

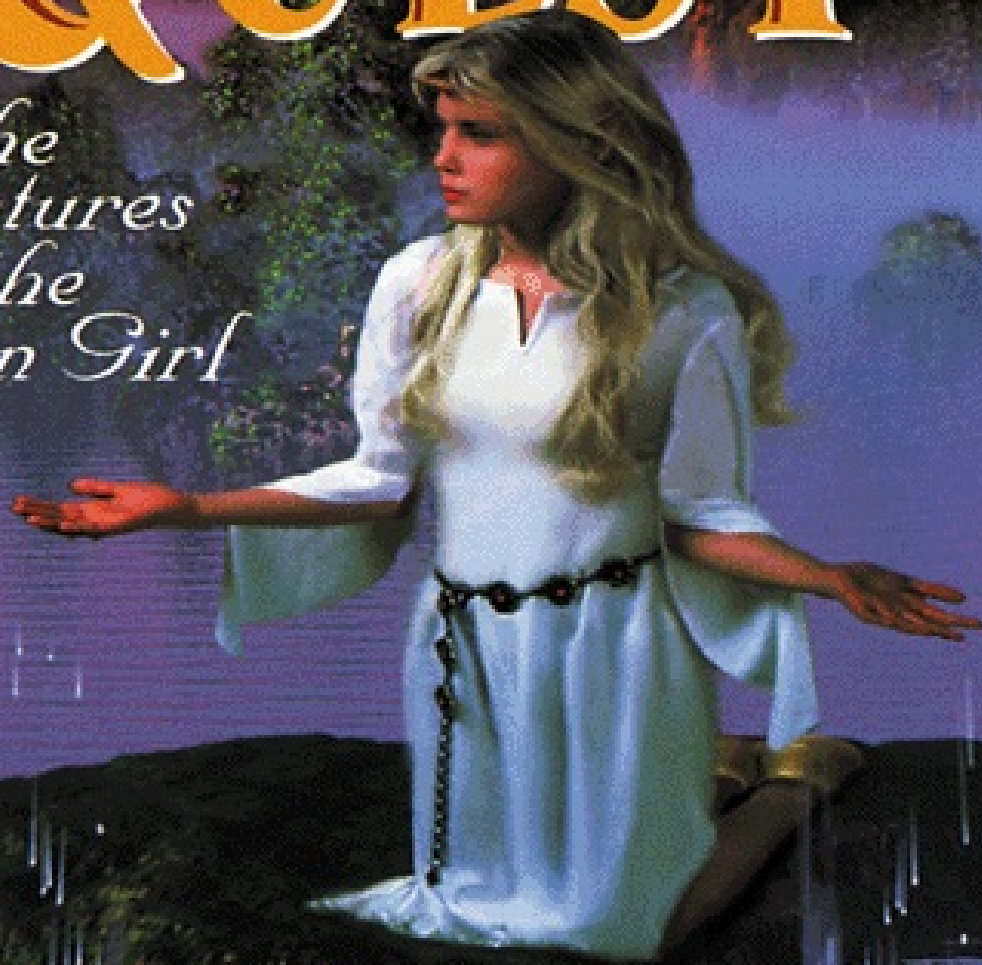
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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE DRAGONRIDERS OF PERN*

AND MARGARET BALL

ACORNA'S QUEST

*The
Adventures
of the
Unicorn Girl*



ACORNAS

Quest

ANNE MCCAFFREY and MARGARET BALL

 HarperCollins e-books

Preface

A short recounting of events that took place prior to the opening of this book, events that are fully detailed in the novel Acorna, also by Anne McCaffrey and Margaret Ball

The asteroid miners Calum Baird, Declan “Gill” Giloglie, and Rafik Nadezda were at the beginning of one of their long collecting journeys when they discovered, floating in space near the asteroid where they were working, a life-support escape pod of unknown origin and its single, sleeping occupant. The occupant was clearly humanoid yet not quite human; this was not as much of a problem for the miners as the fact that they had suddenly been saddled with the care of an infant—and a female one at that! Yet, having no desire to stop working a profitable asteroid belt to bring the child back to their base, they had no choice but to keep and care for her as best they could. In a few days, they loved her as they would a child of their own. Then the child’s unusual qualities became obvious—she could purify water and air, she learned with astonishing speed, and she matured even faster. Within the single year of their voyage she grew as tall and mature as an adolescent human girl.

When they did finally have a large and valuable enough load to return to their base, they found that MME had been taken over by a larger company, Amalgamated Mining. This change in ownership, as well as Amalgamated’s desire to assume all control over the waif whom they had named Acorna, proved unacceptable to the three miners. When they and their “ward” fled, officials at Amalgamated pursued them with claims to ownership of the ship, which was the miners’ only means of livelihood—untrue claims which could nevertheless keep Gill, Rafik, and Calum tied up in Federation courts while their resources were drained by legal expenses. In desperation the miners turned to Rafik’s remarkable Uncle Hafiz, the wealthy and more than slightly shady owner of an interstellar financial empire.

