



MATRIARCH

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KAREN TRAVISS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MATRIARCH

KAREN TRAVISS

*For Lyn Graham, Martin Welsford, and all those who
put truth before convenience*

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Prologue

F'nar, Wess'ej: November 2376

Recycling won't save the Earth, and neither will prayer.

The Eqbas are coming. It might be a few decades away, but they're still coming, and I know them. They're very hospitable, they love their kids, and they can kill millions without losing a second's sleep.

You can reach shock overload pretty quickly. After the first headlines and the protests and the panic, human beings tend to settle into apathy if it's not their life that's on the line. News is about *not* and *here* and *me*.

When we wandered into a war zone in the Cavanagh's Star system, *that* was news. When we got greedy and nuked a neutral world out here, that got plenty of attention too; and so did the fact that the wess'har blew our warship—*Actaeon*—out of the sky.

But we're twenty-five light-years away from Earth, and domestic crises edge alien wars well down the running order now. When there's fighting and suffering on your own doorstep, do you care that we've pretty well exterminated an entire alien race ourselves? Do you care if a woman spaced herself rather than hand over the parasite she was carrying—and *survived*? Does it matter that the local wess'har are so pissed off with humans that they've called in the big guns to visit Earth and teach us a lesson?

If you don't, you probably will in thirty years' time. Because that's roughly when the Eqbas Vorhi fleet will reach Earth, and they're not visiting to say they come in peace or any uplifting shit like that. They're coming to punish us for genocide. And while they're at it, they want to restore Earth to a state of environmental balance. In brief: a lot of humans are fucked. Most of us, probably.

They don't see us as special, you see. That's just our view of the universe. It's not widely shared.

The Eqbas Vorhi fleet is on its way, and there's nothing we can do about it. My news desk is losing interest by the day.

It all feels so far in the future.

But I know it's not.

Private journal of Eddie Michallat, BBChan correspondent on Wess'ej, Cavanagh's Star system: the only independent observer, 150 trillion miles from home.

You detonated cobalt bombs on Ouzhari in your greed to keep c'naatat to yourself. The bezeri who died were collateral damage—that is your phrase, is it not? Now Earth will learn what collateral damage really means.

CURAS TI,
senior Matriarch of the Eqbas Vorhi,
in a response to the Foreign Secretary of
the Federal European Union

Bezer'ej, Cavanagh's Star system: continental shelf off Ouzhari island, December 2376

Mohan Rayat gave up the reflex struggle to stop his lungs filling with water, drowned—which was nowhere near as painless as they claimed—and plummeted into the crushing black depths where the light of Cavanagh's Star never penetrated.

You bitch, Frankland.

And he wasn't dead.

You sanctimonious bitch.

He was shaking uncontrollably and convulsing, but he wasn't *dead*.

Rayat was aware of the kaleidoscopes of colored light rippling above him in the mantles of the last surviving bezeri. He was a living corpse, a man imprisoned with his victims, a man who couldn't die.

Hold on to that. Whatever the parasite does to you, you're still a man.

He had no air supply and no suit. He could taste blood in his mouth: or maybe it was just something in the silt billowing around him. He sank down on the seabed, facing upwards, crushed by pressure and a searing agony in his head beyond any pain he'd ever experienced. For a moment he wondered if his survival was the result of a primal diving reflex, and not the intervention of an alien parasite.

He'd never told anyone how scared he was of water. Now he never had to fear it again.

Somehow he could still see: green, violet, blue. Coils and fractal patterns of ludicrous fairy-light danced overhead, the chatter of the bezeri—the few who had survived the irradiation from bombs he had detonated.

I never meant to kill you. You just happened to be in the way.

But the bezeri couldn't hear him. He couldn't even hear himself. The silence was overwhelming but ~~although he could still reason, and he knew his eardrums were ruptured, he still expected to sense~~ the sounds of his own body. It was surprising how much you noticed the absence of your own heartbeat.

His heart had stopped. He had no idea how he could still be conscious.

So Frankland must have gone through this when she stepped out the airlock: dead and not dead, aware that her whole body had ceased to function and existed solely by the grace of a microscopic parasite called *c'naatat* that was worth destroying worlds to capture.

