

**WARNING**

THE MATERIALS AND WORKS MADE AVAILABLE BY C&M ONLINE MEDIA INC. THROUGH BOSON BOOKS ARE COPYRIGHTED.

YOU ARE PERMITTED TO DOWNLOAD LOCALLY MATERIALS AND WORKS FROM BOSON BOOKS AND TO MAKE ONE (1) HARD COPY OF SUCH MATERIALS AND WORKS FOR YOUR PERSONAL USE.

FEDERAL COPYRIGHT LAWS, HOWEVER, PROHIBIT ANY FURTHER COPYING OR REPRODUCTION OF SUCH MATERIALS AND WORKS, OR ANY REPUBLICATION OF ANY KIND.

ILLEGAL COPYING OR DISTRIBUTION OF MATERIALS AND WORKS OBTAINED FROM BOSON BOOKS CONSTITUTES COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT. ILLEGAL COPIES OF SUCH MATERIAL AND WORKS CAN BE SEIZED AND DESTROYED. FURTHERMORE, MATERIALS AND WORKS CREATED BY YOU OR OTHERS USING COPYRIGHTED MATERIALS OBTAINED FROM BOSON BOOKS WITHOUT THE WRITTEN AUTHORIZATION OF C&M ONLINE MEDIA, INC. ALSO CAN BE SEIZED AND DESTROYED. COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT CAN BE INVESTIGATED BY THE FBI. CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS MAY RESULT IN IMPRISONMENT OR A FINE OF UP TO \$250,000, OR BOTH.

---

This short story is presented in acid-free biodegradable text

Published by Boson Books  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
ISBN 1-886420-03-3

An imprint of C&M Online Media Inc.

Copyright 1994 by Gayle P. Peters  
All rights reserved

For Information contact  
C&M Online Media Inc.  
3905 Meadow Field Lane  
Raleigh, NC 27606  
Phone: 919 233-8165; Fax: 919 233-8578  
email: boson@vnet.net  
URL: <http://www.vnet.net/boson/>

**TESTIMONY OF A WAIFER'S DAUGHTER**

by

**GAYLE P. PETERS**

---



Out of the desert came Jonathan Prophet. Last summer. To our hanca, just under the west rim of the Ordubeast Wash. If you've never been there, it's pretty scrub land, with standing redrock and hardbrush and sandrunners. Don't have a big spread, Dad couldn't afford wet riverbottom or the big water collectors you need for a good-sized flock, but he's paid attention to the breeding, and there's one Consolidated buyer stops by every season to look at our yearlings.

Well, there's Dad and Mom and Theso--he's three years older'n me--and little Jeem, cute as anything. Theso's all right, but he's always so serious, and Dad says he does a man's work already with the flock.

I'll be working the flock soon, myself--already have the smartest little pet pup named Killeau that I took care of when a runner got her mama--but just now Mom says I'm more value to the family helping her. "Sure enough work around here for two women," she says, "especially when whelping comes." Means long days and little sleep and we're all busy all the time, even Jeem. Dad always hires at least two of the Oferkeno boys to help, and they stay over, which means even more cooking and laundry for her, and course I help with all that.

But don't believe I'm cut for being a wife and mother. Rather be with Dad and Theso and the flock than doing women's work--can't stand the gardening and the brush-cutting and the housecleaning. Mom says I'll feel different in a few years, when I find the right man and have a hanca of my own to take care of. Maybe, but boys sure are dumb. I do find one, likely I'll be the one with the flock and he'll do well to stay out of my way and mind the house.

Unless he'd be like Prophet. That would be all right. Back when we could still talk about it Mom said I had a crush on Prophet just cause he wasn't like anything I'd ever seen. That part's true enough. Well, not sure how to say it except to say it. He's like a waif, only bigger, taller than Dad, and... well, he's smart as you and me. Fact is, he thinks. Do understand that Waifs can't think, that they're dumb animals, but Prophet thinks. Besides, he's only like a waif.

The hottest part of the summer had just set in, 'cause both our small streams held dust, but the North Fork of the Ordubeast still ran water. Dad has a contract with Counselor Saurkorza's hanca manager to water up to fifty head year 'round in the river, so he and Theso were up there with Thunder and the ewes, when Prophet showed up one day, near sundown.

I was outside pumping deep sweetwater to the groundlings, since night was coming. Killeau was squatting watching me from outside the pen--don't think she'd mean any harm, but she's quick, and if she got one, I'd never hear the end of it from Mom and Dad--and I was talking at her like you do, and looked up and saw them there, standing high on the rim above the spread. Just standing there silhouetted against the low sun, though you had to look close, 'cause there's a lot of brush we hadn't cut yet up that way.

Three of them. Prophet first--he was the tallest--and then a Korieggi, and this loper, probably taller'n Dad on its hind legs and every bit as big at the shoulder as little Jeem

would want to ride--I saw her let him once, when Mom wasn't around--with teeth that would fit around my leg, and claws to match, and she was beautiful, like sculpture.

Hadn't ever seen anything like that, but I wasn't really scared, for some reason, maybe the way they didn't try to sneak up or anything. Just stood there looking down at the place. Could see they saw me watching them, and when they started down off the rim, I went to the house and told Mom.

"Company. A Korieggi, looks like two pets with him, biggest waif I ever saw, and a loper. Maybe twenty minutes--just started down off the rim through the brush, pick up the middle trail soon enough."

Mom stopped kneading up the dough for supper and looked at me, pushing a tendril away with the back of one hand. She glanced at Jeem rolling brush fronds into cords for Dad to weave into lariat rope when he got back. "Jeem, set another place at the table. We have a guest." Her voice to me was real quiet. "Khayla, go into my bedroom and bring me the two-thread from the box on top of the shelf."

I nodded. Mom's apron had wide, deep pockets. Until we knew about this Korieggi we'd offer him the hospitality any desert traveler deserved, but no point in being stupid, with Dad and Theso both gone.

They came down the middle trail like I figured, and stepped into the clearing between the whelping barn and the house just as Mom shoved the dough into the beehive oven--during the summer we cook and eat outside like most folks, to keep the house cooler. The Korieggi had been singing, like, for the past few minutes, so we wouldn't be surprised, and he stopped moving as soon as he showed in full view. I liked that, it meant he knew how to act in the desert, though traveling during the day had sort of argued the other way.