Hafiz arranged to swap the identifying beacon of their ship for one belonging to a wrecked vessel with Kezdet registration. Although the miners were uneasy about adopting the registration of a planetary system with which they had had some difficulty in the past—a small matter of disputed mining claims—they had no option but to accept the offer and pay part of the price Hafiz demanded—a substantial percentage of their profits from the last mining journey. The rest of his price, though, was unacceptable to them. A dedicated collector of rarities and one-of-a-kind treasures, Hafiz was fascinated by Acorna’s short horn and delighted by her precocious ability to understand the numbers he loved most—gambling odds. He demanded that the miners leave Acorna with him and clearly

planned to keep them prisoner until they complied. Rafik outwitted his uncle in a series of clever maneuvers which freed them but left them on the run from even more enemies than they had had before: not only the minions of Amalgamated Mining, but also the Kezdet magnates who had caused the wreck of the ship whose identity they had “borrowed.” In addition, they had a third enemy they did not even know about. Hafiz Harakamian was so impressed by the way in which Rafik had outwitted him that he decided this nephew was quite clever and crooked enough to be a worthy heir to the Harakamian financial empire—in contrast to his worthless, bungling son, Tapha. Hearing about his father’s plans to disinherit him in favor of Rafik, Tapha decided that the only way to keep his inheritance was to find his cousin and kill him.

After a precarious time spent moving from system to system, trying to sell off their payload without being caught by any of their numerous pursuers, the miners were finally captured by Pal Kendoro, a young man working for Delszaki Li. Li had been a friend of the real owner of the ship whose identity they had borrowed, and when his agents discovered the ship’s beacon again in use they assumed the miners had killed the owner and hijacked the ship.

Although based on Kezdet, Delszaki Li was no friend of the Kezdet government and their quasi-military police, the so-called Guardians of the Peace. In fact, he had quietly funded an organization which worked to subvert the ruling class of Kezdet. The wealth of Kezdet’s few was based on the sufferings of the many; its low-tech mines and factories were served by unwanted children brought from nearby systems and kept in bondage by a semilegal system which treated them as debtors who must work off their debts. The factory owners saw to it that the children’s nominal wages were so low and the charges against them for food and shelter so high that they never “worked off” any debt, but remained in perpetual bondage. Few survived to adulthood, and those who did were so debilitated by years of poor food and crippling work that they had no energy to challenge the system that had enslaved them.

Heir to a financial empire that rivaled that of Hafiz Harakamian, Delszaki Li had first freed his own interests of any connection with the Kezdet child-labor system, then had begun working secretly to help the enslaved children in any way he could. Although physically disabled by a wasting neurological disease which had almost totally paralyzed him, he was still brilliant and wealthy and was able to recruit others to his cause—among them Pal Kendoro and his two sisters, Mercy and Judith. The Kendoro siblings had been among the orphans brought to Kezdet for slave labor, but Judith had escaped by winning one of the scholarships established by Delszaki Li to encourage education among the bonded children, and by hard work she had soon earned enough to buy her young brother and sister free. Now grown, all three were determined to take whatever risks were necessary to free the children who remained in bondage.

Their attempts to effect peaceful change by educating the enslaved children and helping them to demand better conditions were continually frustrated by the wealthy class that controlled Kezdet’s government, and by the time he encountered Acorna, Delszaki Li was on the verge of despair. It seemed as though nothing short of a revolution would free the children—and it would take a miracle to overthrow the solidly entrenched government of Kezdet.

In Acorna, Delszaki Li thought that he recognized that miracle. Half-Chinese, he saw in her a *kilin*—the legendary unicorn of China, whose appearance is an omen of great and beneficent change. The fact that she came accompanied by three asteroid miners only increased his belief that she was

sent by the heavens to bring good fortune to his enterprise, for it happened that he was in particular need of such expertise as they might supply. Before he met Acorna, Mr. Li had subtly acquired the mineral and mining rights to Kezdet's three moons—Maganos, Saganos, and Tianos—seeing in them a possible place for the children he wished to rescue from Kezdet's factories and mines. None of the planetary mining companies wanted to bother with the problems of building moon bases when it was so cheap to use child labor on...or rather below...the surface of the planet. But Li's plan was ambitious as well as altruistic. He meant to use his great fortune to create mining bases on the three moons, where the children he freed could work part-time and be schooled part-time. With love and care and decent nourishment, upon reaching adulthood they should be ready to take over the mining bases and make them truly self-sufficient. But until he met the three asteroid miners and their "ward," the mysterious unicorn girl, Acorna, Mr. Li's plans had moved so slowly that he despaired of their coming to fruition in his lifetime. There were too many problems for one man to overcome: the entrenched opposition of the wealthy families of Kezdet, the bureaucratic obstacles which the Kezdet government threw in his path, and, most of all, the fears of the children who had been taught from arrival on Kezdet to flee strangers—even benevolent ones. When the factory owners would not admit to employing children, and the children themselves had been trained to hide, how could they be found and freed?