You bitch, I beat you. I got your precious parasite in the end. Suck on that, bitch.

No sunlight: he could have been at least a thousand meters down, then, below the depth where light penetrated. When silent screaming panic overtook him—screams he couldn't force out of his airless lungs—he concentrated on numbers to stay sane.

I should be dead. A thousand meters...maybe one hundred atmospheres...ten thousand kilospascals...

But his mouth opened in a panting reflex anyway, because he couldn't take in what *c'naatat* was doing to keep him alive at this depth. The cold burned him. He should have looked around for Lindsay Neville but all he could think of right then was Frankland, drifting in the vacuum of space without a suit. She'd spaced herself to stop him getting hold of the *c'naatat* she carried. And—bitch, bitch, *bitch*—it had all been for *nothing*, because no matter how bad things were now, he'd got what he'd come for, and a small sane part of him rejoiced.

I beat you, you bitch. And your precious bloody Ade and your pet wess'har helped me do it. I hope you find out, oh shit yes I pray you do, you bitch.

It was amazing what you could hang on to when you needed to pass beyond death. God, numbers, vengeance: whatever it took. He seized them all.

Shan Frankland had survived. And so would he—somehow.

And he could wait.

We've had our environment screwed for centuries by the Americas and Europe and the Sinostates. They shat out their crap and we paid the price. Now it's our turn to fuck them. We can invite anyone we please into our territory. And that includes aliens who can bomb them back into dodo country.

The Right Honorable JAMES MATSOUKIS MAP,
Pacific Rim States lead delegate to the United Nations, in private conversation
with the Canadian and
Indigenous Peoples delegates

F'nar, Wess'ej: December 2376

“She’s going to fucking well skin us when she finds out,” said Ade Bennett.

The soldier kept pace with Aras all the way up the steeply carved steps to the top of the terraces, no mean feat for a short human male. Aras wondered if he would have managed it before his physiology was altered by *c’naatat*, and suspected that he would. He was a Royal Marine: he prided himself on his fitness.

“We’ll find a way to tell her,” said Aras. “And she may not understand our reasons at first, and she’ll swear at us like she always does, but in time she’ll calm down and life will go on.”

It will go on, yes. That’s the one thing a c’naatat host can be sure of. But not as before.

As soon as he said it, Aras knew things wouldn’t be that simple. How did you tell your *isan*, your wife, your matriarch, that you’d thrown away her sacrifice? Shan Frankland had spaced herself rather than let Mohan Rayat get a sample of *c’naatat*. And now Aras—or Ade, whoever felt bravest—had to tell her that they had *willingly* infected the man with it.

And Commander Lindsay Neville.

That would probably infuriate her most of all. The woman she called Lin had tried to be a pale imitation of her and succeeded only in disappointing her. Aras knew Shan well enough to guess that: you survived unimaginable pain and terror, drifting for months in space, unable to die, you didn’t easily forget that kind of ordeal or forgive its necessity.

Ade paused at the top of the steps to catch his breath, hands on hips. Stretching nearly two hundred meters directly beneath them, the city of F’nar covered the slopes of the caldera, an amphitheater of pearl-coated terraces carved into the rock.

“I’m the one who did it.” Ade wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “So I’ll explain it to her.”

“No. I’m—”

“Yeah. You’re her old man and I’m not.”

“You’ll be her *old man* too, as you put it.”

Ade shook his head and began walking along the terrace to the far end of the caldera where the home they shared was cut into the stone.

“If I don’t tell her and then I sleep with her, she’ll pick it up from my memories. And *then* she’ll kill me.” He speeded up a little to the pace he described as a *yomp*. Aras had never worked out what that meant. “And if I tell her first, she’ll kick me out anyway. So either way—I’ve lost her. I might as well face it like a man.”

Aras had lived with *c’naatat* for centuries by human reckoning, and its ability to manipulate genetic material and keep its host alive still surprised him. It seemed able to do very nearly anything it tinkered, it borrowed, it scavenged, it rearranged, it remodeled, and it defended. One set of genes that had taken its fancy was genetic memory—a legacy from his isenj captors when he was a prisoner of war. And, as *c’naatat* crossed membranes from host to host, in blood or in the act of copulation, memories surfaced in other minds.

