

Chapter 1: K-42

“We are about to land on K-42,” Zain announced with perfect enunciation as he neared the planet. “Is everyone ready?”

He landed the ship, the SE-Gauntlet, and looked over the motley team that was assigned to the mission. He, the perfectly manicured, properly-dressed, and well spoken gentleman, was assigned a most unusual team. Marg was the toxicologist, who was also a priestess who had driven them crazy on their journey trying to get them to find their inner peace. She was only three feet tall and looked more like a margay cat than a human. She walked on her hind legs, didn't have fur, except on her ears and tail, wore a green tunic, and spoke perfectly. Kaia was their farming expert. She, at one time, was a normal human, but after the Diablo mutant incident, she was left with the skin of a cuttle fish, thus able to change her skin and hair to blend into any background. His engineer was also mutated in the same incident and had four arms. Their geneticist, Derek, was an adult who looked and acted like a twelve year old child, even though he was sixty-one. His race matured behaviorally slowly. Yet, he had many interesting animals that he had genetically modified. Personally, Zain would not go into Derek's cabin because of the creatures. The most unusual of the team was Steve, their protector, who was eight feet tall, massive, and grew to twelve feet when he berserked. Honestly, Zain was scared of him.

“Is everyone ready?” Zain asked again. “Let's hope this goes well.”

“It should be pretty easy,” Marg responded. “Nobody worry. Just take deep breaths and meditate for a moment. After all, we just need to see what happened to the race that used to live here

and if we can colonize the planet. It should be safe.” She thought for a moment and suggested, “But just in case it isn’t, let me go down first. We are told the atmosphere is breathable, but just in case it is poisonous, I should go first, since I can’t be poisoned.”

“You can’t?” Derek asked as he snapped for his shoulder dragon to come to him. “That’s odd. Can I study you when we get back?”

“No,” Marg answered. “I’m headed home after this. It’s peaceful there. I came out here to make antibodies for the disease that was affecting the non-humans that the mutant normals were spreading. My race is immune to all disease and poison, so all they had to do was inject me with the disease and I produced an antidote that they were able to analyze. I was able to help save thousands.”

“Interesting,” Derek noted. “By all means, you go first. I always said ladies first, particularly since you won’t be able to give those antibodies to me if I’m exposed.”

“Actually I could,” Marg explained. “There is no reason to worry. Be at peace.” She held her hands out and closed her eyes as if meditating. It looked odd coming from a three foot tall cat lady. Then she added, “But I have to warn you that to do so I will have to bite you. It’s the only way for me to deliver the antibodies.

“I’d rather get bitten than get injected with a needle,” Kaia, the cuttle-fish skinned girl, chimed in.

“Not me,” Derek noted. “It sounds painful.”

“Pain is a thing of the mind,” Marg assured him. “It doesn’t have to hurt if you think of a nice field with flowers and beautiful butterflies. Imagine the sweet smell of...”

“We don’t need flowers right now,” Zain pointed out. “We need to get this job done. Come, Marg, you may go first.”

She opened the door and walked down the ramp. After taking readings, she hit her com unit. "It's safe; no poison," she reported, so the rest of the team came out.

The land may have once been beautiful, but not anymore. The buildings were in ruins and the plant life looked wild and untamed.

"Obviously plants can grow here," Kaia noted. "That's good if this planet is to be colonized." She began setting traps to catch animals and see what wildlife lived on the surface.

Zain began to search the ruins of the buildings for technology, looking for data about the people who were there before and what killed them.

Derek walked up to a plant. His ice-breathing shoulder dragon, Draco, flew back away from it as he picked a leaf. The plant immediately squirted something on him and he started into a rage, yelling and throwing a tantrum.

Steve, the eight foot tall strong man, walked over and picked him up, restraining him. Marg squirted the poison in her face so she would produce the anti-toxin and then bit him.

As she did, a strange creature that looked to be something between a small snake and a lizard ran over toward Derek.

Unsure what it would do, having just seen an attacking plant, Kaia blasted it.

It made a high pitched squealing sound, and suddenly thousands of the odd lizards were surrounding them, answering the call. They were all quickly covered in the critters, at least almost all.

Marg jumped up into a tree. Kaia immediately lay down and made herself look like the ground so they would ignore her, but Norman and Derek were bitten, many times. They were trying to bite Steve.

Norman started screaming, “For glory!” as he shot at Steve and ran to attack him.

Steve shook the odd lizards off him and smacked Norman away. Norman flew through the air and landed with a thud on the ground. He wasn’t going to fight anymore. He was unconscious, but Steve knew he wasn’t dead. If he was, he wouldn’t feel pain. Fortunately, Steve could keep his wits about him. He was covered in the odd lizards, but his skin was way too tough for them to bite through.

