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The Seeker by David Bischoff and Christopher Lampton

PART ONE: Arrival

CHAPTER 1

I stood behind the pulpit and watched them file smugly into their pews, as they had obviously done every Sunday of their lives and as their parents had all done before them. Life in a small town like Middlefield was built upon such rituals, as I was coming to find out. If you knew everyone who lived around you and were kept in close proximity to them, you needed such standards of behavior to keep you from tearing their throats out after a couple of years. People deviated from those rituals only at their own risk. In one way, at least, it was comforting—I knew I had a captive audience for the length of my service. After that was anybody's guess.

Light streaming in through the windows made the front pews hotter than the shadowed ones in back, which gave everyone an excuse not to sit close to the front. I wasn't fooled by their excuses; after more than a year of living in Middlefield I was still an outsider—the minister from the big city who has invaded the parish of the late lamented Reverend Brand. My predecessor had served this congregation for close to forty years, and that was a tough act to follow. The people sat in the back and watched with vulture eyes, daring me to tell them something Reverend Brand hadn't said better. Every Sunday was becoming a trial before a stone-faced jury more than a little inclined toward hanging.

Only Jeanne, my wife, and Karen, our daughter, were in the hot front pew. Karen, as always, sat on the edge of her seat, leaning forward, biting her lip and waiting for the platform under the pulpit to break. The wood creaked dangerously because it was old, but I wasn't worried. It had supported all the ministers of Middlefield for ninety-three years and I expected it to last through my time as well.

I smiled encouragingly down at Karen and Jeanne, even though that meant incurring the displeasure of Mrs. Paulson. That worthy lady, president of the Women's League, preferred her ministers to be made of sterner stuff. Hellfire-and-damnation was what she wanted to hear, and she was already quite disappointed in me because I preferred a gentler, more introspective approach to faith.

As I looked over the rest of the congregation I was surprised to see, far to the rear, the face of Jerry Baker watching me expectantly. His unkempt mane of black hair and his casual clothes seemed terribly out of place amid the slicked down splendor of the Middlefield people; but then, he was coming from a different place than they were, both literally and figuratively. Jerry was from Country Gardens, a "youth commune"—one of the many mushrooms that had sprouted from the rich and fertile soil known as the counter-culture. The commune comprised about thirty kids, many of them runaways from various parts of the country and a few of them barely into their teens.

About two weeks earlier, Mrs. Paulson and several of her cronies had persuaded me to visit that secluded little glade on the edge of town, "to point those poor children toward the light of Christianity." I went with great reluctance, suspecting that what they really wanted was for me to send the kids back home to their parents and suggest that they take regular baths. So I went with my Bible in hand and a prepared speech in my head, fervently wishing I could be done with it all.

They lived, those kids, in a sprawling farmhouse some four miles southeast of the church, purchased by the members of the commune with their own money. It had been described to me by people who had been there several years before as a ramshackle, dirty old building, so I was pleasantly surprised, as my car dusted its way up the long driveway, to note how well they had fixed it up. There were new shingles, a paint job, considerable rebuilding—the works. I'd had visions of a pig sty just before slaughtering; instead I saw an elegant American Gothic.

A young girl sat on the porch with a baby in her arms. As I slammed my car door she looked up and stared at me without surprise. "Hi," she said, her voice calm and unsuspecting.

"Good morning," I replied. Drawing in a breath, I walked across the freshly mown lawn and stepped up onto the porch. I found myself nervously slapping my Bible against my thigh as I moved and made a conscious effort to stop it. "I'm Gordon Ames."

She brushed a strand of hair from her forehead and looked up at me with a pleasantly curious expression. I shifted from foot to foot as I continued on. "I'm the minister from Middlefield, and I've never had the chance to welcome you folks properly to the community. I'd like to make up for that oversight." I leaned against a support beam and smiled as realistically as I could.

She returned the smile. "Great. It's nice to have company. I'll call down some of our crew. Please, sit down. A couple of the guys are out in the fields, but I think I can roust a few people from inside."

They turned out to be friendly, all of them. There was some curiosity, at first, but no hostility. One bearded fellow who couldn't have been more than nineteen asked, "Are you going to try and convert us?" I told him no, and the moment the words were out of my mouth I felt like an unconscionable hypocrite. Conversion was *exactly* what I'd been sent there for. Someone passed me a cup of herb tea. We sat and talked, and the morning soon passed into afternoon. One boy, Jerry Baker, seemed genuinely interested in my invitation to attend our church services. It was for him, more than any of the others, that I went through with my little prepared speech.

