the dishes needed washing, but Uncle Chal had mentioned hot water and the tiny bathroom basin had only cold. He probably heated it on the cooking unit, but she was a little afraid of using an open flame. Her eyes moved to the neatly made up couch in the corner where Uncle Chal must have slept. At least she could pull her own bedding straight. As she took hold of the slightly rough sheets, the pleasant herbal scent that rose from them seemed to lift her spirits. She did the best she could, then, deciding to unpack the supplies she had brought, dragged the heavy sack into the main room. Three cupboards over the counter where she had left the dirty dishes looked promising, but the first two were filled with unlabeled tins and glass jars, neatly stacked. The third cupboard had only a few tin cups and what were probably cooking utensils in it, but it was much shallower than the other two. None of the bags or boxes in her sack would fit on the narrow shelves. A curious humming sound seemed to be coming from the wall behind the shelves. There was no power, so it must be some sort of insect invasion. Nervously, she closed the cupboard and left the sack where it lay. When Uncle Chal came back, she would ask him where to put the supplies. A ray of sunlight striking through the front

window made a pattern of squares on the wooden floor, and seemed to invite her outside. There was a comfortable-looking bench by the door - a good place to sit and knit. She got out her knitting bag, and after wrestling for a time with the complicated pattern she had chosen for a small synthasilk blanket, the last of her low mood dispersed. She had made some progress when a twig cracked on the path; Uncle Chal was standing only a few feet away, a silvery fish dangling on a string from one hand. The sun brought out highlights of dark blue and crimson on his ebony skin ... he looked like part of the woods.

"Time for lunch."

"Where did you get that fish?"

"There's a stream not too far from here. Come on in and we'll cook it."

"Uncle Chal, I'm ashamed to tell you, I've never cooked."

"Just watch what I do, It won't take you long." He pushed open the door, and stopped in mid-stride when his eyes fell on the bulging sack of supplies. "We'll have to store those in your shed till I use up a few things."

"The cupboards were full ... and I heard buzzing when I opened the shallow one, like there were insects behind it."

"I'll check it out." He filled a kettle of water at the basin, lit the cook unit and set it to heat, then laid the fish

on the counter and expertly gutted and scaled it. Pouring the hot water into a metal pan, he stirred a mesh basket full of soap chips through it, producing foamy bubbles, then placed the morning's dishes to soak while the fish joined a little chopped bacon in a frying pan.

Lura watched, fascinated. The smell of bacon woke her appetite and between the two of them they finished the fish, with warmed-up biscuits and mugs of tea. She relaxed and was beginning to feel a little drowsy, when Uncle Chal leaned back in his chair and asked, "How do you feel about our government?"

She looked up at him wide-eyed. The unexpected question brought a flood of opinions pouring into her mind. Her face flushed, and she found herself suddenly articulate, "I've never even seen anybody from the government, and it wasn't something I thought about before, but now ... people ought to be able to have babies if they want to without asking for permission; it's inhuman to take them away to run those horrible machines. But even if the whole government is rotten, we can't do anything, they have that 'term for life'. My father says that when he was a boy, politicians served a limited term, and people used to choose them by voting. I wish it was like that now ... I'm really feeling pushed around."

"You should be ... your father is right - years ago people had a vote. You used the word 'inhuman'. Would it surprise you to know that the national government isn't run by humans?"

She stared at him, wondering uneasily if living alone had affected his mind, "How could that be, what else is there?"

"Have you ever thought there might be life on other planets?"

"I didn't think any of the other planets in our system supported life."

He heard a trace of agitation in her voice, and cut the discussion short, "They don't; don't worry about it. You're looking a little tired; all this must be quite a strain for you. Why don't you take a little nap while I take care of the dishes? I'll call you in an hour or so."

"I should really help you, but I am tired." She went into the shed, kicked off her shoes, and lay down on the cot.

A little while later, Chal glanced in on Lura - she was breathing evenly. He closed the shed door and quietly walked to the shallow cupboard. Swinging the shelves to one side, a niche at the back revealed a buzzing com with a touch pad. Pressing the "on" key, he spoke softly into the grille, "I have a guest, I won't be able to use this unit for a while ... I'll contact you at the alternate location soon." He turned off the unit and replaced the shelves, then whirled as he heard the

creak of the shed door. Lura was standing there, "I'm sorry if I startled you, I heard your voice, and thought maybe Keren had come back."

"Just talking to myself. You do that when you live alone. Do you feel a little more rested?"

"Yes, thanks."

"How about a game of chess? I don't often get anyone to play with."

"What is chess?"