"Hello, the house!" he called, in that high-pitched Korieggi voice they all have, and lifted both arms to wave.

Mom put the dough paddle back and turned slowly, almost like a queen. She looked him over, and so did I from the doorway, where I had Jeem behind me. Saw then the Korieggi was a female, which surprised me some, but the important thing was she didn't carry any weapon, slung or holstered, that I could see. No taller'n me, dressed for the desert, good gear, certainly not handmade, but not used much yet. And she looked pretty limp after traveling in that heat, even smaller and pinker and thinner than most Korieggi I'd seen.

The tall waif surprised me a lot. Big strong male, looked pretty solid yet, and he was dressed! The Korieggi had him wearing everything like a heathen man would, from boots and pants to shirt and wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun off, instead of robe and turban like Dad and Theso wear. He carried a pack, so the Korieggi was using him for a trade waif--he was sure big enough to handle a hefty weight--and then I spotted what I should have seen first off: that waif had a two-thread holstered around his middle, just about where his hand would touch it when he stood easy. Didn't matter how long I stared at it, made no sense at all. Why wouldn't the Korieggi carry her own weapon--who would trust

a waif with a two-thread--I had a dozen questions and no answers at all about him. Shook my head and looked closer at the loper.

Like I'd seen, she was beautiful. Trained down to the ground, too. Stood stock still, didn't move a muscle, 'cept you could see her ribs spread when she breathed, like a windmill turning over with no effort at all. Desert-colored, white blaze on her chest, sun-yellow eyes taking us all in from across the clearing, tail motionless while she tasted the wind, lifting her nose in quick little motions.

Mom stepped away from the oven and shoved her hands deep in her apron pockets. "Come and set," she called, "there's water and supper, and you can pump sweetwater for your animals." She waited a moment. "Cousin, I'd feel safer if you'd take that thing off your waif. No offense, but I have little ones here." I knew she meant Jeem.

"No offense," The Korieggi stopped and held out her hand, and after a moment the waif pulled his weapon and gave it over. They came to the pump, and first thing the Korieggi pumped for the loper, who drank a long time, and then for the waif. Only then for herself.

"Salazar's the name, and waif-buying is the game," the Korieggi said as we sat eating at the table under the Batichitree, watching the rimshadow creep across the wash and up the eastern cut. The waif and the loper were feeding in the shadow of the barn, eating out of the pack he carried, and they seemed to be doing all right.

"Wrong time of year," I said, before I thought, but caught Mom's "Hush, don't talk disrespectful to guests" look, and hushed.

"Heavens, little miss, not here to buy now," Salazar laughed too hard. "No, here to poke around, see who's raising what, who they sell to, what prices are like. Maybe you folks sell to Consolidated?" Leaned forward over her bowl, her hands busy breaking bread, and when Mom nodded, her voice dropped. "There's a group thinks Consolidated has had it their way along the Ordubeast too long, thinks there's money for everyone with the right suppliers located. A little healthy competition would do everybody right." Quick little eyes shifted from Mom to me. "Now, can't say for sure, not my decision, you know, but don't be surprised, next whelping season, you see other buyers in here offering more than Consolidated ever has."

"Wouldn't know about that," Mom said, refilling the Korieggi's waterjar. "Husband handles the sale. No complaints about prices."

The Korieggi smiled too big again, like she had ever since we sat down. "Loyalty to your buyer is an admirable virtue, Ma'am." Reached for another big hunk of bread. "Now where is your husband, Ma'am? Like to talk, maybe see some of your breeding stock if he's of a mind."

"How come you're walking?" I asked. "During the day?"

Salazar looked at me kind of vacant, like she couldn't figure out how to answer, then smiled that slick smile again, "Windrover broke down last night in the middle of nowhere.

Knew I was someways west of the Ordubeast and decided to keep coming. Not real smart. May have noticed I'm new to the desert. But learning."

"Out here learn or die," I said. "Desert don't forgive."

Told to hush and Mom and Salazar started talking about the season and when Dad would be back, and found myself watching Killeau. Normally she squats behind my chair--Mom doesn't permit pets at the table--but she had been fascinated by the big waif ever since they'd arrived, and now she had wandered off to watch him eat. Approached him real cautious, moving slow, keeping her retreat trail open, stopping a lot to see if he was showing signs of irritation like other males, but finally got herself within touching distance.

Just sat on the ground, his long legs stretched out and his back against the barn wall, watching her. Every now and then he'd pull a handful of something out of his pack and hand some to the loper and eat some. Kept watching her all the time. So did the loper.

Could see he puzzled her, cause while they looked exactly alike, only he was almost twice as big, didn't act like a waif--no sniffing, no circling, nothing she could fit into how things were supposed to be. Gave him every opportunity to say hello and present himself, but he wouldn't do a thing to help her. She squatted down in front of him.

"Not really a waif, is he?" I asked, interrupting Salazar.

"Now why don't you think so?" Salazar sounded interested in that, instead of being too polite like when they'd been talking weather and flocks.

"Looks like them, 'cept bigger, and he wears clothes, but he uses things right, uses his head, and don't know how waifs act among themselves. Who is he?"

"Khayla, not polite to ask strangers their business. Now apologize." Mom sounded pretty embarrassed.

"Apologize," I said automatically, "but who is he?"

"That's all right, Ma'am, how else do they learn if they don't ask questions. Now, little miss, it so happens, you're right. Isn't a waif, though you can see they're obviously related somewhere along the line. Calls himself a "humam" --loper's his, not mine, by the way--and he's guiding me on this first trip."

"Guide?" Mom asked, real puzzled. "How can he do that if he ain't from around here? Never seen anything like him, never heard anybody talk about seeing anything like him. A humam, you said? Take the clothes off and let his hair grow, could be the biggest breeding bull at any hanca up and down the Wash." She looked sharply at Salazar. "Under control?"

"Oh, no danger at all, ma'am. Big and tough but gentle with child or babe. Why don't you go take a closer look, little miss? Seems your waif has already found him to her liking."

Jeem and I left the table and walked to where Killeau was picking food out of Prophet's hand--some sort of grain he was eating. "That stuff all right for her? Usually eats leftovers," I said.

He looked at me a long time in silence, then looked at the loper and when he opened his mouth, I couldn't make any sense of the sounds at all. May have been a desert guide, but sure wasn't from around the Ordubeast, and I had never heard a waif make those noises.