Marg looked at the pandemonium and tried making the shrieking noise the odd lizard had used to call the others, hoping to call them away. It didn’t work, but called many to her. Their poison couldn’t affect her and make her go crazy, but their bites sure hurt.

That was the scene that Zain came back to, after having successfully found memory chips. The odd lizards began to run toward him.

“Cover your eyes!” Zain called out as loudly as he could. “Drop to the ground and cover your eyes!”

Marg, Kaia, and Steve did immediately. Derek did when the flash of light came.

“That was a warning!” Zain called. Everyone closed their eyes tightly. Zain then burst forth a very bright light, so bright that it suddenly became hot. All the odd lizards either ran away or died.

“Wow!” Kaia exclaimed. “That was amazing! How did you know light would affect them that way?”

“Quite simple, madam,” Zain responded with perfect enunciation. “I have used light to rid my home of pests on several occasions. Cold blooded animals do overheat, and extreme light will harm most species, even humans. I do hope I caused no eye damage to anyone on the team.”

Kaia would have loved to ask more questions, but Norman was unconscious and Derek was in a rage again. “We need to take care of them and get back to the ship,” she suggested.

“But of course,” Zain agreed.

Steve easily picked up the enraged Derek and brought him to the ship. Zain picked up Norman. At least he tried. The four arms made him hard to hold, so Steve came back out and retrieved him.

When they all arrived back on the ship, the first order of business was to have Marg bite Derek so he would stop being enraged. Derek fought surprisingly hard considering his size, and Steve had to hold him down. Norman also woke up and started into a rage. Zain made lights dance around him so he would be too disoriented to attack anyone until Steve ran over and held him down, so Marg could bite him.

The next item of business was to heal all of them. Marg went right to that job. Her bite could cure disease and poison, not wounds, but her race was incredibly good at healing. They knew every plant on their world and made excellent healing salves. She could heal the bites almost instantaneously, and everyone but Steve, Zain, and Kaia had many bites. Norman took longer, as his wounds were bad because Steve had hit him hard.

Steve came over and sat by him. “Can you fix his broken bones?” he asked Marg. “I’m afraid that he has broken ribs. When he wakes up, he will feel the pain. I am so sorry. I was not careful as I had those lizard-snakes on me.”

She looked at him oddly. “How do you know his ribs are broken?” she asked. She then used a smelling salt to revive him, and he was in pain.

“He’s going into shock,” Steve warned. “Help him.”

It didn't take long for Marg to calm him and stop the shock. She then gave him an elixir for the pain and started working on the broken ribs.

"I can heal broken bones in a few days," Marg assured him. "He will be fine."

Steve stared at her and asked, "A few days? No one can heal that quickly without medical bonding technology. Those are expensive machines."

"We have unusual plants on my planet," Marg explained. "He will heal that quickly."

"Good," Steve stated as he watched Norman. "He hurts. The others hurt too, as those bites really stung, but they aren't in the pain he is."

Marg thought to question him about it, but she had to take care of Norman.

"What happened?" Norman asked when he gained the ability to.

"You were injured," Marg explained. "Just stay calm."

Norman tried to raise his head, but put it back down quickly and moaned, "I feel funny. I don't remember anything I did on the planet after seeing that funny looking lizard."

"I'm calling them slards," Derek called from across the room.

"You went crazy from being bitten," Marg explained.

Norman almost jumped up and panicked, "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No," Marg answered. "Steve stopped you."

"I hurt you," Steve admitted. "I am sorry."

"Was he bitten too?" Norman asked.

Marg didn't answer his question, but soothed, "Stay calm and let me heal you. Questions can wait until later. Breathe deeply and think peaceful thoughts."

Steve walked away, as Marg had the situation under control. He went over to Kaia and noted, "I don't think K-42 is inhabitable."

"It might be," Kaia countered. "We may be able to do some pest control, and the dangerous plants may be able to be destroyed and replaced with harmless ones."

Zain also came over to them and informed them, "I have been reading the memory chips. It seems that there are many infected animals on the planet, but they are all infected by the plants. If the plants could be removed, then perhaps the animals could be given an antidote and K-42 could become inhabitable. We will try again tomorrow. I may be able to help there. I am an accomplished horticulturalist. I'm not merely a pilot."

"So did the infected animals kill the people?" Kaia asked.

"No," Zain answered. "They did not. The people became infected and killed each other. It was war between them that brought the destruction of their city."

Steve nodded and suggested, "Zain, why don't Marg and I go tomorrow and see what we can..."

His sentence was interrupted by a beeping sound coming over the com.

"What's that?" Steve asked.

"It's a distress call," Zain answered. "And very poor timing. It is almost time for tea. Let's go see what it is. Someone is in trouble."