"A game played on a board ... let me show you." He reached under the sofa and pulled out a board marked off in small red and black squares and a bag of oddly shaped wooden pieces. Setting the board on the table, he laid out the pieces, describing the ancient methods of warfare that had inspired the game.

Lura was fascinated ... she had never played a game that didn't involve a vid before. By the time she began to grasp the names of the pieces and the simpler strategy, the sun was setting and hunger pangs indicated that dinner was overdue. When they had cleared away the game, Chal showed her how to use the cooker to heat two of the freeze-dry meal packs she had brought. It was quicker, but the meal tasted dull after the fresh food she had been eating.

"Watch yourself, Lura", she thought, "you could get used to this primitive life."

V.

Six months had gone by since her arrival, and life in the cabin had gradually settled into a routine. For the first few weeks, Lura had spent her mornings wandering the narrow trails that threaded the woods. The birds and small animals gradually became used to her, and she would watch them, fascinated - she had never been so close to nature before. But as her body continued to swell, together with her ankles, her taste for exploration lessened, and she spent most afternoons sitting on the bench in front of the cabin, reading or knitting. There had been no visit from Keren yet, and Lura tried not to dwell on the possibility that he might be in trouble with the authorities. When she managed to subdue that, worries about getting the baby born would rise to the surface. The paper books in the cabin spoke about a world she had never experienced. It seemed that in the past women had had babies successfully without modern technology. Lura became convinced that Chal's neighbor, Mrs. Harris of the chickens, would know about it, but her cabin was over a mile away, and Lura didn't think she could walk so far.

She had learned to manage much of the cabin's primitive housekeeping equipment. There was no fresher, and driven by embarrassment at the thought of Chal taking care of her laundry, she began her domestic efforts with the machine he had contrived to wash clothes. You rotated a water and soap-filled tub with a hand crank, then drained the tub and refilled it with clear water for rinsing. Lura gradually came to enjoy wringing out the clean clothes and draping them to dry over a rope stretched taut between the cabin and a tree. As she took over the chores, Chal was free to spend more time in the woods. It was a small return for the refuge he had provided, and she found that as long as her hands were busy, she could keep from thinking about Keren. Nights were something else; dreaming, she would reach out to him, and wake suddenly, in tears.

One evening, towards dinnertime, Lura sat by the door watching as Chal silently appeared out of the woods. She had gotten up to greet him when the hum of a hovercar motor became audible, followed by the sound of footsteps on the path. Keren appeared, carrying a knapsack.

Lura jumped up and hurried clumsily toward him. He took her in his arms and held her tightly, "Lura, I've missed you so. I couldn't come sooner, I've been watched, and when I got home tonight, the house had been broken into and searched.

Chal interrupted; his voice tight, "Come inside, both of you. Were you followed here?"

"I checked the rear-viewer all the way; no sign of anybody."

Lura broke in, "Are you hungry, I made plenty of stew."

"You've learned to cook?"

She smiled, and put an extra plate on the table, but before they had finished eating, a beeping sound came from the wall of cupboards.

Chal pushed his plate aside, "That's a warning; I'll see about it." He hurried outside, and up the path to the hovercar. Lura and Keren followed him to the field, where they saw him examining the car minutely with a pocket light. After a few moments, he extracted a small object from behind the license plate, placed it on the ground and smashed it with a rock. He turned to them, "That was a locator; they didn't follow Keren because all they had to do was activate it. Lura, pack your things as fast as you can."

They hurried back inside. As Lura packed and Chal threw a few things for himself into a knapsack, Keren stood, frozen with guilt, "I shouldn't have come; I've put you in danger!"

"I was already doing something dangerous here. I have an escape route set up; you can come with me, or wait for the pursuit and hope the government forgives you."

Lura broke in, "No, not after coming this far!"

Chal nodded, threw open a closet door, and slid the back wall aside, revealing a dark opening. He gave Keren a hand torch and took Lura's small suitcase, "The ladder is a little steep. You two start down, I'll close up and follow."

"Where are we going," Keren stammered.

"Explanations later ... move."

Lura was already groping her way down, feeling for the narrow rungs with her feet; Keren followed with the torch. At the bottom was an earth-floored tunnel, just high enough to stand in without stooping. The light of Chal's torch showed little beside rough walls, as he arrived and pushed past them into the darkness. "Follow me, and be careful."