I gave them my standard membership pitch: a strong church makes a good community. I knew the routine backwards and forwards, and I doled it out smoothly. False modesty aside, I had a very professional delivery. And if I lacked anything in my own inner convictions, I more than made up for it in enthusiasm.

They listened politely, without undue interruption. Then, when I'd finished my spiel, one brooding young man replied, "Life is a search. And when you don't know where—or even what—something is, you've got to spread out in different directions to find it. This is our direction. Some of us are into religion—all different kinds—but we don't like being forced to

believe in a god simply because our neighbors do. Our search is a very personal thing. We're content because we're creating our own kind of happiness for ourselves. We haven't had it thrust down our throats by the society we happen to have been born into." And, having spoken his piece, he turned and stared off into the distance, somewhere beyond the trees that bordered their front yard.

They invited me to stay for lunch, but I demurred. I told them I had a previous engagement, which was a lie, and I left. But the words of that young man followed me to my car and down the road as I drove home.

I had to admire the courage of those kids. I'd never had the guts to break out of the social mold in which I'd been set. My entire life seemed preordained: I was the son of a minister, and it had always been accepted that I, too, would go into the ministry when I grew up. The world of the seminary was a comfortable one, because it was easy to learn the correct answers without having to think seriously about the questions.

Jeanne and I had married young and had a child almost at once, which seemed the proper thing to do. After college my father wangled me a job as an assistant in one of the larger churches in Cleveland. Up until then I had been encased in wombs—first, that of my father's house, and then the seminary. Now I was on my own, and the drudgery of day-to-day living began to set in. Up until then, my life had been filled with its own rituals, but now they were crumbling. I had gotten by on rote so long that there was little faith left behind it. Suddenly the Christian answers that had always seemed so sure were foundering.

To keep my life from collapsing around me, I had to make some hard decisions. I convinced myself that the problems of my faith were due to living in the city, with its constant stresses and crises. When the Middlefield opening came my way, I took it, hoping it would restore my decaying beliefs in God. But, as the following year showed, my problems were internal rather than external and I was no closer to solving them than I was before I came. I reacted to situations rather than acting to prevent them. As far as my life went, I felt like an understudy performing a role written for someone else. And those kids at the commune had seen through my sham instantly...

Jeanne cleared her throat and I came back to reality with a start. Staring out at the congregation, I began, "The text for today is Matthew, Chapter 12, Verse 38..." I waited for a moment listening to the rustle of

pages and watching old Mr. Paulson, who was usually the last to get there. He was bent almost double with his nose brushing the page, squinting at the large print because he was too vain to buy glasses.

When I finished reciting, the congregation sat back down—old Samson Lockhart was the first down just as he was the last one up. He squirmed on the bench while his hand sifted through the coins in his pocket for his quarter contribution. Mary Allen shifted on the bench, just bubbling over with some juicy gossip she could hardly wait to tell Mrs. Martha Ethan.

The noise began quite softly, like the faraway sound of a car engine whining on a cold morning. It quickly rose in intensity, though, until within seconds it was a high-pitched scream tearing at our eardrums. There was a series of loud explosions, and all heads in the church swivelled to get a better look out of the rear left window.

There was nothing to see, but the sound kept coming anyway. It built steadily, until it was a solid wave of noise pushing against us with suffocating force. It encircled our little world inside the church. I could feel my teeth rattling in sympathetic harmony. High above us one of the windows shattered, cracking along its full length, and I saw Jeanne bend protectively over Karen.

Looking over the faces of my congregation, I saw undiluted panic. Hagar Abrams jumped up screaming, hands clamped tightly over her ears. Another window shattered, pushed entirely out of its frame, and sent shards of glass raining down over an empty section of pews.

The sound passed directly overhead, jarring us all with its intensity. Then there was a roar as though the world were exploding, and I was knocked to my knees with the shock. In desperation I grabbed for the edge of the podium, missed it and fell face downward onto the floor.

There were more explosions, long strings of them, like firecrackers at the Fourth of July picnic. The floor shook violently and far above me there was the sound of more glass shattering. A light mist of dust and debris was covering my head and neck, and I hoped that no one had been hurt.

