

# THE MYSTERY OF IRETA

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BALLANTINE BOOKS

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THE  
MYSTERY  
OF IRETA

Dinosaur Planet

Dinosaur Planet Survivors

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BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

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# **DINOSAUR PLANET**

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# 1

KAI heard Varian's light step echoing in the empty passenger section of the shuttlecraft just as he switched off the communications unit and tripped the tape into storage.

"Sorry, Kai, did I miss the contact?" Varian came in out of breath, her suit dripping wet, and bringing with her the pervasive stench of Ireta's "fresh" air, which tainted the filtered air of the shuttle's pilot cabin. She glanced from the unlit communications panel to his face to see if he was annoyed by her tardiness, but a triumphant grin cut through her feigned penitence. "We finally captured one of those herbivores!"

Kai had to grin in response to her elation. Varian would spend long hours tracking a creature in Ireta's damp, steaming, stinking jungles—hours of patient searching which all too often proved unproductive. Nevertheless, short of resorting to Discipline, Varian found it nauseatingly irksome to sit still in a comfortable chair through a Thek relay. Kai had wagered with himself that she would manage to avoid the tedious interchange with some reasonable excuse. Her news was good and her excuse valid.

"How'd you manage to capture one? Those traps you've been rigging?" he asked with genuine interest, though those same traps had taken his best mechanic and kept him from completing the seismic grid his geologists needed.

"No, not the traps." There was a hint of chagrin in Varian's tone. "No, the damned fool creature was wounded and couldn't run away with the rest of the herd." She paused to give her next statement full emphasis. "And, Kai, it bleeds blood!"

Kai blinked at her announcement. "So?"

"Red blood!"

"Well?"

"Are you a biological idiot? Red blood means hemoglobin . . ."

"What's odd about that? Plenty of other species use an iron base . . ."

"*Not* on the same planet with those aquatic squirmers Trizein's been dissecting. *They* have a pale viscous fluid." Varian was fleetingly contemptuous of his failure to recognize the significance. "This planet's one mass of anomalies, biological as well as geological. No ore where we should be striking pay dirt by the hopper-load, and me finding creatures larger than anything mentioned in text tapes from any planet in all the systems we've explored in the last four hundred galactic-standard years. C

course, it may be all of a piece,” she added thoughtfully, as she pushed back the springy dark curls that framed her face.

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She was tall, as were so many types born on a normal-gravity planet like Earth, with a slender but muscularly fit body which the one-piece orange ship suit displayed admirably. Despite the article dangling from her force-screen belt, her waist was trim, and the bulges in her thigh and calf pouches did not detract from the graceful appearance of her legs.

Kai had been elated when Varian was assigned as his co-leader. They'd been more than acquaintances on shipboard ever since she had joined the *ARCT-10* as a xenob vet, on a three-galactic standard-year contract. The *ARCT-10*—like her sister ships in the Exploratory and Evaluation Corps—had basic administrative and operations personnel who were ship-born and ship-bred. But the complement of additional specialists, trainees and, occasionally, high-echelon travelers for the Federated Sentient Planets changed continually, giving those on board the stimulation of meeting members of other cultures, subgroups, minorities and persuasions.

Kai had been attracted to Varian first, because she was an extremely pretty girl and second, because she was the opposite of Geril. He had been trying to end an unsatisfactory relationship with Geril, who had been so insistent that he'd had to change his quarters from the ship-born to the visitors' area of the Earth-normal section in order to avoid her. Varian happened to be his new next-door neighbor. She was gay, bubbling with humor and intensely interested in everything about the satellite-sized exploratory vessel. She quickly infected him with her enthusiasm as she chivvied him into taking her on a guided tour of the various special quarters which accommodated the more esoteric sentient races of the FSP in their own atmosphere or gravity. Varian told her she'd been planet-bound—on how many diverse planets did not signify—so that she felt it was high time she saw how the Explorers and Evaluators lived. Especially since, she added, as a xenob vet, she often had to correct some of EV's crazier judgments and mistakes.

Varian was a good narrator, and her tales of planetary adventures, both as a youngster trailing after her xenob vet parents and as junior in the same specialty, had fascinated Kai. He'd had the usual planetary tours to combat ship-conditioned agoraphobia, and indeed had spent a whole galactic year with her mother's parents on her birthworld. But he felt his must have been dull worlds in comparison to those responsible for Varian's wild and amusing experiences.

Another way in which Varian surpassed Geril was in her ability to argue pleasantly and effectively without losing her temper or wit. Geril had always been oppressively serious and too eager to denigrate anything which did not meet with her unconditional approval unconditionally. In fact, long before Kai heard that Varian was to be his co-leader, he had realized that she must have had Discipline, young as she appeared to be. He'd gone as far as to tap for a printout of her public history from the EV's data banks. Her list of assignments had been impressive even if the public record did not give any assessment of her value on those expeditions. However, he noticed she had been promoted rapidly—this, combined with the number of assignments, indicated a young woman slated for increasing responsibility and more difficult assignments. Granted her addition to the Ireta expedition had been made almost at the last minute when life-form readings had registered on the preliminary probe, but with her background Ireta ought not to post too many problems. Yet the planet was, as she'd said, rampant with anomalies.

“I suppose,” she was saying, “if one has a third-generation sun with planets, one must expect peculiarities; such as Ireta, whose poles are hotter than its equator, stinking of—I’ll remember the name of that plant yet . . .”

“Plant?”

“Yes. There’s a small plant, hardy enough to be grown practically anywhere on temperate Earth-type worlds, which is used in cooking. In judicious quantities, let me add,” she said with a wry grin. “Too much of it tastes like this planet smells. Sorry, I digress. What did the Theks say?”