The damp air smelled earthy, but not unpleasant. As they moved ahead, Lura's foot slid on the earthen floor and she reached out to the wall for support, but recoiled ... it felt slimy. She wiped her fingers on a handkerchief, and wadded the soiled fabric into her pocket, not wanting to leave a trail. At regular intervals, heavy beams shored up the walls and ceiling. Lura counted five sets, then stopped counting. There was still no sound of pursuit, but she had a terrible sense of urgency. Finally, the tunnel ended in a door of wood planks. Chal knocked in a complicated pattern, and the door swung open on a small, square earthen-walled room. On the opposite wall, just touching the ground, was a shiny red circle about six feet

across, Chal waved them in, turned to close and bolt the door, then crossed to the circle and repeated his knock there. The circle moved to one side, filling the room with dazzling light. Chal walked confidently through the opening, and they stumbled after him, half-blinded. As their sight returned, they made out polished metal walls curving seamlessly around them. The light reflections made it difficult to gauge the size of the empty room they stood in. The red circle where they had entered had closed behind them and was indistinguishable from the rest of the surface except for its color; other colored circles were spaced at intervals.

Lura finally found her voice, "Where are we?"

"You could say we are in Police headquarters," Chal replied. They stared at him, bewildered.

Chal continued, "Lura, do you remember the night you first came? You got a little upset when we talked about Earth's government?"

"I remember you saying it wasn't human; and I thought to myself that living alone out here had warped your mind."

He grinned, "That's possible, but the government is still being run by aliens."

"You're serious," she gasped. "What do they want?"

"Minerals they don't have at home, talented engineers like Keren to design machines they can't build at home and a supply of intelligent baby brains to be wired into those machines."

Her face drained of color, and she instinctively crossed her arms over her abdomen to protect her unborn child. "How long has this been going on?"

"About thirty years ... I'm not sure. They started moving into the government about twenty-five years ago, replacing human politicians as fast as they could."

"How do you know?"

"People we had elected started behaving oddly. Some very repressive laws were passed with little opposition. Those who objected openly were jailed, and gradually all opposition stopped, along with the elections. Finally, a few of us realized that the bodies of the politicians in office contained something very different from the original."

"Did they kill the politicians and change themselves to look human," Lura managed to ask.

"Not exactly. If you can keep that queasy stomach of yours under control, I'll explain."

She nodded warily.

"They were wearing humans ... they had somehow worked their way inside and taken over the body completely - the only visible difference was in the eyes ... the pupil had

disappeared, and the whole eye became a dark, transparent lens."

Lura shuddered; Keren made an inarticulate noise.

"Are you kids okay?"

"We're fine," Keren managed to say. "Go on."

"There isn't much more to tell. They're called the Redon, and as far as we know, there aren't very many of them here. Taking control of the national government seemed to satisfy them."

"If they control the government, who are the police you were talking about?"

"Another group of aliens, the Kvaa. They arrived about fifteen years ago in pursuit of the Redon. They have been recruiting Earth natives to help us retrieve control of our own planet, and they figured that people like me who lived outside of the city system were less inclined to accept the restrictions that had been set up. They made contact slowly, because they don't look very much like us, and they were worried about xenophobia, but once they did, they offered me a job. These woods lay on a flight path between the capital and several large cities. A flock of Kvaa spybots covers the area, and I spend my mornings collecting data from a series of tiny receivers spotted through the woods, and delivering the results

to a Kvaa pickup point. This is their base, and we'll see them as soon as they're ready."

"You said the Kvaa were pursuing the Redon. How did they know where to come?" asked Keren.

"They followed the trail of ruined planets from other systems, guessing what direction the Redon would take next. That's why it took them a few years to get here."

"And if the Kvaa hadn't come, what then?" Lura asked, suspecting what the answer would be.

"They would have left Earth in chaos, with a badly depleted population, no government and its mineral supply used up."

A movement caught Lura's eye; another colored circle had slid aside, revealing a wide, polished metal tube. Light even more brilliant than that of the room they stood in made it impossible to gauge its length. Flowing over the rim of the circle was a being which resembled the facsimiles of protoplasm she remembered from her school biology vids. As soon as it had completed its entrance, the circle closed. It slid smoothly up the wall behind it to about Chal's height, so that it appeared to be a standing figure. A voice filled her mind, "You are welcome to our abode. I have not seen a gravid earth female before." She suddenly became very aware of the baby inside her, and began to tremble.

"Have no fear", the silent voice continued, "It is only strong interest. Unlike the Redon, we have no need of your children." It seemed to include the others as it asked, "Do you require nourishment or rest?"

Chal spoke aloud, "We may have been pursued here; after the danger passes, we would like to eat and rest. Are you Krul?"