Sometimes the memories it picked up were terrible. Sometimes it simply showed you how other people truly saw you. And sometimes they were both the same thing.

“Ade, it’s not the memory transfer that you fear.”

Ade didn’t look round. He was a compact, muscular human with a distinctively upright posture. His rifle bounced a little, slung across his back. “No, it’s trying to hide it from her, mate. I can’t do that.”

Aras had always been sure of his duty until the *gethes*, the carrion eaters, the secular humans, had come to Cavanagh’s Star in pursuit of a lost colony and commercial gain. Shan had changed his life out of all recognition. He wondered if he now resented her for that, but no—he had *infected* her. Without *c’naatat*, she could have gone home again; and Ade could have gone with her. Aras found himself back in the circular argument, wondering if he should have gone to live among the bezeri remnant to help them rebuild instead of letting Lindsay Neville and Rayat take his place.

He had never had such cyclical, dithering thoughts before. A wess’har accepted reality and dealt with it, never glancing back. Humans fantasized about alternate realities to avoid the only one they could actually influence. He realized he was becoming too human.

“We’ll tell her *together*,” said Aras. *Ade is my housebrother. We share genes now. We’re committed.* “The bezeri wanted them alive. We’ll explain that to her, and face the consequences.”

“You talk a good game.” The *clop-clop-clop* of Ade’s boots echoed off the flagstone terrace. “And I’ll be right there when she hands you your balls on a skewer.”

“I have no balls,” said Aras.

Ade snorted. It sounded like bitter amusement. “Neither will I after today.”

The marine was right. Shan would be more than furious; she would feel *betrayed*. Loyalty and honesty seemed to matter more to her than love.

But if they had no other choice but her, then she was confined to her own infected kind as well. If she rejected them, she had nobody.

Aras felt shame—real *human* shame—at thinking so manipulatively. A female was a precious and scarce gift, one a *c’naatat* carrier could never have expected. He could never be allowed to father offspring and pass on his condition; but he could at least have an *isan* to love and look after. Unlike him, though, Shan Frankland didn’t fear being alone. She dreaded doing what was *wrong*. Loneliness alone would not bind her to him—or Ade.

Ade paused at the pearl-coated door, slipped his rifle onto his shoulder, and listened as if he was about to storm the house.

“She’s not back yet.” He put his hand on the latch and pushed it open. There was no need for locks among wess’har. “Got time to rehearse our excuses.”

They could hide nothing in the end. Shan had developed a wess’har *isan*’s olfactory system, and she could smell the pheromones of agitation, anger, fear. She would certainly smell something was wrong.

At least I’ll still have a brother.

“Perhaps she’ll see why we did it.”

Ade laid his rifle on the shelf next to the door and hung up his jacket. “I don’t think so somehow.”

“She forgave you for shooting her. She forgave me for infecting her with *c’naatat*.”

“Let’s hope she works in threes, then.”

They stared at each other for a moment, knowing the answer. Shan cared about consequences. She cared about how things fitted into the bigger picture, and what she feared most—what the wess’har feared most—was that *c’naatat* would get into the wider human population somehow, with all its attendant disasters.

Perhaps Shan would see the contagion as Rayat’s punishment. Aras considered the irony: Rayat had been sent to seize it for the FEU. Whether he really was a Treasury agent or military intelligence didn’t matter now. He had it. But he wasn’t going anywhere, because there was no way off Bezer’ej, not without wess’har or Eqbas assistance. It was the ultimate punishment—a cold dark eternity trapped with your prize and no way of using it, confined with the bitter remnant of the species you helped kill.

Aras wished he had Eddie’s gift for presenting unpalatable information with selective grace. He was sure he could make it seem like a triumph.

“Your turn to cook dinner,” said Ade.

They stood side by side at the table, slicing *evem* and the last peppers that had ripened on the windowsill. Ade always seemed to seek refuge in dull routine, as if he could refashion and erase the brutal and chaotic world that had made him by mimicking the uneventful lives of lesser men. He was very precise about the thickness of the slices.

“Bugger,” he said quietly. He examined his fingertip, crowned with a welling blob of dark red blood. “Cut myself.”

C’naatat still seemed to be a novelty to him. He licked the blood away and watched the cut as it closed and faded, then resumed his task.