Kai frowned. “Only the first reports have been picked up by our wandering Exploratory Vessel.”

Busy mopping off the worst of her wetness, Varian turned to stare at him, towel suspended. “Fardles!” She sat slowly down in the chair next to him. “That’s unnerving! Just the first?”

“That’s what the Theks said . . .”

“Did you allow time enough for them to manage a reply? Scrub that question.” Varian slumped against the backrest as she added, “Of course, *you* did,” giving him full credit for his ability to deal with the slowest moving and speaking species in the Federated planets. “That’s unlike EV. They’re usually so desperately greedy for initial reports, not just for the all-safe-down.”

“My explanation is that spatial interference . . .”

“Of course.” Varian’s face cleared of anxiety. “That cosmic storm the next system over . . . the one the astronomers were so hairy anxious to get to . . .”

“That’s what the Theks say.”

“In how many words?” asked Varian, her wry humor reasserting itself.

The Theks were a silicate life form, much like rock and extremely durable, and though not immortal, certainly the closest a species had evolved toward that goal. The irreverent said that it was difficult to know a Thek elder from a rock until it spoke, but a human could perish of old age waiting for the word. Certainly the older a Thek grew and the more knowledge he acquired, the longer it took to elicit an answer from him. Fortunately for Kai, there were two young Theks on the team sent to the seventh planet of this system. One of them, Tor, Kai had known all his life. In fact, though Tor was considered young in relation to the lifespan of his species, he had been on the *ARCT-10* since the exploratory vessel had been commissioned one hundred and fifty galactic-standard years before. Tor constantly confused Kai with his great-great-grandfather, who had been an engineering officer on the *ARCT-10* and whom Kai was said to resemble. It gave Kai a feeling of curious satisfaction to be on the same mission as a planetary co-leader with Tor. His conversation with Tor, while lengthened by space distance and Thek speech habits, was comparatively brisk.

“Tor had one word, actually, Varian. Storm.” Kai added his laughter to Varian’s.

“Have they ever been wrong?”



“What, Theks in error? Not in recorded history.”

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“Theirs? Or ours?”

“Theirs, of course. Ours is too short. Now, about that *red* blood?”

“Well, it’s not just the red blood, Kai. There are far too many other unlikely coincidences. Those herbivores we’ve been shadowing are not only vertebrates and bleed red blood, but now that I’ve gotten close enough to have a good look, the things are pentadactyl, too.” She opened and closed her fingers at him in a clawing motion.

“Theks are pentadactyl . . . after a fashion.” Kai was well pleased they had no visual contact during the interchanges, as the Theks had an unnerving habit of extruding pseudopods from their amorphous mass, which tended to distract the viewer, sometimes to the point of nausea.

“But not vertebrate or red-blooded. And not coexistent with another totally different life form, like Trizein’s marine squares.” Varian fumbled at the opening of her belt pouch and withdrew a flat object well wrapped in plastic. “It’ll be interesting,” she spread the syllables out, “to see the analysis of the blood sample.” With a graceful push, she rose from the swivel chair and strode out of the pilot cabin, Kai following her.

Their boot heels echoed in the emptiness of the denuded passenger section. Its furnishings not equipped the plastic domes grouped below the shuttle in the force-screened encampment. But Trizein’s work was better accomplished in the air-conditioned storage compartment which had been converted into his laboratory. A terminal to the ship’s computer had been rigged up in the lab so that Trizein rarely stirred from his domain.

“So you’ve finally got an occupant for your corral,” Kai said.

Varian nodded. “See, I was right to plan ahead. At least we’ve a place big enough to stash him/it/her.”

“Don’t you know which sex?”

“When you see our beast, you’ll understand why we haven’t taken a close enough look to know . . .” She shuddered suddenly. “I don’t know what got to it, but whole chunks have been torn from its flank . . . almost as if . . .” She swallowed hastily.

“As if what?”

“As if something had been feeding on it—alive.”

“What?” Kai felt his gorge rise.

“Those predators look savage enough to have done it . . . but while the creature was still living?”

The appalling concept silenced them both for several strides. A civilized diet no longer included

animal flesh.

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“I wonder if Tanegli’s having any luck with those fruiting trees,” she said, quickly redirecting the conversation.

“D’you know if he did take the youngsters with him? I was setting up the interchange.”

“Yes,” said Varian, “Divisti went, too, so the kids are in good hands.”

“Just as well,” said Kai a little grimly, “someone can manage them. I wouldn’t relish explaining the EV’s third officer if anything happened to her pride and joy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kai saw Varian bite her lip, her eyes sparkling with suppressed amusement. It was an embarrassingly well-known fact that young Bonnard had a case of hero worship for the team’s male co-leader.

“Bonnard’s a good kid, Kai, and means well . . .”

“I know. I know.”

“I wonder if food on this planet tastes the way most things smell,” said Varian, again changing the subject. “If fruit tastes of hydrotelluride . . .”

“Are we food-low?”

“No,” said Varian, who was charged by the expedition’s charter to procure any additional food suppliers needed. “But Divisti is a cautious soul. The less we use of the basic subsistence supplies, the better. And fresh fruit . . . you ship-bred types may not miss it . . .”

“Land-born primates have no dietary discipline.”

They were both grinning, Varian cocking her head to one side, her gray eyes sparkling. The first day they’d met, at a table in the humanoid dining area of the huge EEC ship, they’d teased each other about dietary idiosyncrasies.