Then it stopped.

The cessation was not a gradual winding down, but an abrupt halt. The wall of silence that hit our eardrums was almost as painful as the noise

itself. I realized that my entire body was shaking and fought a mental battle to get myself under control. My forehead was beginning to swell where it had struck the platform. I had to struggle to get on my feet again.

Most of the congregation was huddled together, frightened, in the aisles. A few individuals had fallen and others were clinging to the backs of benches, but no one had been hurt as far as I could tell. Karen and Jeanne were on the floor in front of their pew, and Jeanne smiled weakly up to show me they were okay. Karen was trying hard not to cry.

Now that the noise was gone the people had time to think again—and what they were thinking was far from pleasant. I could read the incipient panic in their faces. Their fears were as strong as mine, but unless I could get my own under control I would be facing an hysterical mob within seconds. Gripping the pulpit so tightly that my knuckles whitened, I shouted out, "Our Father!" They looked at me dazedly, a hundred pairs of eyes staring from pale and frightened faces. "Our Father," I repeated, and I heard them murmur dully in reply.

"Who art in Heaven," I went on. Josh Hanson, the sheriff, stood up and disappeared through the front door, but I held the others in their pews. The *Amen* sounded with almost a relieved sigh from the congregation. By that time Josh and his deputies had gathered in front of the church. I made the congregation leave one pew at a time, with those in the rear exiting first.

When everyone had left I stepped shakily down from the pulpit; Karen ran into my arms and I scooped her off the floor, holding her as tightly as I could. Jeanne, looking weak and shaken, followed more slowly, her feet crunching over the shattered glass. I lowered Karen back to the floor and put my arm on Jeanne's shoulder. She was trembling and cold, despite the warmth in the building; I took one of her hands in mine, and she grasped it tightly.

"What was it, Gordon? Have they dropped some kind of a bomb on us? I... I thought the whole church was going to fall in."

"It wasn't a bomb," I said, as though I would have known one way or another. "It could have been a plane crash. There's a field not too far from here, over in Dayton. It could have been circling for a landing when something went wrong..." And then I stopped, realizing that I didn't have the slightest idea what had happened. "Maybe," I added, "we should go

out and take a look."

Her grip tightened further then, and I knew she didn't want me to go; but I could hear shouts from out front and it occurred to me that I might be needed. Just then a young boy—John Fisher's son, I think—came bursting in yelling, "Reverend! Come quick! The woods are on fire!"

I broke loose from Jeanne as gently as I could and started up the aisle. The entire town seemed to have gathered by the front steps, packed as closely together as possible and murmuring to one another. I pushed my way through the mob with Jeanne on one side and Karen on the other.

But it didn't seem that just the woods were on fire. From our position, the entire state appeared to be going up in a great, billowing cloud of smoke.

CHAPTER 2

There was a small patch of trees across the field from the church. The tops of several had been sheared off, as though an immense scythe had cut across their uppermost branches. At least two trees had toppled violently against their fellows. A thick column of smoke rose from their rear. For a moment I thought I saw a glint of metal behind the smoke.

Jeanne clutched my hand. Josh appeared from somewhere in the crowd and clapped my shoulder. "It looks bad," he said. "Paul has the fire department on the radio and they're going to try to get some extra equipment up here from Simpsonville, but I'll tell you, I don't know what they can do about this." Josh turned and squinted into the late morning sun.

Paul Mullins, one of Josh's deputies, came bounding up the steps. "Come on, Josh. We're takin' the squad car over to get a look at what hit. You comin' or aren't you?"

"Yeah. Hold up a minute, Paul." Josh turned back to me with the grin of a born soldier about to go into battle. He was enjoying this excitement and the added importance it brought him. "Why don't you come along, Reverend? We can always use an extra hand."

Jeanne linked her arm tightly around my elbow. For a moment I

thought I should say I couldn't go, but I changed my mind. If it *was* a plane crash there would probably be casualties—and a minister can serve the hurt or dying as well as a fireman or a sheriff.

"Sure," I said. "I'd like to get a look at it myself." I kissed Jeanne lightly on the forehead and started down the steps.

"Gordon?" she whispered. I looked back up at her and smiled. She had sense enough not to say any more.

