

PROLOGUE

Before the explosion, when she and the audit group had come to the first food storage unit still blissfully unaware, Jennings turned her head and saw a tour group trailing some ways behind them.

A tour group.

Ridiculous, she thought. Did Chauncey really think that would work? The guide was fairly smooth, considering. “Primary food storage is in this section. This one here—” a point of the finger “—probably has a thirty percent capacity compared to the big ones. It’s due for an update, next on the list. The big ones are already done.”

They could have tried this earlier on, and it *might* have been effective. Way too late for it now, insultingly so; Gros Morne did not give tours—and this was no training. This was simply a little repetition wormed in, a different voice claiming what Chauncey had: an attempt at resonance delivered by an opponent who knew full well who she was dealing with—and there was the jab. *She* was no unsophisticate.

Though it had not been, yet, anything like yesterday, when she had hardly maneuvered herself out of the vehicle, stiff from traveling and wanting only her hotel room. Chauncey had arrived too promptly with the greeting delegation, had said, in front of them, with false quietness: The agenda that day was ambitious; would Jennings like the use of an electric cart? There would be no shame in it. Her age...

She thought to find something this visit, then. To say something with that much nerve—had to be designed to throw her focus.

The bays themselves were magnificent. She could admit that. Age-old limestone glistened out of the reach of the lights; the hydroponics units on the floor below were spotted with plants in full leaf.

Amazing that Kaettegut had produced *this*, when its buildings were slabs of uncolored cement—not a spark of creativity, of aesthetics.

But she was being unfair. Kaettegut did not have the resources Prime did, if she had to put her finger on it; long decades of that, and the population that resulted was unrefined, had a rawness of emotion. Even their highest officials had edges. Chauncey's smoothness was certainly intermittent.

"Main hydroponics are ahead." The guide's voice lost some of its volume as the tour group dropped further behind. One of the participants had slowed by one of the mechanical struts, was making a good show of examining it. Maintained as poorly as the much of the rest of the bays, no doubt, the metal rusted and bubbled under a cheap coat of black paint, if it was at all like the others.

Chauncey had gone further along, called ahead by an aide.

"Fine, ma'am?" Spoken to her now by a bureaucrat she particularly despised, a man whose fortyish face had more than its share of folds, of extra skin. It suited him, a simple panderer who had made it into the high levels of the Kaetteguttan government. God knew how their testing system was over here, but then, this one wouldn't survive in the rice fields. What was there over here not manual in *some* form, but government? "Ready to move on?"

A crack! It clapped hands over her ears, shocked all her nerves. She lost what the man was saying, he was no longer there—she lost all her weight, in a sickening instant, and she could not shout: her throat was stuffed with something hard and thick. *What—*

She opened her eyes. She thought she had: it was white instead of black. Dust clogged her nostrils, her mouth, her ears, bitter-tasting, bitter-smelling; her lips were coated with it.

Oh, my God. There was shocked silence all around her, the dust drifting down serene and light as fog.

She tried reaching out her hand to turn herself over. She was on her stomach; she could only tell because something pressed into it, hard and approximate to her own weight, which was too much, and she cursed it now, because she could not move. Her muscles were as insubstantial as the fog.

It was clearing. She could see a few feet ahead, with the direction

her face was turned; she could not lift her head— Several feet, now.

There was a foot, some metal... She squinted. One of her staff? Someone awake? There was more—a calf, a hand.

At least it was intact. The remains of a hydroponics unit beneath it was not, and there was another shape mixed in with that, a stomach. Dear God, she could see a navel—the clothes were torn away, and there was something jagged and dark poking through.

The one on top was alive. *Not* her staff, not a tech—one of the tour group. Young, breathing very shallow, face resting on its side as if on a pillow; he might have been simply asleep, but for the surroundings.

“Hey!” she said, sharply. Ordering tone.

Nothing. She tried turning her neck again, and it creaked and protested, but it moved until she had gotten her nose ground into the floor.

She was not lying level. Under her arm she could feel metal grid, hard and unyielding, and chafing. The walkway—down at the level of the floor, at this angle, *good God*. Her leg, when she pulled, only came so far.

A flicker on the metal. *Oh, no—oh no, no, no. Oh, for God's sake—* She could not hear, but she could see it: fire, where there had not been any before, and she could not move.