Born and brought up on the ship, Kai was used to synthesized foods and to the limited textures provided. Even when he’d been grounded for brief periods, he had never quite adjusted to the infinite variety and consistencies of natural foods. Varian had boasted that she could eat anything vegetable or mineral and had found the ship’s diet, even when augmented from the life-support dome with freshly grown produce, rather monotonous.

“I’d call it educated tastes, man. And if the fruit tastes at all decent, you may be perverted to a appreciation of *real* food.”

Just as they reached the lab, the panel shushed open, and an excited man came charging toward them.

“Marvelous!” He halted mid-stride and, losing his balance, staggered against the panel wall. “Ju

the people I need to see. Varian, the cell formation on those marine specimens is a real innovation. There are filaments, four different kinds . . . just take a look . . .” Trizein began pulling her back into his laboratory and gesturing urgently for Kai to follow.

“I’ve something for you, too, my friend.” Varian extended the slide. “We caught one of those heavy-duty herbivores, wounded, bleeding red blood . . .”

“But don’t you understand, Varian,” Trizein continued, apparently deaf to her announcement, “this is a completely *different* life form. Never in all my expeditionary experience have I come across such a cellular formation . . .”

“Nor have I come across such an anomaly as this, contrasting to your new life form.” Varian closed her fingers about the slide. “Do be a love and run a spectro analysis on this?”

“Red blood, you said?” Trizein blinked, changing mental gears to deal with Varian’s request. He held the slide up to the light, frowning at it. “Red blood? Isn’t compatible with what I’ve just told you.”

At that moment, the alarm wailed unnervingly through the shuttle and the outside encampment and tingled jarringly at the wrist units that Kai and Varian wore as team leaders.

“Foraging party in trouble, Kai, Varian.” Paskutti’s voice, his thick slurred speech unhurried, came over the intercom. “Aerial attack.”

Kai depressed the two-way button on his wrist unit. “Assemble your group, Paskutti. Varian and I are coming.”

“Aerial attack?” asked Varian as both moved quickly to the iris lock of the shuttlecraft. “From what?”

“Is the party airborne, Paskutti?” Kai asked.

“No, sir. I have coordinates. Shall I call in your teams?”

“No, they’d be too far out to be useful.” To Varian he said, “What *can* they have got into?”

“On this crazy planet? Who knows?” Varian seemed to thrive on the various alarms Ireta produced for which Kai was glad. On his second expedition, the co-leader had been such a confirmed pessimist that the morale of the entire party had deteriorated, causing needless disastrous incidents.

As usual, the first blast of Ireta’s odorous atmosphere took Kai’s breath away. He’d forgotten to replace the deodorizing plugs he’d removed while in the shuttle. The plugs helped but not when one was forced to breathe through his mouth, as he was while running to join Paskutti’s rapidly forming squad.

Though the heavy-worlders under Paskutti’s direction had had farther to come, they were the first to arrive at the assembly point as Kai and Varian belted down the slope from the shuttle to the force

screen veil lock. Paskutti shoved belts, masks and stunners at the two leaders, forgetting in the urgency of the moment that the casual thrust of his heavy hand rocked the light-framed people back on their heels.

Gaber, the cartographer who was emergency duty officer, came puffing down from his dome. As usual, he'd forgotten to wear his force-screen belt though there was a standing order for those belts to be worn at all times. Kai would tag Gaber for that when they got back.

"What's the emergency? I'll never get those maps drawn with all these interruptions."

"Forage party's in trouble. Don't wander off!" said Kai.

"Oh, never, Kai, never will I do anything so simple-witted. I assure you. I shan't move from the controls one centimeter, though how I'm ever to finish *my* work . . . Three days behind now and . . ."

"Gaber!"

"Yes, Kai. Yes, I understand. I really do." The man seated himself at the veil controls, glancing sidelong and anxiously from Paskutti to Varian that Kai had to nod at him reassuringly. Paskutti's heavy face remained expressionless, as did his dark eyes; but somehow the heavy-worlder's very silence could indicate disapproval or disgust more acutely than anything he might have growled.

Paskutti, a man in his middle years, had been in ship security for most of his five-year tour with the EEC. He had volunteered for this assignment when the call had gone through the mother ship for secondaries to assist a xenob team. Heavy-worlders often took semi-skilled tours on other worlds on the EEC ships as the pay was extremely good. Two or three tours would mean that a semi-skilled individual could earn enough credit to live the rest of his or her life in relative comfort on one of the developing worlds. Heavy-worlders were preferred as secondaries, whatever their basic speciality might be, because of their muscular strength. They were paid to be the muscles of humanoid FS units, generally a comment made respectfully, since the heavy-worlders were not just muscle men but were numbered as many high-ranking specialists as any other humanoid subgroup.

There was, however, no question that their sheer physical presence—the powerful legs, the compact torso, massive shoulders, weather-darkened skin—provided a visual deterrent that prompted many sentient groups to hire them as security forces, whether merely for display or as actual aggressive units. Contributing to the false notion that heavy-worlders were ill-equipped with mental abilities was the unfortunate genetic problem that, though their muscle and bone structure had adjusted to bear the heavy gravities, their heads had not. Consequently, at first glance they did look stupid. Away from the harsh gravity and climactic conditions that bred them, heavy-worlders also had to spend a good deal of their time in heavy-grav gyms to maintain their muscular strength and to enable them to make a satisfactory adjustment when they returned to their home worlds. Perversely enough, the heavy-worlders were intensely attached to their natal worlds, and most of them, having made their credit balance high enough to retire in comfort, happily returned to the cruel conditions that had developed their subgrouping.