"I'll be back in a little while, honey. Don't worry. It'll be okay."

A squad car squealed to a halt in front of the steps and Josh squeezed his way into the driver's seat. I got in the back with Paul. Fred Borden, a chunky, red-faced farmer, slid over to the passenger's side up front. When I climbed in, he turned to me and grinned. "That was some sermon you gave this morning, Rev'rend. It really brought down the house."

Josh stepped on the accelerator and we all sank back into our seats. Some kids banged on the hood as we pulled out, then we shot out across the open field like a rock fired from a slingshot. Some people say Josh watches too many movies about fast-driving policemen; I don't know if it's true, but I wouldn't be surprised. If we picked our sheriffs by miles-per-hour instead of votes, Josh would be re-elected by a landslide.

The land beyond the patch of trees was good, fertile farmland. Steve Stoner grew corn and tomatoes on it— or used to, before today. Josh ran the squad car into a deep plow rut and we all grabbed for something to hold onto; then we were back up again and got our first glimpse of what was causing the smoke.

I'm not sure, really, that I can describe it. The first thing that struck me about it—that struck all of us about it—was how immense it was. It was as big as a building, even a large factory. In fact, I would have thought it *was* a building of some sort, except that it hadn't been there the day before. It hadn't even been there that morning.

It was as though two metal spheres—each at least fifty yards in diameter and shiny, like polished bearings— had been linked together by a rod at least twice again as long. One of the spheres had cracked open like an egg. Greasy black smoke poured out and rose into the sky, until it spread mushroomlike several hundred feet above the ground. Inside, you

could see flames licking along the ragged edges. The other sphere was still intact, but had been badly scarred by the crash. There were markings on the sides of both; but not in any language I was familiar with. About halfway up the intact sphere was what might have been a hatchway, but it was too far off the ground to be easily reached and too big for a man to handle by himself.

Fred Borden leaned out the window and gawked at it like a teenager. "Wheeeee-oooooh! That sure is a big airplane! You ever see anything like it?"

"Get your fool head in," snapped Josh. "That isn't any airplane. It's too big, for one thing. And it doesn't have any wings."

Paul nudged my shoulder. "What do you think it is, Reverend?"

"I... I don't know. Maybe some kind of satellite. Or missile..."

Josh looked at me in the rearview mirror. "I never heard of any satellite like that."

"Hey!" shouted Fred. "Maybe it's that there Skylab. I saw something about that on television the other night."

Josh slammed on the brakes and we fishtailed wildly through the mud and grass, sliding to a halt by the low barbed-wire fence that Steve Stoner had slung along the edge of his cornfield. We all piled out of the squad car, Josh climbing out last with a microphone in his hand. He said a few words into it, then hooked it back on the dashboard. None of the rest of us said a thing.

Even from two or three hundred yards away it seemed to tower over us. There was an unnatural feeling to it; it looked so out of place there in the cornfield, like... like a boat in the desert. But I guess that thing would have seemed out of place just about anywhere on Earth.

Now that we were closer I could see that the spheres weren't made of any metal I recognized. The material looked a little like fiberglass, but there was something in it that seemed almost alive, something moving just below the surface like the changing patterns of color in an oilslick. As the sun—now almost directly overhead—shone across its surface, it seemed to glimmer and sparkle. I thought of sunshine on mica—and

remembered when, years ago, I had chipped at large rocks with smaller ones to see the shiny particles within.

There was a thumping, rattling noise behind us and two more cars slid to a halt behind ours. A group of teenagers piled out of one; Hagar Abrams and her husband Jack got out of the other. Then an old Ford pickup came racing alongside the fence and Steve Stoner waved at us from the cab. He pulled up beside a copse of bushes and leaped out the door, shaking his arm furiously at the smoking, glistening thing that lay across his field. His face was deep red.

"They're burnin' up my crops!" he screamed. "Sheriff Hanson! Ain't you gonna do somethin' about it?"

"Now hold on, Steve," countered Josh. "We don't even know what that thing is yet. We've got fire trucks coming, some of them all the way from Simpsonville. And I told 'em down at the station to call up the guard over in Wolverton. Now you'd better be patient, 'cause there's nothing we can do until they get here."