Once it was clear that Calum, Gill, and Rafik had not caused harm to his friend, but had merely exchanged identities with the wrecked and derelict spacecraft in an effort to evade their own pursuers, Li recruited them as his allies and offered to adopt Acorna as his own ward. Recognizing that the child they had raised was now maturing to the point where she needed a permanent home and an education in the ways of "normal"—i.e., planetside—civilization, the miners agreed to help Mr. Li with his project. But when Acorna learned of the plight of Kezdet's enslaved children, she precipitated a crisis that affected all of Delszaki Li's slow and careful plans. Unable to wait and do nothing where she saw obvious cases of need, she became entangled in any number of projects that aroused the wrathful attention of Kezdet's ruling class—rescuing one child from a brothel, another from begging on the streets, giving shoes to the barefoot slaves of a glass factory and using her horn to heal their wounds. The furor aroused by her actions forced the Child Liberation League to forgo their years of patience and incremental improvements in favor of a bold stroke for freedom.

While the miners worked desperately to get the first of the planned moon bases in condition to receive children, and Delszaki Li fought Kezdet's bureaucracy to get permission to open the base, Acorna solved the problem of finding and freeing the children. They might have been taught to flee strangers, but the mystical rumors which identified Acorna with the protective saints and goddesses of the children's manifold belief systems ensured that she alone, of all the beings on Kezdet, was accepted by all of them. Believing that the silver-haired girl with the horn on her forehead was an earthly manifestation of Lukia of the Lights, or Epona, or Sita Ram, at her call they came willingly from mines and factories and followed her without fear. With the help of Calum, Rafik, and Gill to implement plans for a working mining base on Maganos Moon, and the sometimes overenthusiastic help of Acorna to reach out to the neglected children of Kezdet, Delszaki Li had the immense gratification of seeing his plan become a reality. He also saw that he had made many implacable enemies among those formerly wealthy who were now, as a result of his machinations, merely well-to-do. But it did not appear that this fact disturbed him particularly.

By the time that Maganos Moon Base became a reality, the miners' lives as well as Delszaki Li's had been changed—as much by Pal Kendoro's two sisters, Judit and Mercy, as by the implementation of the moon base plan. Gill and Rafik, Kezdet's best friends, had agreed to act as foster parents to the children

of the moon-base plan. Gill and Judit Kendoro had agreed to act as foster parents to the children brought to Maganos. Rafik's cousin Tapha had died in an attempt to assassinate him, and Rafik felt it was his responsibility to work with his uncle Hafiz and learn the ins and outs of the Harakamian family businesses that he was now slated to inherit. As for Calum, he was as taken with the shy, quiet Mercy as Gill was with her more outgoing sister, but he felt that with the defection of his comrades it was even more his responsibility to help Acorna in the search for her home, especially as it was his mathematical analysis of the partial results given them by Dr. Zip that had narrowed down the possible location of her home planet to a searchable sector of space.

Even Acorna was not romantically untouched; Pal Kendoro had fallen in love with her, and she was, like any young girl, flattered though distressed by his devotion...but unlike most young girls, she had to wonder whether their two species were even compatible! In any case she felt that she could not commit herself and her life to this young human while she still did not know where, or even if, others like her might exist.

Where did she truly belong? And how much time did she have to find a suitable mate? In the three years that had elapsed since the establishment of Maganos Moon Base, she had matured from an adolescent into what appeared to be a fully adult female of her kind. Knowing nothing of her origins, she had no way to guess whether her body would stabilize or whether she would age and die as rapidly as she had matured.

Although the search for her home world was of prime importance to Acorna and almost as much to Calum, Acorna's other friends and guardians were reluctant to see them start out on such a long and potentially perilous journey. They had become used to protecting Acorna—not only from the enemies she and Delszaki Li had made on Kezdet, but from the genuinely ill who wanted access to her healing powers and the charlatans who thought to grow wealthy by exploiting her unusual capabilities.

To protect her from wearing herself out in an attempt to heal everyone who might approach her, they had grown into the habit of shielding her from the world, screening her mail, and otherwise treating her as someone to be sheltered and hidden. Sometimes it seemed that it would take another revolution to free Acorna from her well-meaning friends, and as *Acorna's Quest* begins, just such a revolution is about to take place....