Paskutti and Tardma had joined the expedition out of sheer boredom with their shipboard security

duties. Berru and Bakkun as geologists had been Kai's own choices since it was always good to have a few heavy-worlders on any team for the advantage of their physical attributes. Both he and Varian had been pleased when Tanegli, as botanist, and Divisti, as biologist, had answered the request for such specialists. When they had made planetfall and Varian had seen the unexpectedly large type of animal life which populated Ireta, she had blessed the heavy-worlders on her team. Whatever emergency they were going to meet now would be approached with much more confidence in such company.

Paskutti nodded at Gaber as the cartographer's hands twitched above the veil controls. Slowly the veil lifted while Varian, by Kai's side, shuffled with impatience. One couldn't fuss Gaber but reminding him that this was an emergency and speed was essential.

Paskutti ducked under the lifting veil, charging out, the squad at his heels, before Gaber had completed the opening. It was, as usual, raining a thin mist, which except for the heavier drops, had been deflected by the main screen as had the insects small enough to be fried by contact.

They could hear Gaber muttering anxiously under his breath about people never waiting for anything as Paskutti gave the closed-fist upward gesture that meant sky-trailing. The rescue team activated their lift-belts and assumed the formation assigned them at Paskutti's original briefing on emergency procedures. Kai and Varian were in the protected positions of the flying V formation.

Aloft, Kai turned his combutton to home in on Tanegli's signal. Paskutti gestures westward, toward the swampy lowlands, and indicated speed increase as his other hand adjusted his mask.

They flew at treetop level, Kai remembering to keep his eyes horizontal, on Paskutti's back. Odd enough his tinge of agoraphobia bothered him less in the air, as long as he didn't look directly down at the fast-moving ground. He was cushioned by the air-stream of his passage, an almost tactile support at this speed. The monotonous floor of conifers and gymnosperms which dotted this part of the continent waved briefly at their passage. High, high above, Kai caught a glimpse of circling winged monsters. Varian hadn't yet had a chance to identify or telltale any of the aerial life forms: the creatures warily made themselves scarce when the explorers were abroad in lift-belts or sleds.

They increased altitude to maneuver the first of the basaltic clines and then glided down the other side, skimming the endless primeval forest, its foliage in ever-varied patterns of blue-green, green and green-purple. They met the first of the thermal downdrafts and had to correct, buffeted by the air currents. Paskutti signaled descent as the best solution. For him, it was, with his bulk of heavy granite-trained muscles, flesh and bone, but Kai and Varian had to keep compensating with their lift-belt auxiliary thrust jets.

As the buzz of the homer intensified, Kai began to berate himself. He ought not to have allowed an exploratory group beyond a reasonable lift-belt radius of the compound. On the other hand, Tanegli was perfectly capable of combating most of the life forms so far seen here while dealing with the exuberant nature of the youngsters in his charge. So what aerial trouble could they have fallen into. And so quickly. Tanegli had left in the sled just prior to Kai's scheduled contact with the Theks. They could barely have made their destination before running afoul of whatever it was. Tanegli would surely have mentioned any casualty. Then Kai wondered if the sled had been damaged. They'd only the one big unit and the four two-man sleds for his seismic teams. The smaller sleds could, in a pinch

take four passengers, but no equipment.

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The land dropped away again and they corrected their flight line. Far in the purple distance the first range of volcanoes could be seen on the edge of the inland sea—a lake that was doomed to be destroyed by the restless tectonic action of this very active world. That was the first area he'd had tested for its seismicity because he'd worried that perhaps their granite shelf might be too close to tectonic activity and would turn mobile. But the first print-out of the cores had been reassuring. The lake would subside, probably giving way to small hills pushed up from beneath, clad with sediment and eventually folded under, for this was the near edge of the stable continental shelf on which the encampment had been placed.

The steamy, noxiously scented heat of the swamp-lands began to rise to meet them; cloying humidity intensified the basic hydrotelluride stench. The homer's buzz grew louder and became continuous.

Kai was not the only member of the party scanning ahead. Far-sighted Paskutti saw the sled first, a grove of angiosperms, parked on a sizable hummock that jutted into the swamp, away from the firmer mass of the jungle. The great purple-barked, many-rooted branches of the immense trees, well scarred by herbivorous assaults, were untenanted by avian life, and Kai was beginning to feel the anger of relief overcome concern.

Paskutti's arm gesture caught his attention and he followed the line of the heavy-worlder's sweep toward the swamp, where several tan objects were slowly being dragged under the water by the pointed snouts of the swamp-dwellers. A minor battle began as two long-necked denizens contended for the possession of one corpse. The victor claimed the spoils by the simple expedient of sitting on the body and sinking with it into the muddy waters.

Tardma, the heavy-worlder directly in front of Kai, pointed in the other direction, toward firmer land, where a winged creature, obviously recovering from a stun blast, was swaying upright.

Paskutti fired a warning triplet and then motioned the group to land on the inland side of the grove. They came to a running stop, the heavy-worlders automatically deploying toward the swamp since the likelihood of attack was from that quarter. Kai, Varian and Paskutti jogged toward the sled from behind which the foragers now emerged.

Tanegli stood waiting, his squat solid bulk a bastion around which the smaller members of the party ranged. The three youngsters, Kai was relieved to see, appeared to be all right, as did the xenobotanist Divisti. Then Kai noticed the small pile of assorted brilliant yellow objects in the storage cage of the sled: more of similar shape and color were strewn about the clear ground of the small grove.

"We called prematurely," said Tanegli by way of greeting. "The swamp creatures proved curious allies." He replaced his stunner in his belt and dusted his thick hands as if dismissing the incident.

"What was attacking you?" Varian asked, staring about her.

"These?" asked Paskutti as he dragged a limp, furred and winged creature from behind the trunk of a thick tree.