Half an hour later, Aras heard the distinctive thud of Shan’s footsteps approaching the door. He wished that he could suppress his scent the way she did. Ade looked at him and shrugged.

“Here we go,” he said.

The door creaked slightly before it swung open and brought in a gust of cool, damp air.

“Hey, you two,” said Shan. She forced a smile, and that wasn’t like her at all. “I’m home.”

F’nar plain, Wess’ej: Eqbas Vorhi camp

They were leaving.

Eddie Michallat gasped to a halt in the center of the Eqbas camp. The bronze bubble habitats clustered on the plain were rolling together and coalescing like mercury, metamorphosing from little globe-like tents into a huge tapered cylinder of a warship, a belt of brilliant red and blue chevron lights pulsing along its length.

For a moment Eddie forgot his straining lungs and stared at the technology that made him feel like a particularly retarded amoeba fresh out of the primordial slime.

The warship had almost completely assembled itself. He looked around for the small survey vessel that had been the vanguard, Da Shapakti’s ship, and noticed it wasn’t there any longer. Maybe the destroyer had swallowed and absorbed it too. How did they route the services and the controls? How did they keep it vacuum-tight in space? He found he had a thousand questions whose answers would almost certainly be something along the lines of *forget it, chimp*.

Esganikan Gai strode towards him. He could always ask her; it was her ship. She was the boss-woman.

The visiting Eqbas wess’har might have looked different to their native Wess’ej cousins, but the females still had that same ability to make you crap yourself. No wonder Shan fitted in with them so well. Esganikan’s brilliant copper-red plume of hair bobbed as she stared down at him and cocked her head to get a better focus, four-lobed pupils snapping from open flower to tight cross-wires and back

again in an instant, just like all the wess'har. Looking any of them in the eye was still hard. There was no single point to focus upon—just the uneasy sense of being the center of their aim.

And Esganikan was *tall*. Eddie felt like a little kid lost in a towering forest of adult legs again.

“What do you want?” She lacked charm but, unlike Shan, she was incapable of even feigning it. “We leave soon for Bezer'ej and Umeh.”

“I know.” *You owe me one*. He'd lent her his database to learn English. He wasn't sure yet of the Eqbas approach to repaying favors, but if it was the average wess'har one, it was unpredictable. “Can you take me to Jejeno?”

“We have a presence to maintain.”

“So can I get a ride with you?”

The Eqbas matriarch—flat-faced compared to the elegant, long-muzzled wess'har he'd grown used to—glanced over her shoulder at the embarkation going on behind her. “Why?”

Eddie found himself detaching from a recent, raw memory. “Now that Minister Ual's dead, I need to make contacts within the government again.”

“So do we.”

“Yes, but *can I come too?*” You had to be direct with them; they had no concept of being abrupt. Eddie wondered if his natural diplomatic touch was being corrupted by close contact with species who were as outspoken as five-year-olds. “Please?”

She cocked her head again. “Be here tomorrow when we leave.”

“Thank you.”

“At your own risk.”

It always was. “I get it.”

Esganikan turned and swept back to the ship. Eddie watched her go, still feeling sweaty and uncomfortable from running, and reminded himself what she was—an *alien*, the commander of an alien warship, a warship that was stunning in its size and technology and was just a small part of a much, much bigger fleet.

Earth had nearly thirty years left to prepare for the invasion. The fact that the Australian government had invited the Eqbas guaranteed no happy endings. Eqbas wess'har were the guests who never knew when it was time to go.

Eddie made his way back to F'nar at a sedate pace this time. He was used to the higher gravity, but it was still a long walk across the rolling plain of rock and tufts of sage green vegetation to the point where the terrain became lava buttes and the city was suddenly visible. Homes and terraces were carved into the cliff walls of a long-dead volcano. Whatever the weather, whatever the light, it was

always beautiful, coated in a shimmering layer of nacre. It was, as the human Christian colonists called it, the City of Pearl.

The pearl happened to be insect shit deposited by billions of *tem* flies, but Eddie didn't let the reality spoil his sense of wonder one bit.

Nor did he let the equally accurate word *invasion* sully his irregular news reports. Twenty-five light-years away on Earth, his BBChan colleagues had abandoned diplomatic euphemism and used it with B-movie relish; but now the panic had died down, and humans were fighting each other again.