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Maganos, Unified Federation Date 334.05.11

Acorna's office in the Dehoney facility on Maganos Moon Base was far too full for her comfort, and the meeting had been going on so long that she was developing an alluring fantasy about escaping the comfort of the base for the freedom of a good planetside gallop—any planet, anywhere, just so it offered her clean firm earth to run on and a horizon very far away. The need for earth and sky and open space was becoming almost an obsession for her as the meeting dragged on—just as dreaming up all these new ways to stop her and Calum from starting on their mission to find her species' home world had become an obsession for Pal.

She tried to compose herself, remembering that it was probably even worse for Calum. He considered finding her home world his first duty to her, even before his love for Mercy. The sooner Acorna could release Calum from that self-imposed quest, the sooner he and Mercy could marry. Acorna understood why some of her friends were reluctant to see the *Acadecki* depart. Gill and Judit were happily settled now, overseeing the care and education of the bondchildren still arriving to study and work at Maganos; and Rafik was presumably satisfied with his new career as assistant and heir apparent to his uncle Hafiz, the head of House Harakamian. But couldn't they see that Calum needed to complete his quest for her home planet—and that she needed to find her own people before she could be content anywhere?

Pal continued inexorably to read on from the notepad in his hand. "Supplies and munitions are still not completed. But right now"—and he looked directly at Acorna and then Calum, shaking his head sadly—"the worst problem is that of reinstalling and testing the *Acadecki*'s defense system. My people estimate it will take at least four weeks to be certain that the new defenses are accurately installed this time."

"Wait a bleeding minute!" Calum jumped to his feet. He and Acorna exchanged a glance that told her he felt sure this was yet another one of the many phony little delaying tactics thought up by Pal in collaboration with his sister Judit and Gill. Possibly even Delszaki Li had had a hand in this one; although the *Acadecki* had been supplied by Hafiz Harakamian, Mr. Li had offered to finance its refitting to make it the perfect vessel for this long-distance quest. Had that generous offer really been a sneaky way of seeing that Delszaki Li retained control over the ship and could drag out the refitting until they gave up the search?

Calum shot a second, almost accusing glance at Mr. Li, who was floating quietly in the chair which allowed him such mobility as his increasing paralysis permitted. Some people had made the mistake—sometimes a fatal mistake—of underestimating Delszaki Li because of his great age and the

debilitating neurological disease which had all but paralyzed him. Not Calum! He was all too aware of the clear, penetrating mind encased in that ancient body. Delszaki Li was a force to be reckoned with—benevolent, powerful, astute, and, Calum thought wryly, about as straightforward as a spiral staircase in an Escher print.

Calum knew that Mr. Li found it hard—deep in the heart which Acorna’s beauty, charm, bravery and intelligence had thawed—to let her start out upon her search. He did make every appearance of helping to secure her ambition of finding her folk; but he was easily tempted into thinking up new ways to delay her actual departure. And Pal Kendoro, his personal assistant, was not limited by even the pretense of wanting to help Acorna on her quest! He considered himself in love with Acorna, could not or would not see why she couldn’t settle down happily with him while remaining in ignorance about her own race, and absolutely did not want her going off alone for months, possibly years, with Calum. Neither of Pal’s sisters could convince him that Calum Baird had absolutely no interest in Acorna, apart from completing his self-imposed task of finding her species.

Cal might seem totally immersed in technologies, improvements, designs, star systems and analyses thereof, but he wasn’t oblivious to Pal’s obvious jealousy, and he did his best to defuse situations which fed that unreasonable attitude. Sometimes he wondered if it wouldn’t be better to openly declare his love for Pal’s youngest sister Mercy and his desire to marry her as soon as he had completed this mission—though that would not be fair to Mercy; she should not be tied down while he went away on a quest of unknown duration. But right now, all Calum’s good intentions of calm, rational behavior had gone out the nearest air vent as, once again, Pal seemed to be sabotaging the start of their voyage.

“If you think,” Calum went on, his anger apparent in his acid tone of voice, “that a lousy defense system is going to stall us another few months, you’re crazy. Crazy!” And he scissored his hands to emphasize his denial.

“Why we should require a defense system,” Acorna jumped in to support him, “so far beyond what was originally designed for that class of ship, I do not know.”

“Is not sensible to send you so far without every possible consideration taken for your safe return,” Mr. Li said.

“We have communications devices that can reach a habitable system soon enough to summon help if the long-range missiles, the mines, the warheads, and the laser cannon do not dissuade a pirate,” Calum went on. He was seething with resentment.

“First”—and Acorna held up one of her blunt, two-jointed digits—“what could a ship the size of our scout possibly have that anyone would want?”

“You,” Pal said in an unequivocal tone.

“Second,” Acorna said, ignoring that, “the built-in weaponry already installed allows us to defend ourselves against ships with three times our capability....”

“Not to mention our built-in speed,” Calum interjected. “Why, that drive could outstrip the fastest drone ever manufactured. And that’s saying something.” He gave an extra nod in emphasis.