~~“Watch out!” said Tanegli, reaching to his belt before he saw the stunner in Paskutti’s. “I set the gun on a light charge.”~~

“It’s one of those gliders. See, no socket for the wing to fold,” Varian said, ignoring the protests of the heavy-worlders as she moved the limp wings out and back.

Kai eyed the pointed beak of the creature with apprehension, suppressing an irrational desire to step back.

“Carrion-eater by the size and shape of that jaw,” remarked Paskutti, peering with considerable interest.

“Well and truly stunned,” Varian said with a final twitch of arrangement to the wings. “What was dead enough to attract it here?”

“That!” Tanegli pointed to the edge of the clearing, to a mottled brown bundle, its belly swelling up out of the coarse vegetation.

“And I rescued this!” said Bonnard, stepping clear of his friends so that Kai and Varian saw the small replica of the dead animal in his arms. “But it didn’t bring the gliders. They were already here. It’s very young. And its mother is dead now.”

“We found it over there, hiding in the roots of the tree,” said Cleiti, loyally supporting her friend Bonnard, against adult disapproval.

“The sled must have alarmed the gliders,” said Tanegli, taking up the story, “driven them away from her. Once we had landed and started collecting the fruit, they returned.” He shrugged his wide shoulders.

Varian was examining the shivering little creature, peering into its mouth, checking its feet. She gave a little laugh. “Anomaly time again. Perissodactyl feet and herbivorous teeth. There’s a good fellow. Nice to have something your own size, isn’t it, Bonnard?”

“Is it all right? It just shivers.” Bonnard’s face was solemn with worry.

“I’d shiver too if I got picked up by huge things that didn’t smell right.”

“Then perisso . . . whatever it is, isn’t dangerous?”

Varian laughed and ruffled Bonnard’s short-cropped hair. “No, just a way of classifying it. Perissodactyl means uneven-numbered toes. I want a look at its mother.” Careful of the nearby sword plants with their deceptively decorative purple stripe leaves, she made her way toward the dead creature. A long low whistle broke from her lips. “I suppose it’s possible,” she said in a sympathetic tone of voice. “Well, her leg’s broken. That’s what made her fair game to the scavengers.”

A loud noise attracted everyone’s attention: an ominous sucking sound. From the swamp a huge

head and neck broke the slimy surface and wavered in their direction.

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“We could be considered fair game, too, by such as that,” said Kai. “Let’s get out of here.”

Paskutti frowned at the great and evil-looking head, fingering his stunner onto the strongest setting. “That creature would require every charge we have to stop it.”

“We came for fruit . . .” Divisti said, pointing to the litter in the clearing. “They *look* viable, and fresh food would do us all good,” she added with as wistful a tone as Kai had ever heard from a heavy worlder.

“I’d say we had a safety factor of about ten minutes before that swamp creature’s brain can make the logical assumption that we’re edible,” said Tanegli, as unconcerned as ever by physical threat. He began to gather up the scattered thick-skinned fruits and toss them into the storage cage of the six-man sled.

In point of fact, those sleds had been known to lift twenty, a capability never mentioned in the designers’ specifications. The exploratory sled was an all-purpose vehicle, its ultimate potential not yet realized. High-sided and slightly more than eight meters long, with a closed deck forward for storage, the compact engine and power pack sat under the rear loading space. The vessel could be fitted with comfortable seating for six as well as the pilot and copilot, with the storage cage, as it was now. When the seating was removed or lashed to the deck, a sled could carry enormous weight, on board or attached to the powerful winches fore, aft and midships on either side. The plascreen could be retracted into the sides or raised in sections. The sled had both retro and forward jets with a vertical life ability, which could be used in defense or emergency flight. The two-man sleds were small replicas of the big one and had the advantage of being easily dismantled and stored: in flight, usually in the larger vehicle.

Augmented by the rescue squad, the foragers accumulated enough fruit to fill the sled’s storage cage in the time it took more carrion-eaters to begin spiraling above the grove. The swamp head seemed mesmerized by the comings and goings of the group, swinging slowly back and forth.

“Kai, we don’t have to leave him here, do we?” asked Bonnard with an apprehensive Cleiti by his side. He had the orphan in his arms.

“Varian? Any use to you?”

“Certainly. I’d no intention of leaving it. It’s a relief not to have to chase something over the continent to get a close look.” She frowned at the suggestion of abandonment. “Into the sled with you, Bonnard. Keep a hold on it. Cleiti, you sit on his right, I’ll sit left. There we are. Belt up.”

The others stood back as Tanegli took off in the sled, gliding insolently over the ooze and the undecided beast that still regarded the grove with unblinking interest.

“Set for maximum stun,” Paskutti told them, glancing overhead. “Those carrion-eaters are coming in again.”



Even as the rescuers lifted from the ground, Kai saw the carrion fliers circling downward, the heads always on the dead creature in the grass below. Kai shuddered. The dangers of space, instant and absolute, were impersonal and the result of breaking immutable laws. The deadly intent of the things held a repulsively personal malevolence that disturbed him profoundly.

RAIN and headwinds buffeted the airborne *V* so steadily on their way back that the heavily powered sled had long since landed when Kai and the heavy-worlders finally set foot in the compound. Varian and the three children were busy constructing a small run for the orphan.

“Lunzie’s trying to deduce a diet,” Varian told Kai.

“Just what is its anomalous state?”

“Against every odd in the galaxy, we have succored a young mammal. At least its mother had teated it. It’s not very old, born rather mature, you see, able to walk and run almost at birth . . .”

“Did you . . .”