Stoner waved his hands about excitedly. "Maybe there's nothin' *you* can do about it..." Before any of us could move he'd grabbed an old rifle from under the seat of his truck and bounded over the fence, heading toward that *thing* out there. Josh yelled after him, but he didn't seem to hear.

Paul let out an exasperated sigh. "You know, he's just fool enough to get himself hurt out there. Why, I remember one time when he—"

The noise caught us all by surprise. It was a high, keening sound, like a dog whistle, only it was low enough that we could hear it. It passed through my head as though it had never touched my ears.

I looked up toward the one intact sphere and saw something move toward its crest. A section of the shiny surface disengaged itself and extended outward, like a thick cylindrical antenna—or maybe some kind of weapon.

There was a burst of light.

I remember, when I was much younger, driving with my family through the open countryside in a thunderstorm. Bolts of lightning were striking trees off along the horizon and I was very frightened, even though my

father explained that the rubber in our car's tires kept us from being grounded and thus attracting the lightning ourselves. A series of high tension lines ran parallel to the highway at that point, and when one of the lightning bolts struck a power line a huge globe of green light would rise up around it, almost as though it had risen out of the ground. My father explained that it was caused by the transformers short-circuiting, but that didn't make it any less frightening at the time.

I thought of those globes of light as an electric blue halo formed around that bizarre antenna. It was like a bubble of pure radiation, expanding rapidly. Within seconds it surrounded the entire sphere; then it reached Stoner.

It struck him like a moving wall. He was propelled along before it, arms flailing, feet stumbling, back in the direction from which he had come. He looked like a puppet with half its strings missing, trying to dance but not able to do all the steps. And then he was running—blindly, awkwardly—until he struck the barbed-wire fence. He stumbled forward against it. One of his arms slipped through the two top wires and the bottom wire wrapped itself around his feet. He struggled to disentangle himself, but he only managed to become more hopelessly twisted.

The blue globe kept on expanding, but apparently it had extended too far to do any more damage. It passed through the rest of us like a light mist. I felt a mild tingling down my back, and then it was gone.

For a moment we just stood there, watching Stoner struggle spastically against an enemy who wasn't around any more; then Josh, Paul and I rushed to his side. I held his head and muttered a few things to him in the soothing language you'd use to calm a baby. Paul took out a handkerchief and dabbed the blood from Stoner's forehead where he'd cut himself on one of the barbs. After a while he calmed down and stopped struggling. Josh worked to untangle the wire from his feet.

"Now, Steve," Josh began. "You knew when you ran out there that you were going to get yourself in trouble. I ain't going to tell you not to try that again, 'cause you're old enough to figure that out for yourself. But if I catch you pulling some fool stunt like that again, I'm going to find some law you're breaking and slap you in a cell before you can count to three."

Stoner didn't say anything. He just lay there and moaned. We pulled him gently off the wires and put him in the grass. I looked up and was

surprised to see that a crowd had gathered already. Lulu Thompson, who worked part time at the Medical Center in Wolverton, came over and checked Stoner for broken bones. I saw Amy Lucas standing beside her boy, Tom, and I went over and asked her if Doc Lucas was around. She coughed uncomfortably and replied, "Uh, no, he's... um... sick."

Josh glanced over at me with a grin. We both suspected the sick doctor was recuperating on the seventeenth hole of the Greenville Golf Course, twenty miles away. I motioned her back toward the church. "Could you please ask him to come if it's not too serious—or whoever he's asked to take his calls."

A familiar red Chevy came bouncing across the grass and stopped about twenty feet away. Jeanne and Karen got out. Karen rushed over and threw her arms around my legs; I picked her up and sat her down on the hood of the car.

"Look," I said—to Jeanne as much as to Karen. "I don't want you two hanging around here. Too much could happen."

Jeanne pulled her hair back off her forehead and for a moment—her eyes sparkling in the light of the sun—she was as beautiful as any Madonna ever painted by a Renaissance Master.

"What could happen?" she asked. "Everybody's here. Practically the whole town."

There was a sinister rumbling from the thing in the field, like thunder way off in the distance. It was gone by the time I looked around, but it gave me a shuddery feeling.

"Get in the car," I said. "Get in the car and drive home. If something happens a lot of people are going to get hurt. I don't want you and Karen to be among them."

She didn't argue. Jeanne is a sensible woman, and she understood why I was worried. "But what about you?" she asked as she slid into the front seat of the car.