He looked at the loper again, as though trying to read a message in the way she cocked her head at us. Then he turned back to me and I got the second big surprise of the day.

**\*\*Name's Jonathan Prophet. This is Shana. What did you say?\*\*\***

Stared at him. His mouth hadn't moved, except to chew, but I heard him inside my head, and I could understand him--I looked around at Salazar and Mom, and then at Jeem crouched down in front of Shana.

**\*\*You're the only one can hear me right now, kid. What's your name? Don't say it, just think it.\*\*\***

**\*\*I AM KHAYLA.\*\*\*** Screwed my eyes almost shut and balled my fists and thought real hard.

He smiled--a real nice smile--and nodded his head. **\*\*Got you just fine, Khayla. No need to work so hard. What did you say earlier?\*\*\***

**\*\*Can she eat what you're giving her?\*\*\***

**\*\*Dried fruit and cereal grain we brought from Ancala. She seems to like it all right. What's her name? She won't tell me.\*\*\***

**\*\*Tell you---oh, in here. She's a waif, she can't tell you anything. Name of Killeau, and she's mine.\*\*\***

After a moment Prophet nodded. **\*\*Nice name. You pick it?\*\*\***

And I told him the story of Dad finding her up on the mesa right after whelping season where her mama hadn't come down to the pens for birthing and he'd come on the female too late to save her from the Sandrunner he shot but in time to bring the little pup home and give to me even though he thought she'd die but she hadn't and I had brought her through and named her after my favorite heroine in the stories Mom told me when I was little cause she was a fighter and how one day I'd work the flock and get it into prime shape and bring in some water collectors and....

**\*\*Whoa, kid, take a breath. Chances are we'll be here a few days if your folks don't object. Plenty of time for getting acquainted.\*\*\***

**\*\*You from Ancala?\*\*\***



\*\*Nope. Used to be a deputy sheriff in Vidalia County, Georgia, until I joined up with the Empire.\*\*

\*\*Never heard of Vidalia County. Desert country, like this?\*

\*\*Green and fertile and trees all around. Lots of water.\*\*

\*\*So how come you're here with her if it's not like home?\*

\*\*Kid, I been lots of places that weren't like home. Shana and I usually find our way, and she pays good.\*\*

\*\*Hope you got your pay up front. Keep traveling during the day, she won't live to square accounts.\*\*

He nodded. \*\*Had no choice today, but you're sure right. That heat kills.\*\*

\*\*Couldn't fix the windrover?\*

He paused a moment, flicking his glance toward Salazar. \*\*No way,\*\* said finally, \*\*stove up too much. Somebody might if they find it, but we decided to walk.\*\*

My turn to nod, but I wondered why Salazar had said broken down, not broken up. Prophet interrupted.

\*\*What's going to happen to her--Killeau?\*

 He leaned forward and cupped her face--she's a pretty little thing--in his hand, and you could see she liked that, closing her eyes and rocking back and forth.

I shrugged. \*\*Not sure. Dad gave her to me, but I won't sell her unless things get a lot tougher around here. Likely she'll be the foundation of my own flock. When she's older, start breeding her and build up. Won't sell the yearlings for awhile, either, though you got to watch the inbreeding if you use the same bull too often.\*\*

Prophet jerked his hand back like she'd bitten it. \*\*Man, I can't do this!\*\* Was like a shout, and both Salazar and Shana jerked their heads to look at him and I suddenly understood two things: All three of them were connected. And no windrover accident brought them to our place.

Prophet scrambled up and walked off behind the barn. Killeau trotted after him, but I called her back. Finally came and squatted behind me. Loper just laid there and washed herself and watched me.

Woke up sometime late during the night. Breeze had brought sound through the window, and Dekios had risen to shine bright enough that I could see the clearing pretty good when I looked out. Glanced at Jeem sleeping just fine in his little bed, and I got my clothes and sandals and went out without waking him.

Mom had told Salazar we didn't have any extra beds, but she was welcome to sleep in the barn. Don't think she believed what Mom said but understood the real reason, and accepted as offered. So first thing I headed for the barn, to see what I could. Not really surprised that Killeau wasn't sleeping in her nest outside the back door. Whatever those three had in mind, she was involved some way.

Took me almost a full minute to open the barn door without making noise. In the far corner whelping pen was a dim light and sometimes the sound of movement, and whispers. Crept closer, till I could see what they were doing with Killeau. If they were hurting her, I'd fix their wagons good. Promised myself that.

They weren't. Were all in a circle, Salazar across from Killeau with something in her hands, and Prophet kneeling beside my waif. All looking at the same thing, and when Salazar moved a little, could see it was a mirror, and they were letting Killeau look at herself.

Didn't make any sense at all. They were dead serious, too, no game. Really wanted her to see herself in the mirror. And, you know, when she looked, at first I thought she'd think it was another waif--Mom and Dad always said they thought that--but she knew she looked at herself. She pushed at her hair, she made faces, she giggled, she finally took the mirror and held it real close, like she couldn't get enough of looking. Said she was a smart one. Prophet patted her back and she smiled real bright at him. Leaned against him.

"Killeau finds the mirror fascinating, and gives unmistakable evidence that she knows who she sees in it. She is undoubtedly self-aware," Salazar said in a rapid, businesslike whisper. Couldn't tell who she was talking to at first, until I saw the holocorder next to her. Sure didn't sound like the cheesy waif-buyer she had at supper. Sounded like she was doing a job she knew how to do.

After a minute she got Killeau's attention back from the mirror and Prophet gave her a stack of playing cards, except they weren't like the cards we use--had signs and symbols I hadn't seen before. She laid about six of them down on the ground, face up so Killeau could see them. She picked up one, with a big circle on it and held it in front of her. Killeau didn't do anything, and after a short wait, Prophet gently took her hand and helped her pick up one card after another. When she got to the matching circle, he had her hand it to Salazar, and gave her a pinch of the Ancala food, and he and Salazar smiled and cooed and patted her. When Salazar picked up the card with the two triangles, Killeau went to the right card like a shot. That must have impressed Salazar, cause she stopped what she was doing and looked closely at Killeau munching away at the new food nugget Prophet offered. Then, for the next several minutes she fooled with the cards, putting out more and more to start with, until she had about fifteen or twenty on the ground, with Killeau finding the right one every time, and then she wouldn't play the game any more.