The silent voice seemed pleased, "It is good of you to differentiate us, that is correct ..." it broke off as a light pattern began to flash over the door where they had entered, then resumed. "Ah, the pursuit has entered the tunnel. Please withdraw to the further area while we deal with it."

A blue circle on the opposite wall slid aside, and Chal led the way into another polished tube, less brightly lighted than the first. Strangely scented air flowed in from a grille above them as the circle closed behind them. From this side the material was transparent, and balancing as well as they could on the curve of the floor, the three of them watched. The walls of the room they had left vibrated to a tremendous pounding. Krul had gone, but as the pounding continued, a green light traced a pattern over the inside of the door, and it swung open suddenly, precipitating a group of men into a heap on the floor. They quickly recovered their balance, and one of them reached back into the tunnel, dragging in another

figure to join them. The first six were dressed in gray official tunics, but the seventh was wearing a physician's crimson.

Keren whispered, "That's Doctor Bodun."

Lura nodded and shrank a little behind Keren, even though she was fairly sure they couldn't see her.

As they stood there, gazing around them, the three hidden in the tube got a good look at their faces; except for the physician, even from this distance, there was something unusual about the eyes. As they watched, another red circle slid open, but the tube beyond was empty. The first six seemed to communicate silently, then each pulled a metal rod from a belt at his waist and advanced into the new opening, dragging the physician after them.

"Time to move," Chal said in a low voice. He turned and led the way down the tube. "The Kvaa can handle them better than we can."

It was awkward to walk on the curve of the floor, particularly for Lura, but Keren put his arm around her waist for support, and they managed to keep up with Chal. The tube spiraled, leading upward, and ended in a circular room almost like the one they had left. A round door opposite them, a few inches above the floor, stood open. As they entered, they could hear a low hum that might have been an engine, and

another of the doors opened, admitting a Kvaa. He looked like Krul, but Lura sensed that he was not.

"Excellent," the voice in her head seemed pleased. "I am Knet; you differentiate us well on short acquaintance."

"What is happening?" asked Chal aloud. "Do you know how many more of them there are?"

"Thanks to your useful reports and the interrogation these have undergone, we know that there are only twenty remaining on the planet. It is time to take steps to end their domination."

Shocked, Lura spoke, "How could only twenty-six aliens take over a planet of this size?"

"Your people are used to obeying the orders of their government. These had only to establish themselves as the government and the few who questioned their authority were easily controlled. Now, I would suggest that you remain here while we deal with the remaining Redon. Your dwelling has been rendered uninhabitable, but we are preparing temporary living quarters for you, and we can synthesize suitable nourishment."

"What did they do to the cabin," Chal asked, his voice tense.

"I regret to tell you that they failed to find your escape opening immediately, and in the search they damaged several walls. Repairs would take some time. Does your female require additions to the air?"

"She breathes just as we do," Chal replied.

"Then please await patiently our return." Knet flowed through the opening, which closed behind him.

"What do they breathe?" asked Keren.

"They don't as far as I know, or eat either," Chal replied. "They seem to get all their nourishment from light, which probably accounts for the intensity of the light in this place."

Lura's curiosity was growing, "Do you know if Knet is male or female? I can't tell."

"The answer is neither ... they reproduce by division when more are needed. One single entity splits completely into two identical units. The Kvaa are fascinated by our system of reproduction, with two sexes that blend DNA and produce totally new immature beings to be cared for. And if those Redon monsters damaged my books I'll finish off all twenty-six of the bastards myself!"

In his anger, he hadn't noticed that the door had opened behind him, to admit a Kvaa. He sensed mild amusement as the mental voice hastened to reassure him that his books were intact, as well as his chess pieces. "I came to inform you that your temporary quarters are ready. You will undoubtedly be more calm when you have fed and rested. Please follow me." Knet led them down a tube indistinguishable from the others,

except for a lower degree of light. At the end they entered a small room, obviously arranged for them, with three large foam pads on the floor and a tray in the center that held a plate of grapes, some biscuits that looked suspiciously like Chal's baking, a large flask of water and three tin cups of a familiar pattern. Knet indicated a blue door, "Sanitary facilities are in there if you require them. We found some food you had prepared was still intact. The new human seems comfortable; does he have need of anything?"

Chal responded, "You sound as though you have communicated with it."

"That is so; it is male and quite articulate for one who has not yet breathed your air."

Lura stared; this alien being had spoken to her baby - her son. Keren moved closer and took her hand, whispering, "Now we know what we've got. I'm very happy."

"So am I, but right now I am going to have a drink and lie down. My poor legs won't go much farther." She took some water, sank down on the nearest pad and fell asleep.