"I'll be with Josh. We'll be back as soon as we can. Don't worry."

We kissed and she closed the door. Karen got in the other side and they

drove away together, back toward the church. I watched until they disappeared behind the clump of trees.

When they were gone I realized that Josh was standing at my elbow. "I don't understand this, Reverend," he said, in that deep rumbling voice of his. "I don't pretend to understand this one bit."

"Maybe you'd better not think about it," I said.

"I thought I knew something about missiles and aircraft," he continued, ignoring me, "but this is something I've never run across before. Maybe it's something the Russians have come up with, but I dunno... I'm almost afraid to..."

The rumbling came again, deep down in the bowels of that thing, and we both looked up in time to see the first sparks go off. They rose up out of the cracked sphere, little glowing pieces of matter, like hot ashes flicked off a cigarette. Josh's face went almost white. Then the rumbling grew deeper and more sparks began to fly. Josh led me back to the squad car, not hurrying, but not dawdling, either.

He leaned in the window and grabbed the microphone from the dashboard. When he spoke, his voice came booming out of the speakers on the roof like the voice of Jehovah announcing the Apocalypse.

"All right, everybody," he said. "I want you all to clear out of here, right now. You've seen what's happening; now you can go home. Get in your cars. The show's over..."

He didn't have a chance to finish. The rumbling noise turned into a gushing and the entire sphere went up in a shower of sparks. Flames and smoke bellowed into the air in a thick orange cloud. I saw silvery things fly upwards and I knew with a fearful certainty that some of them would be landing in our immediate vicinity.

"Get down, everybody," shouted Josh. I saw Paul and Fred Borden running toward us, their motion slowed down to a dreamlike crawl. "Get in your cars," Josh was yelling. "Hit the ground!"

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down into the dirt. Mud splattered on my face. A dark shadow passed over the field and flames fell out of the sky.

CHAPTER 3

I wasn't afraid, though I'm not sure exactly how I did feel. A piece of burning matter struck the roof of the squad car and ricocheted into the open field. I was aware of the heat as it passed over me, but I seemed numb to any feeling of terror.

"Come on," said Josh, throwing open the door. "Get in!" He gave me a push and I sprawled across the front seat, then he climbed in after me.

The back door snapped open and Paul and Fred clambered in. Paul's hair drooped across his forehead in sweaty tassels. Fred was wheezing with exertion, his chest heaving as he gulped down air.

"Holy Moses!" he gasped. "I thought I was gonna be fried and basted in my own sweat."

A soft rain of ashes fanned across the windshield. People ran past us in blind confusion. A woman I didn't recognize struck the front of the car and almost tumbled to the ground. I started to get out and help, but Josh grabbed my shoulder. "Stay inside, Gordon," he said. "There's nothing you can do out there."

She caught her balance and ran on. Farther away I saw Jack and Hagar Abrams stumbling across thick clumps of weeds. Hagar fell and Jack stooped down to help her. When she was on her feet again I saw that she was limping. Jack wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pushed her forward. Their car was about fifteen feet farther on.

They didn't get there. Josh looked up and saw it coming first. He started to cry out, too, but it wouldn't have done any good if he had. I craned forward until I could see it myself—a big hunk of flaming material, floating down gently on a gust of wind. It caught Jack from behind, settling down around him like a glove. Hagar fell to one side so that she wasn't hurt, but Jack turned into it as it came down and it struck him across the face.

I grabbed the door handle. "Hold on," said Josh, practically whispering. He jammed the key into the ignition and revved the motor to a low-pitched roar. He maneuvered the car around to Jack's windward side, so that we were between him and the explosion. Paul jumped out of the

back door and Josh got out of the front. He threw his coat over Jack's head and shoulders, while Paul beat out the flames on his legs. After a few seconds they dwindled and died.

The rumbling behind us had dropped away by now and a kind of sputtering had taken its place. A few sparks drifted down through the air, but the ferocity of the explosion was gone.

Hagar was sobbing uncontrollably a few feet away from her husband. I got out of the car and tried to comfort her, but it didn't do much good. Jack was kicking around a lot, and we could see that he had been pretty badly burned. I tried to make Hagar look away, but she tore herself out of my arms and knelt at her husband's side.

"Do something!" she screamed. "You've got to get him to a doctor, to a hospital!"