Okay, deep down, we all want to run the headline ALIENS INVADE EARTH. Admit it, you tourist.

So Eddie admitted it. It was a journalist's fantasy story, along with IMMORTALITY DISCOVERED and EARTH NUKES ALIENS. And he'd done those for real, too. But it wasn't so mindlessly thrilling when you were part of the cause of it, and he still blamed himself. If he hadn't started digging when Shan had survived a fatal head-wound, *c'naatat's* extraordinary restorative powers would still have been a secret. And a lot of people would still be alive—

No.

I didn't bring Actaeon here. That started the shooting. I didn't make anyone nuke that bloody island to destroy c'naatat. All I did was...

He could rationalize all he liked, but he knew he *had* played a hand in helping Minister Ual defy his own government. And, however accidental the shot that killed Ual, the *isenj* politician was still dead.

Like Shan always said: dead's dead. Doesn't matter how or why in the end.

Eddie was so lost in thought that he tripped and looked around instinctively out of embarrassment. But there was only a lone *v'guy* flapping slowly overhead and the occasional pop as one of the many creatures that lived in bubbles on the rocks ventured out to grab something smaller to eat. *Wess'ej* was a carefully preserved wilderness and the *wess'har* trod so lightly on it that they were nearly invisible.

They're not native to this planet. They're invaders of a kind, too. Maybe this is how the Eqbas will behave on Earth.

He could keep wishing, anyway.

He walked on, feeling conspicuous, keeping his eyes on the uneven terrain beneath his feet. At the pillars of pearl-coated basalt plugs that formed a natural gateway to *F'nar*, a little alien seahorse waited for him.

"Eddie!" *Giyadas* had that *wess'har* double-voice like a *khoomei* singer's. She provided her own faint chorus even when speaking English. "You're going to *Umeh*."

"Yes, sweetheart." He ruffled the stiff mane that ran from front to back across the top of her head and she walked with him. "With Ual gone, I need to get to know other people in the government."

“You called them *people*.”

“They are. Even if they’re isenj.”

“I meant that *gethes* usually only call *themselves* people, so you must be learning to be civilized

Gethes: carrion eaters. Wess’har were strictly vegan. Eddie didn’t mind being lectured in moral evolution by an alien child. Sometimes he preferred the company of cockroaches when he saw what humans could do. “Yeah, I hope so.”

“I want to come too.”

“Ask your mother.”

“I have to learn an *isan*’s duties.”

“Not my call.”

Giyadas was the equivalent of a six-year-old, maybe. And it was too bloody dangerous for a little kid in the middle of—of what? Another invasion? Umeh was the dry run for Earth. What happened to the isenj homeworld now would happen to *his* home before too long.

“The Eqbas containment field will protect us,” she said.

“I’ve covered wars, sweetie. Lots of them. You’re never safe anywhere in a war zone.”

“But you’re still alive.”

Her logic was gnawing and inexorable. Like a human child, she was persistent; but she was also subtle and frequently two steps ahead of Eddie.

He wasn’t used to that—not even from adults. “And Ual’s dead.”

“That’s not your fault.”

“I’m still getting the hang of the wess’har concept of responsibility.”

“You helped him to what he wanted to do. He chose badly—for himself, anyway. For his planet, he chose well.”

Her incongruously adult tone always unsettled him. “That’s true. But what if you know someone is doing something stupid, and you don’t stop them?”

Giyadas cocked her head this way and that but didn’t look up at him. “He only harmed himself in the end. He has the right to choose to do that.”

“Outcomes, eh? Always outcomes.” Wess’har didn’t care about motive. What was *done* mattered; what was *thought* was irrelevant. “You’re probably right.”

Giyadas lapsed into silence. She spoke when she had something to say or ask, and beyond that she was content to observe. She spoke English with Eddie's accent. And she would be the next leader of F'nar if and when she grew more dominant than her mother Nevyan.

It was inevitable. They didn't vote. It just happened, and there were never any wars about it. Eddie had a moment of wondering whether invasion by a species like that was such a bad idea after all.