“Third, Uncle Hafiz has supplied us,” Acorna continued, “with so many identities and drive-variation signatures that anyone looking for us from one port of call would never recognize our ship the next one. And he has already taken long enough to supply such multitudinous identities!”

“You, Acorna, are valuable for so many reasons and to so many people,” Pal said, his tone almost as angry as Calum’s had been, “that of course House Harakamian desired to support you with alternate documentation and drive-emission camouflages.”

“Nineteen of them? Requiring six months to develop? To be any safer, I would have to be dead already!” Acorna said, unusually sarcastic for her characteristically gentle self.

“You can stay here, safely, and let Calum find your folk,” Pal said, desperation creeping into his tone.

Acorna straightened her narrow shoulders, tossing the magnificent mane of silvery hair behind her. “These are my people we are trying to find. How will they know that Cal is on a genuine search unless I am with him to represent myself? We know so little about my circumstances.” She shook her head sadly. Her brilliant silvery eyes filmed over, ever so slightly, with the melancholy that was deepening within her daily, almost drowning her with an urgent need to be resolved. Sometimes, at night, she was nearly overwhelmed by the intensity of her need to find her own kind.

“Why was my life pod evacuated from the ship in the first place? Who did it? Enemy or friend? Why was it done? To save me or to destroy me without trace? Why have no vestiges of my kind been discovered with all the explorations that are being undertaken in every direction of this galaxy?”

“That’s another point,” Gill said, speaking for the first time and squeezing Judit’s hand in his big one. “You may not even come from this galaxy. The search could take decades.”

“Decades it could be,” Delszaki Li said, sadly nodding.

“Oh, Mr. Li.” Acorna leapt from the chair she was seated in and lowered his float so she could take his almost useless right hand in hers and stroke it lovingly. “I will not tarry a moment longer than necessary to hurry back to Kezdet and you. You will receive a message the moment we have found my home world.”

“I know this, Acorna,” Mr. Li said in a gentle, understanding voice. He nodded as if he were patting her hand, an action he could no longer perform.

Acorna bent her head, touching his hand with her horn, wishing she had the power to eradicate completely the wasting disease which slowly consumed him. She could, and did, ease his discomfort. But she need not stay for that; there were medicines which did as much as she could to alleviate his pain. And she was more and more “urged” to begin the search. Before it was too late? The phrase sprang into her mind. Startled, she looked up at Mr. Li’s black eyes, wondering if he had a vestige of telepathy. But she saw nothing other than his real love and concern for her.

“Acorna, my love,” thundered Declan Giloglie, “you’re not going without the best defenses we can fit you out with, and that’s me final word on the subject!”

Calum heaved a dramatic sigh. “I see there’s no changing your minds.”

Acorna glanced at Calum, aghast at this apparent collapse of resistance. The side of his face that was turned toward her, away from the rest of the group, flickered in what might have been a brief wink.

“I suppose you are right,” she said, bowing gracefully toward Mr. Li. “Please forgive me for causing you anxiety. It was indeed extremely selfish of me to wish to find my own people before I die of advanced old age.” She could not restrain that comment, even though she recognized as she made it that her words might destroy Calum’s pretense at acquiescence...if it was indeed pretense?

“Women!” Calum said in a disgusted tone. “All sentiment, no logic. But I do see the force of your arguments, and I’ll explain it all to our pretty one here until she understands.”

“Oh, no, you won’t,” Pal said. “That’s my job.”

“Convince me later, Pal,” Acorna said sweetly. “Right now—since we are all agreed on the necessity for installing the revised defense systems—I wish to go over some matters of the ship’s living space with Calum. I am afraid we may need to completely remodel a portion of the interior.”

“By all means,” said Delszaki Li, beaming in a way that reinforced Acorna’s belief that this talk of the new defense system was just another faradiddle designed to delay her departure yet again.

“Make whatever changes you wish. My architect will accommodate.” Li bowed to Acorna.

Once they were alone on the *Acadecki*, Calum looked at Acorna.

“You didn’t really want to redesign the living space again, I trust?”

“You don’t really want to wait six more weeks, which will probably turn into six months if Mr. Li and Pal can arrange it, before we take off, do you?”

“No!” they both said in chorus.

“We’re well enough supplied for the initial voyage right now,” Calum said thoughtfully.

“If something happened to distract the others for just a little while...” Acorna murmured.

On their return to the base, it seemed that distraction might just be at hand. Pal and Gill were fuming out loud at one of the com techs, who had innocently sent the requested acknowledgment for delivery of a message to Acorna.

“What is the problem with this?” Acorna asked. “It seems perfectly standard behavior to me.”