"You're getting bored, aren't you, Killeau?" Salazar said. "Well, that's probably plenty for one session." She glanced at Prophet, and they must have said things in their mind, for Prophet slowly got to his feet and Killeau hopped into his arms. I ducked into a feedstall and made myself as small and invisible as I could while he carried her past and outside. She had both arms around his neck and her head on his shoulder and looked like she had

found heaven. What stopped my breath, though, was the look I saw on Prophet's face in the dim light as he went past. Looked like he had found a private corner of Hell.

And all the time Salazar whispered into her holocorder about what Killeau had done with the cards.

Dad and Theso brought the flock down from the North Fork just after sunup the next morning, about an hour before the hardcases threw down on everybody. Were all up by then, of course, and Mom had a breakfast fire going in the oven. I had finished feeding the groundlings and gathering their spools, with Killeau squatting outside the pen, and Salazar and Prophet were chopping hardbrush for Mom as part payment of the meal--well, Prophet made the brush snap, while Salazar watched. Mom also kept her eye on that big waif handling an edged weapon--she still didn't understand that Prophet was different, and I hadn't told about us talking in my head, or about the barn last night. Figured she still had the two-thread in her apron.

Killeau suddenly stood and faced up the wash, cupping her ears with her hands to hear better, and I looked the same direction. Along the floor of the wash, about where the north trail led, could see dust rising in the brush. Killeau started bounding up and down, waving her arms and making her "Hoo! Hoo!" call.

"Dad's coming!" I yelled, and ran to the edge of the clearing. Jeem trotted over as fast as his little legs would carry him, and Salazar nudged Prophet and pointed. Mom paused from deveining the breakfast spools and smiled, then reached for more, knowing Dad and Theso would be really hungry after a night of moving the flock.

Could hear them in a minute, first Theso's high-pitched whoops and then Dad as he called the waifs to stay together, and Moxie's call, and Thunder's. Had the scent of the barn and water by then, and they were coming home, and you could hear the thudding noise they make when they run, and the moans. Can't let a waif run out of control, he'll run till he gets sick and the ewes are worse than the bulls. Dad says he's seen ewes run till they drop over dead, for no reason.

Hustled over to the corral and got the gate opened, and lifted the lid off the water tank. Prophet came to help--the cover's a little heavy for me, but I can do it if I don't have to hurry. Saw Prophet had his two-thread back. He picked up Jeem as he came, set him out of harm's way beside the corral gate, and we got the lid off just as Thunder and Moxie broke into view at the edge of the clearing, holding their waterskins high.

Came at a run, and behind them the rest of the flock, hooing and calling, legs flashing and hair tossing, the dust churning from under their feet and filtering through the sunlight, and Dad and Theso running close behind to keep them bunched. Both whips were popping and they were yelling, getting the flock into the corral without anyone breaking away. Could have told them no worry, the flock wanted the water and wasn't going anywhere else.

Dad and Theso and I got the gate closed, with the lockpole across, and the flock milling and churning and announcing their success in bringing water, everybody lining up to

empty their skins and drink at the permitted place. Killeau watched from outside the corral, still calling and welcoming them home, jumping up and down and very excited.

Noticed Prophet had gone back to stand a pace behind Salazar, Shana beside him. I nodded. He would choose his moment about bringing himself to Dad's attention, but I could see his eyes under the hat, watching all of us, trying to know Dad from the way he came to Mom and us kids. I wondered if he would try talking to Dad in his head, or let Salazar handle everything. Also wondered when I would tell Dad and Mom about last night, and about Prophet talking with me. Wondered why I hadn't said anything already.

Glanced through the corral poles to see where Thunder stood, checking after his brood now that he had finished drinking, nuzzling and holding the females, and I looked at Prophet. A lot alike, but different. Different height, one dressed and one natural, one with his face bare, the other covered with hair, but could sorta see that if you put clothes on Thunder or took them off Prophet, in a year they'd at least look the same.

What had Salazar been doing? And why so impressed with Killeau's trick with the cards? Who was she? Who were any, for that matter.

All this went through my head in the few seconds while Dad was brushing dust from his robes and hugging me and slapping Theo on the back and Mom arriving with the homecoming basin and jar for her husband. Tried to visualize myself doing that some morning a few years from now as my own would come home from watering stock. Couldn't see it. I shook my head and helped Theo put the tank cover back in place.

We all got hugged, and Dad thanked The Lord for the safe moving of the flock, and he and Theo drank, and Mom introduced Salazar. Kind of a moment there, when my father and my brother saw Prophet and took him in, but Salazar got everybody through it, pointing out both how he was like a waif, and how he wasn't. At last Dad nodded and invited Salazar to breakfast with the family; Prophet and Shana looked at each other and made themselves comfortable under hardbrush shade.

**\*\*Prophet,\*\*** I sent, hoping he'd hear me, **\*\*Dad doesn't mean anything by that. Isn't used to a waif who's a person.\*\***

**\*\*Don't worry so much, Khala.\*\*** Grinned at me from across the clearing. **\*\*Your dad's a good man. I can see he does a good job of taking care of y'all. We'll get through this one step at a time.\*\***

By the time I got Jeem and me ready and seated at the table under the Batichitree, Salazar had already started talking to Dad while he ate, about next whelping season, and prices and all.

"Yesirree, here to say that's a good looking flock you got there, could tell that when they came in. Pleasure to see stockraising done right." Too breezy, too loud, and Dad hadn't gotten used to having company pounce on him, like, the second he brings the flock home. Also doesn't trust flattery. "When someone you don't know tells you how good you do," he says, "seven times out of eight that one wants something." Could tell by the way he frowned and shrugged that Salazar wasn't doing herself any favors by keeping on.

"Looks like you're doing right by your family, too," she said, and that brought Dad's head up and he stopped popping spools and water into his mouth. Talking with Ordubeast folks, you don't bring family into business. Families are private.

"Your girl now, since our arrival, she's been showing us her own waif there, by the pen. Good-looking waif: sound, clear eye, good teeth. Girl's done a good job raising her little pet." Salazar smiled, screwing up her eyes and turning her lips inside out like Korieggi do.

Dad looked at me. "Has that," he said at last, winking at me with the eye Salazar couldn't see.