He reached the center of the city—one of a number of little self-governing states scattered discreetly across the planet—and began the punishing walk up the network of terraces that lined the caldera. Giyadas kept pace as if she was keeping an eye on an idiot.

"Lindsay Neville is dead," she said suddenly.

Eddie's calf muscles were coping better with the climb these days. But he almost missed his footing.

"Okay," he said.

"And Mohan Rayat. I saw Aras and Ade return."

So they'd handed them over to the bezeri, or at least the few that were left. Eddie wondered how smart squid executed prisoners; he also wondered whether to change the subject, but wess'har didn't deal in euphemism even to spare their children. Giyadas could take it. "I expect it was quick."

"Did you say goodbye to her?"

That kid never misses the jugular. "No, I'm afraid I didn't."

"Do you wish you had?"

Yes. She was a friend. "What would I have said to her anyway? Serves you right? Trust in God? What do you say to someone who's killed thousands of innocents?"

"I thought you might know," said Giyadas forlornly. "I know how the isenj treated Aras when they captured him after he had killed so many. Perhaps you might have told her to be brave."

She was suddenly both a child again and a wess'har, genuinely wanting to *know* things. It wasn't rhetoric. Eddie was never certain if it was naïve candor or insight so profound that he didn't quite grasp it. He suspected it was a blend of both. At the top of the steep steps that ran up the terrace, Giyadas slipped ahead of him and they walked in silence on pearl flagstones. Males followed, females led. The kid was falling into adult wess'har habits. So was he.

Eddie's view of wess'har went in cycles, unfathomable miracles one month and then almost family the next. Right then he felt like Uncle Eddie, and the thought crossed his mind that a trip to Umeh Station would mean human companionship again, humans in numbers, and human *women*. There were two female Royal Marines based on Wess'ej: incongruously pretty, slight Ismat Qureshi, who could probably take his head off without breaking a sweat, and Susan Webster, built more on the armored vehicle scale of things but pleasant enough company for a trained killer.

And then there were the colonists, biding their time on Mar'an'cas Island, a long way north of pretty, temperate F'nar. Eddie didn't fancy his chances of romance with the devout Christians there, not even with Sabine Mesevy.

If he went back to Earth with them, it might not be home any longer. It probably wasn't; nearly eighty years had elapsed.

Giyadas pushed open the door of her family's home and a wave of cooking smells and warbling voices spilled out. At the table in the big communal room, Dijuas—the youngest of Nevyan's four recently acquired husbands—sat suckling his infant son. Two of her three other males, Lisik and Livaor, were preparing *evem* for lunch, their long multijointed fingers stained yellow from the sap.

Nothing fazed Eddie now. *Seahorses. Yeah, think seahorses.* They had gold eyes, from citrine to topaz to amber, with four-lobed pupils that snapped shut into crosses. He sat down next to Dijuas and reached to stroke his fingertip across the child's head, eliciting an approving rumble from the father. The baby looked less like a stick insect now: he was recognizably a little wess'har male, a bald one, and three times as big as the palm-sized creature that had spent most of its time in Dijuas's gestation pouch.

“Fulaor,” Dijuas said carefully in his double voice, tone on tone. “*Fu—la—or.*”

Eddie pursed his lips and made a continuous humming sound before trying to add the second enunciated note. He'd practiced overtone singing for hours until his skull vibrated. He still couldn't quite manage it. The wess'har larynx, or whatever passed for it, could shape sounds like human lips and tongues before it even reached the mouth to pile on more phonics. Wess'u was more of a complete song than a language.

Eddie tried again. “*Oooooooooooooooooooooo...*”

Dijuas trilled loudly and the chorus of amusement was taken up by Lisik and Livaor. They found it hilarious. Eddie dissolved into giggles too. There was something touchingly childlike about the wess'har zest for life, and it was easy to forget that they also switched instantly to a much uglier mood and waged total, destructive war without prisoners. *Chilled or punching*, as Shan Frankland described them; there was no middle ground.

Nevyan appeared in the doorway.

She was considered short for an *isan*—a matriarch—but she was as tall as Shan, a six-footer, and equally fearsome in her way. Her gold tufted mane bobbed, giving her the air of a Spartan soldier, and Giyadas watched her intently as if studying her style. *This* was how to be a seahorse warrior queen.