"It must be a strain for your females to carry another being to development. The new one will be complete soon; will she need assistance? There is a physician among the prisoners."

"Can we trust him," Keren asked, "he is the one who put us in this situation."

"He was forced to act as he did, or be obliterated. We can read his thoughts, and would be able to stop him if he did anything harmful," Knet responded.

"In that case," Chal broke in, "it is almost time for the little one to arrive, and a physician would be very helpful. Can I ask what you plan to do with the prisoners, as well as the remaining Redon on the planet?"

"They will be taken to our homeworld for further interrogation. It is hoped that we can locate the remainder of their race so that they may be turned from their destructive course and moved into more useful paths. They had damaged or destroyed a number of planets like yours before we were able to locate them."

"What are your plans for Earth?" asked Keren, half afraid to hear the answer.

"We have no plans for further involvement. We will remove the invaders, the rest is up to the natives. With new leadership, it should be possible to undo much of the damage, even though the minerals they sent off-planet cannot be reclaimed. Someone like Chal would make a suitable leader if he is willing."

"Hold on there, Knet, I moved into these woods for a little solitude, and got dragged into an interplanetary conflict. I'm

not cut out to lead any government." Chal was sputtering with indignation.

Again Knet projected amusement, "You may not wish to lead, but you may find that you attract followers without any effort on your own part."

The discussion was interrupted by a moan from Lura. She was awake and trying to sit up. "If Dr. Bodun is still here, I think you better call him. It might be time; I'm having some awful cramps."

"Your need has been relayed," Knet told her. "The physician will be here very soon; meanwhile lie back and let me induce a relaxed state."

"Can you do that?" Keren looked pale and agitated himself.

"They can do a lot of things," Chal assured him, as Dr. Bodun came into the chamber, carrying his medical bag. His crimson robe had been replaced by a clean plastic coverall. "I suggest we move out into the corridor to give the doctor room to work."

"Thanks, I'll call you if I need any help. I've delivered a lot of babies in my time. Lura's healthy and there shouldn't be any problems."

With Knet's assistance, Lura's mind painted a picture for her of walking through the woods. She was somewhat conscious of her body's discomfort, but felt as though she was no longer

connected to it, and she could ignore the pain, as the physician assisted the new life form to leave her. After a long interval, she heard a thin cry, and realized that a cloth-wrapped bundle containing a small, warm creature had been placed in her arms. She pushed back the cloth and looked at the red, crumpled face. The tiny hands reached for her and Dr. Bodun explained how to support the little head to allow the baby to feed. She felt a tremendous sense of well-being and joy flowing through her. "Please call Keren so he can meet his son." In a few moments, Keren and Uncle Chal had both arrived. Behind them, a small crowd of Kvaa leaned against the walls, projecting happy interest.

"We have to give him a name," Lura told him. "Should we call him Chal? We never could have kept him without Uncle Chal's help."

Chal interrupted, "He ought to have a name from your own families. I'm not even related."

Keren said, "Uncle Chal is right, but in the old days they used to have something they called a godfather - a sort of guardian for a child. Would you do that, Uncle Chal?"

"I guess I can manage that for the little fellow."

Knet projected, "You should also consider becoming a guardian for your planet. There is great need, and you are used to making independent decisions. We will be leaving this

world in a few of your days. Perhaps the physician can assist you; he is as familiar with the workings of your government as you are, and both of you would consider the needs of your people."

"I don't know; I like my solitude. There must be someone who wants the job."

Lura spoke up, "Someone who doesn't want the job, might be the best suited. I want my baby to have a decent place to grow up in, with more of these nice woods to walk around in. If there are more people who feel the way you do, Uncle Chal, maybe we can put Earth back together again. Please say you'll take the job, or at least think about it."

"I guess I can think about it, but I won't promise any more than that."

Keren added, "We shouldn't be asking more of you when you've saved our baby from those monsters, but I hope you will decide to take over. Earth needs you." Then, turning to the Kvaa, he added, "We can't thank you enough."

He was answered with a projection of warmth from the assembled Kvaa, "No thanks are necessary. We will be happy to see the recovery of your planet, and we intend to use the knowledge we have gained from you about combining genetic material to make improvements in our own race, so that both our species will benefit from our meeting. We will only remain

here for a short while, but you may make use of our facilities as long as you need them. Now we shall withdraw, so that your female may have time to recover from her ordeal."

Lura smiled, "I am a little tired, but I have never been happier in my life. I will always be grateful to you." Lying back on her pad, she abruptly fell asleep, and Keren gently removed their son from her arms, whispering, "We'll call him Otho, after your father."