"Now, like I say, got lots of people to see up and down the wash, and sound out how the whelps will be next season, but already like what I see, if your neighbors can match your quality. And your girl's. Tell you what I'm thinking here, my friend. When I get back to Ancala, make my report, the company I represent will think hard about bidding against Consolidated around here. But they're businessmen, like to see the lay of the land, as you might say. Will sure enough want to see if the Wash will meet their expectations."

Dad set down his waterjar to look sharp at Salazar. "Get to it, I'm a tired and lonely man", he said. I could sure see it coming, even if Dad couldn't.

"Direct and businesslike; that's good, that's after my own manner. Very well: Want to buy your little girl's pet, when I'm ready to leave the Wash, take her to show the investors the kind of flock they'll find here. Give top money, to you or your girl, maybe enough to buy two, get a good start on her own flock."

Sat there, staring at my plate. Wasn't s'posed to say about my own flock, I hadn't gotten around to actually telling Dad I wasn't planning on wiving and making a hanca for some man I don't know yet.

"She's a girl," Dad said, looking at me, "no need of a flock. But the waif's hers, decision's hers. After breakfast."

"Well, that's fine. That's just fine. Glad you have no objection to our doing business." Salazar looked at me. "Some sharp bargaining to do in a bit, little missy. Be thinking about your bottom line." Grinned that stupid grin at me and I nodded, but managed not to look at her the rest of breakfast.

Sell Killeau? And not just to one of the hancas along the Ordubeast, but to go to Ancala? Never see her again, never feel her tug on my hand as we walked along, never hear her jabber when she met me first thing in the mornings? Didn't think I could handle that.

\*\*Prophet, why does Salazar want Killeau? Just offered to buy her for a lot of money. What will she do to her in Ancala? Come to it, how will she get her to Ancala, with your Windrover down? Can't walk all that way, she'd never make it this time of year.\*\* There was a long pause, and at first, thought he hadn't picked up on me, and then thought

he didn't want to answer, and then figured he didn't know what to say, and that scared me a little.

**\*\*We don't need a Windrover, Khayla,\*\*** he sent, and sounded a little sad, though I couldn't figure out why. **\*\*We didn't come in one. A skimmer set us down about half a day's walk in the desert, and will come get us when we need. Whatever you worry about, don't fret that Killeau wouldn't make it. We'd do whatever it took to get her wherever she goes safely. She's important to all of us. We'd never let her be harmed. I would never let anybody harm her.\*\***

**\*\*Cause she looks like you?\*\*\***

**\*\*Because she looks like my oldest daughter used to look.\*\***

That slowed me down. Somehow I'd never thought of Prophet as having any kind of family, let alone a daughter that might look a lot like Killeau. Suddenly saw a lot of things pretty clear, how it must hurt him to see like his wife, his daughter and his son, his mother and father even, herded and treated like--I mean we treat our flock well, don't make sense to lose money on dead and sick animals, but they aren't people. Except he saw them as people. People caged and treated terrible. By us. By me and Theso and Dad and Mom.

**\*\*Oh, God, Prophet, I'm so sorry!\*\*** Could feel tears coming, and asked to be excused. Left the table before Mom said yes or no. Walked over to the corral and stood with my hand on Killeau's shoulder. She smiled up at me and then went on watching, and I saw that, instead of looking at Thunder or the rest of the flock, her eyes aimed through the corral to fasten on Prophet on the other side. I also looked at him through the poles, and saw he was watching both of us. Dropped my head, didn't want to have to look at him.

**\*\*You must hate all of us.\*\*** I sent.

**\*\*Too many people in front of you, and life's too short to hate everybody. Besides, your family's just doing what everybody before them and around them's been doing for a long time, raising waifs.\*\***

**\*\*She's not you,\*\*** Stroked her hair and she leaned against me.

**\*\*No. Not me. Maybe like me, but not me.\*\***

Thought a bit. **\*\*What did you mean yesterday you couldn't do this? Do what? Why are you here? Back to it, why do you want Killeau? Would she be your pet?\*\*\*** No! Wrong word! I thought. **\*\*Don't mean pet, I mean--\*\*\***

**\*\*I know what you mean, Khayla. No, she wouldn't--wait.\*\*** I looked at Prophet and he was scanning the near rim. **\*\*Shana says we've got visitors. Five, six men, trying to get close without making noise. Three on the trail we used and more on the trail north.\*\***

**\*\*Trouble?\*\*\***

**\*\*Can't think of any other reason for them to be sneaking in. Tell your dad and I'll tell Salazar. Do it now!\*\***

Went running back to the breakfast table, with enough sense not to yell out. Waited until I got beside him.

"Somebody in the brush," I said, leaning close. "Some on the middle trail, some on the north. Don't want us to hear them."

Salazar had stopped her chatter when I came up, and Dad looked at me, startled. "Hear nothing strange," he said, low, after a moment. "Not the wind?"

"Not the wind," Salazar said, suddenly businesslike. "Hear them too. Six, and they're close." Knew she lied about hearing them--you can't hear very well without external ears--but I was glad that Prophet had passed her the word. "Protection?" Dad nodded and rose. "May not be needed," he said quietly, "but everybody go into the house till we're sure. Theso, take your mama. Khayla, Jeem, go into the house now. Salazar." He waved a hand and we all got up and started across the clearing toward the doorway.

Didn't make it.

I heard a couple of zings from two-threads behind me, and pieces of rock blasted out of the house above the door. We all hit the ground, and I saw two men come around the house, guns in their hands.

"Now folks, just lay quiet like, everything'll be all right." The voice sounded from behind, real polite and friendly, like he'd known us all his life. Turned my head, and it was a man in business robes, though all dusty from the desert. As I watched, other men stepped into view all around the clearing, and they'd never been inside any business robe in their lives. Easy to see they meant trouble, and knew all about it.

I looked under the bottom poles past the corral, where Thunder and the flock were moving, restless from the shooting. Both Prophet and Shana were gone, though I hadn't seen them leave.

Dad made to stand up, but one of the gunnies pointed his two-thread at Dad's head, and he stayed kneeling. "What's this all about?" he asked the leader. "Who are you?"

He came closer. "Following after a killer thief, murdered a family near Ancala a few days ago. Korieggi. Guess we found her."

We all swiveled our heads to look at Salazar, who lay hugging the ground and watching the leader closely, eyes wide to take in everything. "Imperial officers or local law?" Dad asked.