Gill gave her a disgusted glance. “For people who aren’t celebrities, maybe. For you—the acknowledgment tells whoever-this-is that they have found your Lattice node. Now you’ll be inundated with junk mail and worse. Damn it, people send these test messages out like confetti, hitting every node where they think they might find their target, and I thought we had trained all the com techs never to acknowledge anonymous messages!”

Acorna put her hand on the tech's shoulder. He was young enough to have been trained at Maganos in the past two years, thin enough to have come from one of Kezdet's factories before that, and he was shaking under her hand. She sent soothing, calming impulses to the boy until she could feel that he was steadier.

"If you upset the people who work here for no reason at all, Gill," she said, "how can you expect them to remember your wishes? Do not worry," she said to the tech, "it is a small matter, soon forgotten."

"That's what you think!" said Pal darkly.

Acorna shrugged. "I've never had an anonymous message before, so there is no reason to suppose this one is the beginning of a flood."

"Never—had—" Gill plunged both hands into his curly red beard and tugged as if he were trying to root it out. "Why, we must have bounced half a hundred of these confetti jobs back in the last week alone!" He glared at the younger man. "Didn't you tell her, Pal?"

"I didn't think," Pal said unhappily, "it would be a good idea to mention that we were screening her mail...."

"You were WHAT?" Acorna demanded in outraged tones. "Gill, whatever gave you the colossal gall to intercept my personal messages? And Pal, did you think that because I hadn't absolutely rejected your declarations, you owned me and my communications?"

"See here, Acorna acushla," put in Gill, "you can't be talking to me that way, me that bathed you when you were a baby and that's not so very long ago neither!"

In a few short, scathing sentences Acorna demonstrated that she could and would talk to Gill that way and worse. By the time she stalked away, Gill's face was as red as his beard, and Pal later swore that he had seen small puffs of steam coming out of the miner's ears.

"I knew it wasn't a good idea to tell her," Pal said.

Gill glared at him. "You could have explained why we had to do it!"

"Did you hear her give me a chance to get a word in edgewise?" he replied. "Besides, you could have explained, too, and I didn't hear you saying anything!"

Gill's deep laugh rumbled through the com center, and he wiped his sweating forehead. "You've a point there, young Pal. Tell you what, let's get a printout of all the messages we've deleted in the past ten days or so. That'll explain it to her without us having to get that word in past the young lady's offended fury."

"Where'll we send it? The mood she's in—"

"No matter what kind of a mood she's in," Gill said, "you can't stalk off very far on a lunar mining base. And you should be able to guess as well as I where she'll go to let off steam. Why don't you give your sister a call, let her know what to expect?"

He leaned over the desk and began explaining to the com tech exactly what arcane procedures he'd have to follow in order to retrieve the massive amounts of "junk mail" that he and Pal had deleted from Acorna's files before she ever saw them.

"They treat me like an infant," Acorna declared, stalking around the circular floor of the main dome in the living space Judit Kendoro shared with Gill. "I am not to search for my own people...I am not to read my own mail...I will not have it!" Her head came up, her nostrils flared, and the silvery mane that cascaded down her back quivered with the force of her indignation.

"Of course you will not," Judit agreed, taking Acorna by the hand and leading her to a comfortable couch designed with her equine proportions in mind, "but perhaps you will have a cooling drink before you quite explode with indignation? Iced kava, perhaps, or madigadi juice?"

"If you are trying to make me forget about it," Acorna said, seating herself, "I should tell you that it will not work! I am no longer to be treated as an ignorant child!"

"Of course you are not," said Judit Kendoro understandingly. "You have grown up quite amazingly in the last two years. You never lose yourself galloping in the park anymore, or get into fights with street vendors, or..."

Laughing, Acorna stopped her. "Enough, please! I do not deny that I did some very foolish things when I first came to live with Mr. Li—but remember that nearly two years aboard a mining ship is no small amount of preparation for social life on a planet! And I was much younger then."

"That's true," said Judit, "and Gill and Pal now realize that they were wrong to screen your mail for you."

Acorna looked at her suspiciously. "Then why did they not say so? And how do you know?"

"Did you give them a chance to apologize?" Judit asked. "Or did you just stalk off in high dudgeon, O mature and sober woman of the world? Pal guessed where you would go and called to tell me that he and Gill would be sending your intercepted mail from the last ten days over as soon as it could be retrieved and printed—and here it is now," she said as the delivery bell chimed to signal arrival of a parcel.

And chimed.

And chimed.

And chimed...

"Two dozen boxes!" Acorna exclaimed when the last of the boxes of printouts had been dumped on Judit's floor. "Impossible! I do not know two dozen people apart from the children, and most of those people I know are right here on Maganos and would have no need to send me any mail. Gill is making a joke."

"Well, this one seems to be addressed to you," Judit said, picking a flimsy at random from one of

the boxes. “Don’t you want to read it?”