“Debug it? Externally yes. Had to or we’d all be hosting parasites. I’ve interrupted more of Trizein’s carefully scheduled work to run a tissue sample on it so we can figure out what proteins it must have in its diet. It’s got some growing to do to reach mamma’s size. Not that she was very large.”

Kai looked down at the tiny creature’s red-brown-furred body: a very unprepossessing creation, he thought, with no redeeming feature apart from wistful eyes to endear it to anyone other than its own mother. But, remembering the waving swamp-dweller’s head, and the hungry malice in the circling scavengers’ relentless approach, he was glad they’d brought the thing in. Besides, it might occupy Bonnard and keep the boy from following him everywhere.

Kai stripped off his belt and face mask, rubbing at the strap marks. He was tired after the return trip. The heavy-worlders had immense resources of stamina, but Kai’s ship-trained muscles ached from the exertions of the morning.

“Say, don’t we have to contact the Ryxi, too?” Varian asked, glancing at her wrist recorder and tapping the reddened 1300 that meant a special time.

Kai grinned his thanks for the reminder and made for the shuttlecraft with a fair display of energy. There was still a lot of busy day ahead of him. He’d get a pepper to pick his energy level up, and he’d get a bit of a breather while he made contact with the avians. Then he had to go see that complex of colored lakes Berru had documented yesterday in her sweep south. He found it damned odd there were no more than traces of the normal metals you’d think would be in abundance everywhere on this untouched planet. Colored waters indicated mineral deposits. He only hoped the concentrations were heavy enough to make them worthwhile. There ought to be something in old fold mountains, if only some tin or zinc and copper. They’d found ore minerals but no deposits worth the name.

Kai's orders from Exploratory and Evaluation Corps were to locate and assay the mineral and metallurgical potential of this planet. And Ireta, a satellite of a suspected third generation sun, ought to be rich in the heavier elements, rich in the transuranics and actinides, neptunium, plutonium and the more esoteric of the rare elements above uranium on the periodic table, so urgently and constantly required by the Federation of Sentient Populations, the search for which was one of the primary tasks of the EEC.

The diplomatic might say that EEC was exploring the galaxy, seeking to bring within its sphere of influence all rational sentient beings, augmenting the eighteen peace-loving species already incorporated in the FSP. But the search for energy was the fundamental drive. The diversity of its member species gave the Federation the ability to explore more types of planets, but colonization was incidental to exploitation.

The three useful planets of the sun Arrutan had long been marked on star charts as promising, but only recently had the Executive Council decided to mount the present three-part expedition. Kai had heard the rumor that it was because the Theks wished to be included. This rumor was partially substantiated during his private conference with the EEC chief officer on board the exploratory vessel *ARCT-10*. The CO had privately informed Kai that the Theks had superior control of the three teams and he was to consider himself under their orders if they chose to supersede him. Vrl, the Ryxi team leader, had been given the same orders, but everyone knew the Ryxi. Furthermore, it was common knowledge that having a Thek on a team spelled ultimate success: Theks were dependable, Theks were thorough, the ultimate altruists. The cynics replied that altruism was easy when a creature calculated its life span in thousands of years. The Theks had elected to be placed on the seventh world of the primary, a heavy-metal, heavy-gravity planet, exactly suited to Theks.

The light-cored planet, fifth from the sun Arrutan, with a low gravity and temperate climate, was being evaluated by the Ryxi, an aerial species that was in critical need of new planets to relieve the population pressure, and give industry and opportunity to the restless young.

Kai's assignment, the fourth planet in the system, exhibited curious anomalies. Originally designated a second-generation sun, with elements up to transuranic, Arrutan patently did not conform to that classification. A probe sent out for a preliminary survey registered that the fourth planet was undeniably ovoid in shape; the poles were hotter than the equator: the seas registered warmer than the land mass which covered the northern pole. There was almost constant rainfall and an inshore wind of variable velocities up to full-gale force. An axial tilt of some fifteen degrees had been postulated. The readings indicated life forms in water and on land. A xenobiological team was added to the geological

Kai had requested a remote sensor to locate the ore concentrations, but at that point the storm in the very next system had been sighted and he found his request very low on the priority list. He was told that the original probe tapes would give him ample information to locate metal and mineral, and to get the job done *in situ*. Right now *ARCT-10* had an unparalleled opportunity to observe free matter in action.

Kai took the official brush-off in good part. What he did object to was having the youngest dumped on his hands at the last minute. To his complaint that this was a working expedition, not training exercise, he was told that the ship-borne must have sufficient planetary experiences early

their lives to overcome the danger of conditioned agoraphobia. The hazard was not to be dismissed lightly by the ship-born: useless to explain to the planet-bred. But Kai railed against the expedience that made his team the one to expand the horizons of three members who were only half into the second decades. This planet was exceedingly active, volcanically and tectonically, and dangerous for ship-bred juveniles. The two girls, Cleiti and Terilla, were biddable and no trouble until Bonnard, the son of the third officer of the EV, instigated all manner of hazard-strewn games.

The very first day, while Kai and his team were dropping cores around the landing site to be sure they had landed on the more stable continental shield, Bonnard had gone exploring and had lacerated his protective suit because he hadn't remembered to activate the force-field. He had stumbled into a sword plant, as pretty as the harmless decorative plants in the EV's conservatory but able to slice flesh and suit to ribbons with the most negligible of contacts. There had been other incidents in the nine days since the party had landed. While the other team members seemed to make light of the boy's escapades and were amused by his adoration of Kai, the team leader sincerely hoped the little orphaned beast would divert Bonnard.

Kai took a long sip of pepper, its tart freshness soothing his nerves as well as his palate. He glanced down at his recorder, switched on the comunit, arranged the recording equipment to the speed necessary to slow the Ryxi speech pattern into understandable tones for later review. He could generally keep up with their rippling voices but a tape helped to resolve any questions.