From where I laid on the ground the man looked real tall and lean, with a narrow face and dark hide stretched tight over his cheekbones. Bet he didn't have a single sin he didn't want. Pushed his lips out like a kiss, then shook his head. "Don't have to be a peace officer to do what's right. My family, maybe." Smiled a little, but it didn't reach his eyes.

I tried real hard, but couldn't see him married to anybody, or being some kid's dad. Wouldn't want him for mine.

He looked at Salazar, though he kept talking to Dad. "Glad to see you folks are all right. She might have killed you all."

Salazar got to her feet, ignoring the gunsels. "Neither a thief nor a murderer," She said with dignity, and the breezy, sleazy sales rep had completely disappeared.

"No? Not many Korieggi along the Ordubeast. Who are you, then?" His smile broadened just into a grin, as if he already knew the punchline and could hardly wait to get there.

But she didn't say anything, just stood looking at him, and I wondered if Prophet was talking inside her head. I glanced around a little, wondering where he and Shana might be, out in that brush.

"If not running, if not here to thieve and kill, then why?"

She kept silent.

"Maybe she told you folks she was scouting for a waif-buying company. That's the story we heard, story others have mentioned."

Everybody stayed silent while Mom and Dad digested that.

"You know why I'm here," Salazar said then, flatly, quietly.

The leader nodded. "Know exactly why, and know exactly who you are. Can't keep that sort of thing a secret for long. Too many important people in Ancala too unhappy about you slipping through." He spoke as though the rest of us had dissolved.

"Here to kill me."

Shook his head. "Not at all. Taking you back for public trial and decap, like any thief and killer."

"And this family?"

"No need to bother this family, they believe in law and order, same as everybody. Be glad to help us capture a criminal Korieggi." His eyes bored into Salazar's.

After a moment she nodded, and I knew she wouldn't ask for help, or say why she was really there. I didn't believe for a second the fairy story of the dead family around Ancala, but understood she had just bought our lives with her promise of silence. Also understood she would never reach Ancala.



Dad may not have known for sure, but I guess he had suspicions. "If she's a criminal, take her to Counselor Saurkorza, up the Wash. Get her extradited to Ancala. Take you there now or come dark."

"No," the leader said, still looking at Salazar. "She comes with us."

"But you're not deputized. No warrant."

The leader moved his gaze to Dad on his knees, gestured at the guns out and drawn. "All the warrant I need. You...and your wife... and your children have any objection?" He looked at Mom and each of us for a moment as he talked, and Dad evidently got the message.

"No," he said after a moment. "No objection."

Dad looked at us, and I think he felt that he'd let us all down by not insisting. Maybe he'd let himself down, saw he wasn't as brave as he expected, but Mom and I glanced at each other and saw a husband and a dad doing what he had to do for the family. We understood. Whether all of us died, or just Dad, this family wouldn't make it with a hole in it, like snapping the heartlimb out of hardbrush.

The leader nodded. "Then come dark, my friends and I will start back. Have to impose on your hospitality for the day, Ma'am." He looked at his "friends". "After food, some can sleep in the barn while the rest make sure everything on the hanca stays calm."

All day long, wherever we went doing chores, one of them went with us, or kept us in the clearing. They took turns eating and sleeping and watching Salazar, and I wondered when Prophet would do something, though didn't exactly know what he could do. Six of them, and I guessed he would have some care for us, that he wouldn't start anything if it meant Mom or us kids stopping a zinger.

Dad worried about the flock as the sun moved overhead. Usually they'd be out under the shade of the brush after morning water, but there they were in the corral, and when he tried to ask about taking them out, the leader said no, he wanted everybody in one place.

"Thunder knows me," I piped up from playing with Jeem while Mom boiled clothes. "Could take him and the ewes out--they just want to sleep anyway." Leader start to shake his head.

"Come on, mister," I said. "Look, I'm a kid, a girl at that. Just want to take care of the flock. You can see how droopy they're getting. No shade, we're going to have a lot of sunsick waifs on our hands. Don't think you want that. What trouble can I be, with everybody here with you?"

Dad didn't like it for a lot of reasons, not the least being he thought Thunder would give me trouble and I think he wondered if I had some idea of going for help, but in the end, he agreed, and the leader did too. Even better, after we got the corral open and the flock started into the brush, he sent two of his hardcases along with me.

\*\*One thing you should know, Khayla, before this all gets started,\*\* Prophet sent to me maybe a klik into the nesting brush.

I already knew. \*\*Have to kill all of them, don't you?\*

\*\*Can't leave them behind to take things out on your family, can't let them loose on the trail behind us, or to pass the word where we went. Best is for them to disappear completely.\*\*

\*\*Understand.\*\*

\*\*Your folks?\*

\*\*Dad and Theso will understand. Mom will take talking to,\*\* I answered. \*\*Who is she?\*

\*\*Dr. Shalamani Shanami Shalahazi. She's a specialist in behavioral science among humanoids, like me and waifs.\*\*

\*\*Why?\*

\*\*There's a part of Imperial government called the Council on Life Forms, run by some Princep or other. Ever hear of it?\*

\*\*Nope.\*\*

\*\*Last year they received a formal charge from a World Deputy to investigate the intelligence of waifs.\*\*

\*\*Intelligence? Killeau's smart, but she's not a person.\*\*

\*\*Maybeso she is. The charge came right out of the statutes on dignity of life-forms--that waifs are self-aware tool-users with ample brain-to-body ratio and information-processing capacities. Said they're capable of reason, creativity, worship, self-sacrifice for the social order, and all the rest of it.\*\*

\*\*That's what she was doing with the cards in the barn.\*\*

\*\*Shana thought she sensed something last night...there's an offical inquiry scheduled for Ancala and a few other collection points, but the Council told Dr. Shalahazi to work unnoticed.\*\*

\*\*Somebody noticed.\*\*

\*\*Waif-raising and buying and selling is big business here on Tima. A million waifs went through the system two years ago, from farms and collection points to sale all over the Empire. That's why our visitor said she'd made a lot of important people unhappy. Everybody knows what the official Council report will show, but the people who buy and sell waifs by the thousands can't stand the idea that there might be a real finding of rational intelligence.\*\*

I thought a minute. \*\*Would mean they're people, too. Different kind maybe, but people.\*\*

\*\*And people have legal protection. You can't buy and sell them. You can't breed them or slaughter them. Not legally.\*\*

\*\*Mom and Dad couldn't do it at all. Mom cries when we have to put down an injured waif. She couldn't bear the thought that she'd been doing slavery or murder.\*\* I thought some more. \*\*You're no behavioral scientist. Neither is Shana.\*\*

\*\*Shana's an Imperial officer, a Caldorian. I'm a hired gun. Stumbled on a downed skimmer a few years ago and Shana recruited me into joining the Empire. We work together sometimes. This time we were supposed to keep Dr. Shalahazi safe while she conducted her tests. Thought we'd arrived without being seen, but they were obviously tipped off, and they found us, followed us here. We expected to have better luck with small hancas isolated from the main raising areas, pose as a buyer with a guide. Didn't work.\*\*

\*\*Must be tough, seeing how these might be your cousins that are being herded and bought and sold.\*\*

\*\*And slaughtered.\*\*

Couldn't think of anything to say about that. Far as I knew, everybody on Tima ranched waifs or dealt with those who did.