“Let Karina, Psychic Healer, make your fortune?” Acorna read aloud. “What is this about? I do not know any Karina, and if I did, why would I wish to join in partnership with her to sell my healing abilities at so much for each millisecond of time expended? It sounds like a most immoral notion to me!”

“It may not be the most immoral notion you come across today,” Judit said softly. “Read some more.”

By the time Acorna had worked her way through half a box full of requests for money, suggestions for a line of gilt plastiflex visors called “Acornas,” offers of partnership, and demands that she submit herself to some research institute or other for immediate examination, she began to understand why Gill and Pal had been so protective.

Judit, for her part, silently blessed the men for leaving all the heartrending pleas for help and healing at the bottom of the heaviest box, where with any luck Acorna would never see them. She would never be able to resist those cries for help...yet to heal even one percent of those who needed her would so sap her energy that she would be unable to do anything else. *We must find a better solution for her*, thought Judit. *We cannot go on hiding her from the world—the world is catching up with her, and it will destroy her.*

But, of course, Judit realized, with a catch in her breath and a queer ache in her heart, the solution was there—had been there all along. If they hadn’t been interfering with Acorna’s desire to go and find her people, she would long since have left Maganos Moon Base to explore distant regions where even junk mail had not yet penetrated. And now that one of these messages had been acknowledged, whoever had sent it was sure to be on his or her way to Maganos...to be followed by newscasters, charlatans, and the terminally ill. The fiction that Acorna’s healing abilities had faded as she matured would be exploded the first time Acorna’s soft heart was touched and she touched her horn to an ill or injured person.

The only solution, after all, was for Acorna to leave Maganos before she was tracked down here. And even if she never came back...she would come back. Judit blinked away incipient tears and set about the task of persuading the lost youngling of an alien species, whom she had come to love like a younger sister, to leave immediately.

It was not, after all, much of a task. So, feeling as if she was doing something heinous, she contacted Pal’s missile-defense supplier and told him that Mr. Li wished that the installation would take longer.

Mendaciously, she also told Pal that she had received a call to that effect: there was some difficulty in supply. She told Calum, who exploded, and Acorna, who gratified her by assuming the most rebellious expression ever seen on that lovely, tranquil face. Judit decided that frustration would have the desired result.

It did. Calum and Acorna made discreet plans, stowed the few items they wished to take with them on this history-making voyage, and took off without waiting for permission. The *Acadecki* had been “ready” for all practical purposes for weeks. The hydroponics tanks had even been replanted

since the original plants had gotten out of control in size or disuse, and some of Acorna's favorites had gone to seed. The alfalfa had had to be harvested three times already and was back to lawn height.

Since the *Acadecki* had long been in one of the Dehoney takeoff bays, it had been no trouble at all to board her. Nor had the Tower seen anything odd in a request for her launch, since the *Acadecki* was constantly being taken out for trial runs on this, that, or the other new ramification to its engines, com units, whatever. Calum and Acorna were up, up, and away and into the star-studded sky while those nearest and dearest to them slept.

Calum had spent the entire first few hours whistling happily or chortling at having escaped so deviously. It eased Acorna's nagging conscience that he evidently suffered from no guilt about their precipitous departure. She herself still felt pangs of grief and guilt about sneaking away without a proper farewell to Gill and Pal and Mr. Li—not to mention Rafik, who had been away, as usual, on business for his uncle Hafiz. But she could not have said goodbye without warning them...and it had seemed essential to take advantage of Judit's offer to keep all three men busy and out of communication until the *Acadecki* was well clear of Maganos.

"Are you sure even Rafik won't be able to deduce our course, Calum?" Acorna had asked when they were outside the heliopause of the Kezdetian primary.

"Not even Rafik, Acorna. He may be subtle in dealing with people, but I'm the engineer and navigator," Calum said proudly.

"But they all know our destination: the Coma Berenices quadrant."

"Ah,"—Calum's smile was devious as he held up one finger—"there are nine and sixty ways of getting there, and we're taking almost, but not quite, the most illogical. I don't trust Rafik not to think of the most illogical, so I plotted in the course he is least likely to suspect. Therefore, there is no logical or illogical way for him to figure out what way we did go. See—here's the space we're navigating in." He put his hands in a position to encircle a globe, then drew out the left side. "Milky Way," he explained, "then we are going down..." He let his right hand describe a direct downward line. "That is NOT the shortest distance to where we want to be." And his right hand made his planned deviation. "Except that, actually and spatially, it will be. But I don't have to make a course correction for a few days."

"Well, in that case..." Acorna allowed herself to be reassured, at least that they could not be followed and talked out of their project by Rafik's eloquence. "I am surprised, now that we've been gone nine hours, that they haven't discovered we've gone."

The com unit bleeped.

"You spoke too soon," Calum said.

"Urgent you return to Dehoney immediately. Acc—"

Calum's hand disconnected the com unit. "Well, I'm surprised it took them so long."