Kai had been designated the liaison officer between the two groups. He had the patience and tact required for dealing with the slow Thek, and the ear and wit to keep up with the quick aerial Ryxi, who could never have communicated with the Thek and with whom the Thek preferred not to bother.

Right on time the Ryxi leader, Vrl, made the contact, trilling out the courtesies. Kai relayed the information that only the first reports from each of the teams had been picked up by the EV and reported his belief that the spatial storm viewed before the exploratory groups had left the ship must be causing sufficient interference to prevent a pickup of other reports.

Vrl, politely slowing his speech to a rate which must have been frustrating to him, said that he wasn't worried; that was for the Slows to fret about. Vrl's first report was the important one for his people: it confirmed the initial probe analysis that this planet contained no indigenous intelligent life form and could adequately support his race. Vrl was forwarding by interplanetary drone a full report for Kai's interest. Vrl ended by saying that all were in good health and full feather. Then he asked what winged life had been observed on Ireta.

Kai told him, speaking as fast as he could get the words past his teeth, that they had observed several aerial life forms from a distance and would investigate further when possible. He refrained from naming one form as the scavengers they were but promised, at Vrl's liquidly trilled request, to forward a full tape when completed. The Ryxi as a species had one gross sin: they hated to think that another aerial life form might one day challenge their unique position in FSP. This prejudice was one reason why Ryxi were not often included in EV complements. The other valid reason was that Ryxi fretted in enclosed spaces to the point of suicide. Very few bothered to qualify for Explorator Services since they were so psychologically ill-suited to the life. Necessity had forced them into the mission and most of the members had spent the journey time in cryonic suspension. Vrl had been

awakened two ship weeks before touchdown to be apprised of the necessary routine of report and contact with the other two sections. While Vrl, like all his ilk, was an interesting creature, vital and flamboyant with his plumage and personality, Kai and Varian were relieved to have the Theks along for balance.

“Did Vrl remember to be there?” asked Varian, entering the control cabin.

“Yes, and all’s well with him, though he’s mighty curious about winged life here.”

“They always are, those jealous feathers!” Varian made a face. “I remember a deputation from Ryxi at the University on Chelida. They wanted to vivisect those winged tree Rylidae from Eridani V.”

Kai suppressed a sympathetic shudder. He wasn’t surprised. The Ryxi were known to be bloody minded. Look at their courtship dance—males armed with leg spurs and the victor usually *killing* his opponent. You couldn’t quite excuse that on the grounds of survival of the fittest. You didn’t have to kill to improve the genotype.

“Is there another pepper going? I’ve been *trying* to keep up with my teammates.” She slid into the chair.

Kai snorted at that folly and handed her a container of stimulant, chuckling.

“I know we don’t have to keep up with the heavy-worlders,” Varian said with a groan, “and I know that they know that we can’t, but *I* can’t help *trying*!”

“It’s frustrating. I know.”

“So do I. Oh, Trizein says the little creature is indeed a mammal and will need a lactoprotein, heavy in calcium, glucose, salt and a good dollop of phosphates.”

“Can Divisti and Lunzie whomp something up?”

“Have done. Bonnard is feeding . . . or should I say, attempting to feed Dandy.”

“It’s named already?”

“Why not? It certainly isn’t programmed to answer a meal call—yet.”

“Intelligent?”

“Of a restricted sort. It’s already programmed to a certain number of instinctive responses, being born fairly mature.”

“Is that herbivore of yours mammalian?”

“Nooooo . . .”

“What’s the yes in that no for?”

“Granted the viviparous and oviparous types often coexist on a planet . . . and that you’d get some very odd gene specialization to cope with environment here, but I cannot rationalize that aquatic-like cell formation with Dandy or with that big herbivore.

“And speaking of that beast, Trizein says its cell structure is remarkably familiar: he’s going to do an in-depth comparison. In the meantime, I’ve his okay to use a CHCL3 gas on it so we can dry those wounds before they turn septic. Can we rig a force-screen arc over that corral we erected so the wound can be kept free of blood-sucking organisms while it heals?” When Kai nodded, she continued. “And would you also ask your core teams to keep an eye out for any scavengers circling? Whatever wounded the herbivore probably attacks other animals. One, I’d like to know what kind of predator that savage is to its prey; and two, there’s always a chance that we can find amenable specimens by saving their lives. They’re so much easier to capture when they’re too weak to struggle or run.”

“Aren’t we all? I’ll give the word to my teams. Only don’t make this compound a veterinary hospital, will you, Varian? We don’t have the space.”

“I know, I know. Those that are large enough to fend for themselves go into the corral anyhow.”

They rose, both revived by the peppers. But their brief respite in the conditioned air of the shuttle made that first step outside a gasper.

“Man is an adaptable creature,” Kai told himself under his breath, “flexible, comprehending his universe, a high-survival type. But did we have to get a planet that reeks?”

“Can’t win ’em all, Kai,” said Varian with a laugh. “Besides, I find this place fascinating.” She left him standing in the open lock.

The rain had stopped, Kai noticed, at least for the moment. The sun peered through the cloud cover getting ready to steam bake them for a while. With the cessation of rain, Ireta’s insect battalions once more flung themselves against the force-screen that arched above the compound. Blue sparks erupted as the smaller creatures were incinerated, glowing blue where larger organisms were stunned by the charge.