\*\*What happens now?\*

\*\*Get your flock settled and wait. We need to let the sun work for us a little.\*\*

I guess the gunnies were pretty tough in Ancala, but along the Ordubeast they were having a hard time. The air is thinner, since we're higher, and the sun is fierce in midsummer if you're not used to it. Even though they kept to the shade of the brush and stayed quiet, in about an hour they were wishing they had more water. The flock dozed in their favorite nests under the brush and I settled down about twenty yards away to stay silent and listen to the hum of the cicadas. The men were having a hard time staying awake in the heat and the drone, after a night of traveling and little naps in the morning. Decided to take turns sleeping, and the big one stretched out on his back while he made the short one watch me. The short one pulled out his two-thread to show me how serious he was, and stood under some shade, then hunkered down, then sat, then sat with his back to a brush-bole, then napped. His head came up a couple of times, and I stayed right where I was, and then he was gone.

\*\*Khayla, turn your head away. This won't be pretty.\*\*

Couldn't see anything moving in the brush, and I knew the sound of a zinger would carry to the house.

**\*\*What will you do?\***

**\*\*Shana.\*\***

Understood, and shut my eyes real tight. Only opened them once, when the wind brought me a scent, and saw her pad silent as smoke between me and the gunnies, her yellow eyes never leaving the two sleepers, yet watching the placement of every paw. Not a single frond or pebble got moved.

**\*\*Prophet,\*\*** I sent, **\*\*not fair while they're sleeping.\*\***

**\*\*This is not a game. That's my friend out there.\*\***

Covered my eyes with my hands. Didn't take long, from what I heard. She evidently went after the short one first, since his gun was in his hand. Dad says lopers can take the head off a full-grown waif with one swipe of a forepaw, and their fangs are like razors. I don't think the first one ever knew what happened. The second one probably did, since he was a few feet away, and it took her a second to finish and get to him. Evidently tried to draw his two-thread. Didn't help. Didn't get off a shot.

The waifs went crazy, seeing and smelling a loper that close. They were off and running in every direction, squealing, calling in terror. Jumped up after them, being very careful where I didn't look.

**\*\*Do what you need,\*\*** Prophet sent. **\*\*We have work here.\*\***

**\*\*Don't be slow. Dad and Theso must have heard the flock. Somebody will know something's happened and come looking.\*\***

About the time I caught up with Thunder and got him settled down so he could gather the females, Dad and Theso showed up with worried looks on their faces and our visitor and two of his friends right behind them, guns drawn. Dad motioned with his head and Theso came over to deal with Thunder and the females, and the others walked over to where the two bodies lay.

"Loper," I said, coming closer but not real close. "Came out of the brush, on them before anybody could do anything." Guess I didn't sound scared enough, because the leader turned and looked at me, and I could see he was trying to figure out just how a kid like me could have killed two of his men with my bare hands. The two gunsels behind him glanced at each other and started watching the brush.

"Now with waifs handy, why do you suppose a Loper would..." Dad's voice trailed off. He looked at me like he was trying to figure out the same thing as the leader.

"Doesn't matter," the leader said, and waved his gun. "A loper around, everybody comes back to the house. Now."

"Mister, my flock'll be dead by night with a loper nearby, and you can bet he's out there in the brush, waiting for us to leave so he can come back and kill more. My boy and I will have to stay."

"Your flock will have to take care of itself. I've lost two men and whatever killed them is still around. Everybody back to the house. Don't intend to lose anybody else."

"Can't do that!"

For a long moment the leader stared at Dad, and I think he decided to stop the play-acting right then and there. "You called it," he shrugged, "Remember that. Clar." He looked at one of his men, maybe two years older than Theso. "See that everybody stays right here from now on. We'll take care of things at the house."

Clar smiled, a baby smile as he waited until the leader stepped out of the way, and motioned me over by Dad. With his gun. "Hey, waifer," he called to Theso. "Over here, leave the animals." When we were all together he raised his gun, and we heard the safety drop.

"Now wait!" Dad yelled, but the gunnie shook his head. "Waifer waiting's over," he said. He grinned at his joke.

Prophet stepped from behind brush about thirty feet away, and whistled softly. Clar saw him and swung his gun. He was sure quick. Never saw anybody move his gun that fast, except Prophet. Prophet shot him soon as he wasn't covering us. He spun and crashed backward into the brush and rolled to the ground. We all grabbed dirt, fast.

The second gunnie, older, maybe slower, brought his gun up and fired toward Prophet, breaking a branch by his knee.

Didn't even flinch. Just dropped the man with two shots almost so close together they sounded like one.

The leader didn't bother trying to outshoot him. Threw himself on the ground right in front of me and jammed his gun into my face. "Drop it!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, "Drop it or I'll kill her! I'll kill 'em all!" Turned his head to watch Prophet.

Shouldn't have done that.

We all moved at the same time. Flung myself back and right, twisting out of the way, while Dad and Theso jumped on the leader, pinning his gun arm in the dirt. Was Theso who leapt on his back, grabbed his forehorns with both hands and pulled his head up, but was Dad's sheath knife cut his throat.

Over. Maybe twenty seconds since Prophet stepped into view, probably less. We got to our feet and watched the leader until his death-thrumm passed.

"Don't like my family threatened," Dad said to nobody in particular. I hugged him.

A zinger sounded from the house and we jerked toward it. Dad yelled Mom's name and we started running, Prophet ahead of us. A second shot came and then a third. Thought I heard a looper's whine.