“You mustn't mock Eddie,” Nevyan said in English. She gave her males a quick glance and—Eddie knew, even if didn't affect him—a quick burst of her dominance pheromone. *I'm the boss. Shut up.* “He tries hard.”

“We're just having a laugh,” said Eddie.

God knew there were few of those around to be had lately. Every time he found something funny

or enjoyed food, or just realized that life was richly fascinating, he thought of dead bezeri on the irradiated shores of Ouzhari, and Par Paral Ual, killed by his own nervous troops.

And dead Lindsay Neville. Unlike Shan, she wouldn't return from the apparent dead and resume her strange life 150 trillion light years from home.

"I want to visit Umeh after Esganikan has completed her talks with the isenj," said Nevyan.

"I think it'll be a dangerous place."

"I'm the senior matriarch of F'nar, and I intend to meet the isenj government, dangerous or not. Nevyan was still very young, but she had all the seasoned steel of her mother, Mestin. "They're my neighbor and my enemy. Esganikan is just passing through this system. That makes the situation more critical for us, and we might well have different agendas."

Eddie was aware of Giyadas staring up at him in expectation. She could always smell a tense debate and it fascinated her.

"I thought you two trusted each other," said Eddie. "She's one of your own."

"We both originate from the same species, but you might have noted that Eqbas Vorhi doesn't conduct its affairs as Wess'ej does."

Yeah, I know, you're the hippy dropouts and they're the militaristic right-wingers. But you still took out an Earth warship without blinking, doll.

The Wess'ej wess'har just wanted the humans punished and put back in their box, confined to quarters on the speck of rock at the galaxy's edge, and no more: the Eqbas wess'har wanted to sort out Earth's environmental excesses as well.

"That means I can go to Jjeno," said Giyadas, evidently satisfied. "I want to see it for myself."

"I made a right little reporter of you, didn't I, doll?"

"Knowing is very important." Giyadas was more speculatively curious than any other wess'har Eddie had met. "And finding out for yourself is more important still. You taught me that I could only trust my own eyes."

Eddie worried what else he'd taught her without realizing it. He also worried how he had shaped her view of humans, because she would be a matriarch herself before too long, one with access to armies.

"Sometimes you can't even rely on that," said Eddie.

Humankind had kicked over an anthill far from home, and found that the ants were smarter, bigger and far more technologically advanced than they could ever imagine.

And, like disturbed ants, the wess'har were pissed off at the brutal intrusion. They would head for the source of the irritation and deal with it: and the source was Earth.

“Look, forget the bloody aliens. That’s thirty years away. I’m more worried about this government surviving the next thirty months. Australia and the rest of the Rim States aren’t going to pose any kind of threat unless they suck in the Africans by playing the Moslem card. Canada—well, I don’t know which way they’ll jump. Depends on what the Americas do. So leave the Foreign Office to deal with Eqbas Vorhi.”

MARGIT HUBER,
newly appointed Secretary of State for Defense,
Federal European Union

Bezer’ej: the Ouzhari shelf, depth unknown

Mohan Rayat fought to stop trying to breathe. He thought of space for a long time, and concentrated on all the advantages of being at crush depth for humans instead of floating in hard vacuum in zero-g.

He was far better off than Frankland had been.

I’m oriented. I’ve got gravity. I can move.

And I’m not alone.

C’naatat had invaded his cells, and if he had any thoughts of suicide then he had no idea how to carry it out. He’d lost any sense of how long he had been submerged, but it couldn’t have been long. . . . a few minutes; a few hours. Not days, not weeks, not years.

Look around. Focus on something.

What? There was no light except the bioluminescence of his captors, apparently waiting overhead. He concentrated hard on his arms as they rested on the satin-cold mud, spreading his fingers and raising one hand a few centimeters, then letting it fall back. The silt billowed up in slow clouds—he could taste it—and it dimmed the bezeri’s rainbow light-talk for a while.

But...he had *moved*. He was oriented and he wasn’t actually in pain. He wasn’t dying: he was *changing*.

He could feel it. The searing cold had now been replaced by real heat, a fever burning within him and all his reflexes to breathe and struggle for his life had faded. They had been replaced by a desire to open his mouth and...almost *swallow*. He raised his head a little.

And now he could *see*.

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