He gazed over the compound, experiencing a certain sense of accomplishment. Behind him, and above the compound itself, was the tough ceramic-hulled shuttlecraft, twenty-one meters long, with its nose cone blackened by the friction heat of entering Ireta’s atmosphere. Its stubby glide wings were retracted now, leaving it slightly ovoid in shape, the central portion being larger than either end. From its top blossomed the communications spire and the homing device that would guide in its children’s sleds. Unlike early models of the compound-ship-to-planet shuttle, most of the vessel was cargo and passenger space since the incredibly efficient Thek-designed power packs which utilized an established isotope were compact and no longer took up the bulk of the shuttle’s interior. An additional benefit of the Thek power pack was that lighter-weight ships, which had the specially developed ceramic hulls, could deliver the same payload as the structurally reinforced titanium-hulled vessels which were needed for the antiquated fission and fusion drives. The shuttle rested on a shelf of granite which, spreading out and down, formed a shallow amphitheatre, roughly four hundred meters in diameter. Varian had pointed out that the shuttle’s first touchdown had been smack in the middle of

some animal route, to judge by the well-trampled dirt. Kai had not needed any urging to change site. Open vistas might give you a chance to assess visitors, but it was a bit much for his ship-trained eyes.

Force-screen posts surrounded the present encampment in which temporary living, sleeping and working domes had been erected. Water, tapped from an underground source, had to be softened and filtered. Even so, those like Varian, who were less used to recycled water, which always tasted faintly of chemicals, grumbled about its mineral flavor.

Divisti and Trizein had tested several forms of Iretan vegetation and succulents, finding them safe for human consumption. Divisti and Lunzie had collaborated and produced a pulp from the greener that might be nutritionally correct but had such a nauseating taste and curious consistency that only the heavy-worlders would eat it. But they were known to eat anything. Even, it was rumored, animal flesh.

Nonetheless, for the short time they'd been on Ireta, Kai was pleased with their accomplishment. The camp was securely situated in a protected position, on a stable shield land mass composed of basement rock that tested out 3000MY. There was an ample water supply and an indigenous resource of synthesizable food at hand.

A faint uneasiness nagged at him suddenly. He wished that the EV had stripped more reports from the satellite beamer. It was probably nothing more than interference from that spatial storm. The EV, having established that all three expeditions were functioning might have no reason to strip the beamer for a while. It would be back this way in a hundred days or so. This was a routine expedition. So was EV's interest in the storm. Unless, of course, the EV had run into the Others.

Peppers made you hyperimaginative as well as energetic, Kai told himself firmly as he started down the incline to the floor of the compound. The Others were products of myth, made up to frighten babies and children, or childlike adults. Nonetheless, EEC units occasionally found dead planets and passed like systems interdicted on the charts for no ostensible reason though their planets would certainly have been suitable to one or another member of the Federation . . .

Kai became angry with himself and, forcing down such reflections, tramped through the alien dust to Gaber's dome.

The cartographer had returned to his patient translating of taped recordings to the master chart, over which the probe photos were superimposed. As Kai's teams brought more detailed readings, Gaber updated the appropriate grid and removed the photo. At the moment, the tri-d globe looked scabrous. In the other half of the dome was the seismic screen which Portegin was setting up. Glancing quickly past it, Kai thought Portegin was losing his knack—the screen was on and registering far too many core-points, some barely visible.

"I'm days behind myself. I told you that, Kai," said Gaber, his aggrieved tone somewhat counterbalanced by a rueful smile. He straightened, twisting his neck to relieve taut muscles. "And I'm glad you've come because I cannot work with Portegin's screen. He says it's finished, but you can see it's not functioning correctly."

Gaber swung his gimbaled chair about and pointed his inking pen at the core monitor screen.

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Kai gave a closer look and then began to fiddle with the manual adjustments.

“You see what I mean? Echoes! And then faint responses where I know perfectly well your team have not had a chance to lay cores. Here in the south and the southeast . . .” Gaber was tapping the screen with his pen. “Unless, of course, your teams are duplicating efforts . . . but the readings would be clearer. So I have to assume that the machine itself is malfunctioning.”

Kai barely attended to Gaber’s complaints. In his belly a coldness formed, a coldness that came from thinking about the Others. But, if it had been the Others who laid the faintly responding cores, then surely this planet would have been interdicted. One thing was positive in Kai’s mind: his team had not set those other lights, nor duplicated work.

“Most interesting, Gaber,” he replied with a show of an indifference he was far from feeling. “Obviously from an older survey. This planet’s been in EEC library for a long time, you know. And the cores are virtually indestructible. See here, in the north, where the fainter cores leave off? That’s where the plate action has deformed the landmass into those new fold mountains.”

“Why didn’t we have those old records. Of course, a prior survey would account for why we haven’t found anything more than traces of metal and mineral deposits here.” Gaber meant the continental shield. “But why, under a logical regime, no mention is made of a previous seismic history, I simply cannot understand.”

“Oh, it is old, and probably got erased for modern programs. A computer does not have an infinite capacity for data storage.”

Gaber snorted. “Scorching odd, I call it, to send down an expedition without the full facts at their disposal.”

“Perhaps, but it’ll cut down on our time here; some of our work’s already done.”

“Cut down on our time here?” Gaber gave a derisive laugh. “Not likely.”

Kai turned slowly to stare at the man. “What maggot’s in your mind now, Gaber?”

Gaber leaned forward, despite the fact the two men were alone in the dome. “We could have been . . .” he hesitated, “planted!”

“Planted?” Kai let out a shout. “Planted? Just because the seismic shows old cores here?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time the victims weren’t told.”

“Gaber, we’ve got the third officer’s beloved and only off-spring with us. We’ll be picked up.”

Gaber remained obdurate.

“There’d be no point in planting us. Besides, what about the Ryxi and the Theks.”



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