\*\*Shana? She all right?\*\* I sent to Prophet while I was running, but he didn't answer.

Dad and Theso slowed down as we neared the clearing around the buildings, but Prophet kept on and I figured he knew more about what we'd find than I did, so kept up with him, rounding the corner of the barn a few seconds after.

Mom was at the pump, bringing up water fast as she could, her two-thread beside her on the pump frame and Jeem clinging to her leg like he wasn't ever letting go. The last gunnie lay in a little heap of robes in the middle of the clearing, with Shana standing in front of him. She was licking an ugly wound low on her left shoulder.

Salazar--Dr. Shalahazi--sat in the shade of the barn, her head drooped over, and as I got closer, could see she was dying. A zinger bolt had taken her square in the chest. Killeau squatted in front of her, one hand caressing her arm. Nobody made a sound. Even the chicadas were silent.

Prophet pounded toward Shana, but she raised her head and looked at him, and I guess she sent she was all right, because he changed direction and went to Dr. Shalahazi. Mom finished filling the waterjar and brought it over, running, and I went to get Jeem where she'd left him. Dad and Theso arrived and we all clustered around the Korieggi.

Mom had wet part of her apron and was wiping the pink face, but we all knew it wouldn't help. The Korieggi's time had come, and that was that.

She had class. You could see she was scared, but held herself together until she finished her job. Helped as best I could.

"Prophet told me why you're here," I said. "Are there messages you want passed?"

Couldn't move her head, but lifted her eyes at me, and I got real close, listening real hard.

"Tests...inconclusive...universe...too small," she said, and it took a lot of effort to get the breath out. "Smart killeau," and her eyes moved to the waif who watched her face. "Enough poss...."

"Possibility," I supplied. She didn't waste energy nodding. "further...study." She lifted her eyes to me again and I think she tried to smile. "Might...be wise...find...another...crop..." and she died, just...died.

Killeau whined softly and looked at me, but it didn't matter. I couldn't do a thing.

Finished by nightfall. Prophet and I tended to Shana. Her wound would keep her limping a while, but she wouldn't die from it. Prophet told me Dr. Shalahazi followed Ata, so Dad and Theso carried her up on the rimrock and freed her spirit by cutting the body into small parts for the birds to take. They and Prophet made sure nobody would ever find the bodies of the leader and his men. The flock was brought in for the night and I took care of my chores as twilight gathered.

Mom and Jeem and I fixed a late supper for everyone, and we all heard how it happened, how when Dad and all came to see what had happened to the flock the gunnie left behind got more and more panicky, and when he heard zings from out in the brush he had the Korieggi stand against the barn wall and took aim. Shana had tried to rush him from the corner of the barn but he'd been too fast and too scared. First shot hit Dr. Shalahazi and the second had found Shana.

The third came from Mom's weapon.

So everybody was grateful, but sad at the same time. Prophet had saved all of us and Mom had kept Shana from taking more bolts, but the Korieggi was dead, and six men had been killed by Prophet and by us, and we couldn't get past that. Hadn't explained to them yet what she had meant by "find another crop", but I would, and that would worry them more. As it was, could see Mom and Dad look at each other, and I knew that now without the Korieggi as the center, they were uneasy with Prophet and Shana there. I think Prophet knew it too.

\*\*Shana tells me she's strong enough to travel, so we'll be going after we eat,\*\* he sent. Hadn't sat down with us, but had taken his bread and water and stood a few feet away, at the edge of the light.

Left the table without asking and walked closer to him. \*\*Sala--Dr. Shalahazi wanted to take Killeau with her. Do you, still?\*

He looked at me. \*\*She belongs here, with you. With her own. Besides, I wouldn't know how to show what she can do, or what it would mean. I have the holocorder. Maybe somebody will look at it.\*\*

I nodded. \*\*Will you come back?\*

Prophet paused again, then shook his head. \*\*Don't think I can promise that, Khayla. The Life Forms Council might decide to bring another expert in, or they might not. Likely if they do, it'll be somewhere else on Tima altogether. Probably won't want me and Shana along anyway. We didn't do such a good job of protection this time.\*\*

\*\*There were six of them!\*

He shrugged.

\*\*You in trouble with anybody?\*

\*\*Not anybody I care about. Shana's okay. That's what counts.\*\*

Looked down at my pet. **\*\*Lots of things around here are going to change if Killeau and the other waifs are intelligent, aren't they?\***

He nodded. **\*\*Your life may not run like anything your folks and their folks have known for generations. Going to be tough.\*\*** **\*\*If it's true. You want it to be true, don't you, Prophet?\***

He waited a long time on that one. **\*\*I don't know, Khayla. Either way, a lot of pain. I'd hate to think that millions of waifs have been slaughtered knowing what was happening to them. I'd hate to think millions more will be killed and eaten if they deserve legal protection and don't get it. I just don't know.\*\*** **\*\*Hope it is true!\*** I sent fiercely. **\*\*Killeau is too smart and too cute to be somebody's dinner! Look at her! All of us are just savages to be doing this to intelligent animals. Hate it!\***

**\*\*No, you don't hate it. You are too smart to jump to conclusions without proof. You're an ace, kid, and your folks are lucky you're in the family. They're going to need your strength and your good sense more than ever now.\*\*** He looked over to Dad and Mom. **\*\*Your dad and your brother killed for you today, and your mother killed for Dr. Shalahazi and Shana. You're lucky you have them.\*\*** He touched Killeau's face. **\*\*I guess a lot of us have been lucky today. Some more than others.\*\***

Wanted to ask if he'd wait until I grew up and come and get me, but knew he wouldn't. Hadn't mentioned a wife talking about his girls, but think I knew somewhere inside even then it wouldn't work. He wasn't cut for being a rancher, and anyway, now that I know about who Caldorians really are, likely he has something special with Shana.

Anyway, he gathered Dr. Shalahazi's stuff along with his own, and said goodbye to all of us, and Killeau, and he and Shana moved slowly out of the clearing and up the middle trail to the rim, toward that skimmer waiting for their call somewhere above the high desert.

Just for an instant, half an hour later, thought I saw his silhouette up there against the night stars, waving, and I waved back, and then he was gone, and I knew he was gone.

Long time passed, though, before Killeau and I stopped looking up at the west rim of the Ordubeast Wash. I quit before she did.

## **END OF STORY**

Copyright 1994 Gayle P. Peters  
All rights reserved