"Acc?" Acorna asked, blinking a little anxiously. "Maybe we should at least listen to the

message? It sounded like Provola.”

“So? They all know we respect Provola and might listen to her, where we’ve given UP listening to them!” His tone was caustic.

“But she’s never been an alarmist,” Acorna responded, weighed down once again with guilt about their stealthy action.

Calum shrugged. Provola Quero was now in charge of the Saganos operation; she couldn’t have anything that urgent to say to them; she was probably just relaying the expectable protests from Acorna’s other “guardians.”

“We can’t swerve from this departure, Acorna, love, or they’ll just find another way of stopping us.”

It was not until the third day out that their euphoria at escaping so neatly received a slight check Acorna had by then used up the greens and vegetables that she had brought on board. She also needed to replenish Calum’s supplies from the storage area. She came rushing back into the main cabin.

“It’s not there anymore,” she cried, her silvery eyes wide with distress. “What could have happened to it?”

Calum rose from the pilot’s chair and took her by her slender arms, which were far stronger than they looked.

“Easy, girl, what’s not where?”

“My escape pod.”

“What? But it was there when I inspected the ship five days ago.”

She followed him as he ran to where he knew, damned well certain he knew, that the escape pod in which they had found her five years ago had been carefully netted in. The net was still there, but the escape pod was not.

“Blast Pal and his retrofitting nonsense. It was there.” He picked up a piece of the netting as if by shaking it he could restore the missing escape pod. “They must have removed it for safety before they started their damned defense installations. The tubes would have had to be settled against the inner hull. Damn!” And he forcefully threw the netting down again.

“Oh, well, it is not all that essential,” she said, now taking the role of comforter. “After all, there is no counterfeiting me,” she said, giggling as she swept her hand down her obviously alien length.

“Yes, but the glyphs...they might establish your lineage or rank or something.”

“We have holos of them in the files. For that matter, I can draw them quite well, you know.”

“Yes, petal, I know you can.” Calum absently patted her arm. But he, too, was shaken by the disappearance of the pod—not crucial in itself, but what else might they have overlooked in their

eagerness to get away?

The second shock to their seemingly smooth escape was the failure of the legume crops to sprout any pods as they should have done by this point in their growth, followed the next day by a decided yellowing in the stalks of alfalfa. Acorna spent a good deal of time on the agri channel and the microscope, trying to determine why that crop was failing.

“Somehow, the valve to the nutrient reservoir has been tampered with. Damn it.”

Her mild cussword surprised Calum enough, but the fact that she had not spotted the problem earlier was even more unnerving to him. Acorna was usually instantly aware of the slightest change in atmosphere or water.

“It’s just fed the entire stock of trace elements into the water supply at once—zinc sulfate, copper sulfate...no wonder the chard looks so sick!” Acorna sighed deeply.

“Something the matter with your famous nose?” Calum asked, since Acorna could often just smell an imbalance.

“The ship has many new smells, most of them chemical. I guess I thought it was just normal.” She paused, thinking. “Maybe we should listen to Provola’s entire message. ‘Acc’...where you shut her off, could have been the beginning of ‘accident’ as well as the start of my name.”

“So we will now dutifully listen.” Calum keyed in the interrupted message.

Urgent you return to Dehoney immediately. Accident risk warning! Supervisor’s report lists a broken valve in the hydroponics’ unit, which was to have been repaired first thing this morning. Only you left before they could repair it. There was a hint of humor in that final sentence, and Acorna winced. Advise immediate return to effect such minor repairs which could totally damage entire hydroponics and grazings if not made. It won’t take long.

The plea was unmistakable even in Provola’s unmistakably prosaic tone.

“Now, now, petal,” Calum reassured her. “At least it was a mistake.”

“Like unloading my pod?” Acorna asked, then thinned her lips over her front teeth.

“How bad is it?” Calum asked anxiously.

“Well, the chard could be toxic. The old, tough spinach leaves”—Acorna wrinkled her nose—“should be okay since they were fully grown when we left, and one vat of timothy was well grown before the trace-element dump, but the rest I’m not sure about. I’ll have to purify the rest of the ’ponics...and the alfalfa will have to go; if it’s picked up even a small percentage of that zinc, I’ll come out in spots.”

“Now just a moment,” Cal said soothingly, and twirled his chair around to the astrogation-control panel. A flash of knowing fingers across the touch pads, and he beamed. “We’re not that far, spatially speaking, from Rushima. We can stop there...two, three days. Basic agri world, colonized by the Shenjemi Federation. It’ll have everything we could possibly need.”

“Well, I suppose I can exist on what’s available,” Acorna said with a sigh. She swallowed hard and scratched a bit, thinking about how near she’d been to chewing her way through her original notion of lunch—a long swath down the alfalfa bed.

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