"Calm down, ma'am," said Josh. "It won't help any to scream and carry on. We'll put him in the squad car and drive him over to Wolverton. He'll be in good hands there, hear? He's going to be okay. Paul, give me a hand!"

Paul and Josh linked arms under Jack Abram's now limp body and carried him to the back seat of the car. Hagar got in the other side and Josh drove away with the two of them, leaving Paul, Fred and myself to drive the Abrams' car back into town.

Paul slipped behind the wheel and worked it up into third gear, running it across the ruts in the field so fast that I thought the hood was going to fly open. When we got back to the church two large fire trucks came rolling down Oak Street. Paul signalled George Cable, the fire marshall, and told him what had happened. Then we took off back into town.

* * *

Paul pressed me into service in Josh's office that afternoon, mostly answering telephones and giving interviews to reporters. A troop of National Guardsmen rolled in a little after noon and then the curiosity seekers came pouring out of the woodwork. Everyone seemed to want to know what had happened and I told the story so many times I could recite it without really thinking about it. Yes, I told them, we were all pretty

frightened when the spaceship started to explode. No, I don't know if it really was a spaceship but that seems to be what everybody thinks it is. Yes, ma'am, I saw Steve Stoner get attacked by some kind of blue light from the ship. Yes, I'm sure the light wasn't lightning. No, I don't have any idea what it was. Yes, there were quite a few explosions...

It went on like that for most of the day. I called Jeanne and told her I wouldn't be getting home very early; she told me she was planning to get back to the church and help keep the reporters from trampling the rose bushes we had planted in the church garden.

Josh himself came storming back in around three o'clock and plopped himself into the big oak chair behind his desk, his face red and rolling with sweat. Josh was a big man. He liked to claim that it was all muscle, but most of us had stopped believing that a long time back. He had a spare tire around his gut that made his belt seem eternally too small and when he moved you could see the flesh jiggling under his shirt. But he still moved well.

He scowled up at me and said, "We've had us a lot of preachers that threatened hellfire, Reverend, but you're the first that's ever delivered."

I smiled. Josh had all the religious convictions of a boulder, yet he attended church every week. Regular church attendance went with his job, like kissing babies and going to barbecues. Josh Hanson was, first, last and always, a practical politician, who carefully judged the mood of the people and moved out in front so that he could call himself a leader. He was also a damned good sheriff, at least under normal circumstances, because he knew which laws to enforce when, and at what times he should turn his back and ignore what was going on. That latter was particularly useful in a small town. But I harbored no illusions about him; he was a tough man and, once he decided on what direction to take, would allow nothing to stand in his way.

"How's Jack Abrams?" somebody asked.

"About as well as could be expected," Josh replied. "We got him to the hospital okay and they said he'd probably be in there for a week or two, but it didn't look like he'd be in any great danger." He passed a dirty handkerchief across the moist skin of his forehead. "Tell me, Reverend. What do you *really* think that thing was?" He leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling as if he wouldn't have been surprised to have it fall

in on him for no reason at all; it was that kind of day.

"I'm sure I'm not qualified to say."

"Aw c'mon, you're a man of the cloth. What do you think the church's position would be on something like this? A visitation of angels, maybe? Or the avenging bolt of Jehovah?"

I started to give him a reproving glare, but then I saw the pixie-ish twinkling deep inside those tired eyes; so I laughed instead. "I don't think they covered this sort of thing at theological college. Or maybe I flunked that course. Seems to me this is probably something for the scientists to look into, though I doubt they'll come up with any easy answers."

"Do you think it's really a spaceship?"

"Who knows? That seems to be the general consensus around here. Maybe it's something that the Russians have developed. Or the Chinese. It could even be a secret project by our own government. I don't know; but somehow none of that seems terribly likely."

"Okay, then, so what if it *is* from outer space? What difference do you think it's going to make in our lives?"

"Not much," I said without thinking. Josh smiled and jumped into the breach.

"I think you're wrong there. I think it's going to make a lot of difference, a lot more than you'd guess right now. Why, we've already got people from all of the TV networks here in town—I just talked to a couple of them on the way here. And we've got newspaper reporters from all over the state. So far they don't even know what that thing might be, but if enough reporters catch the scent of a good story in Middlefield, we'll have them here from all over the United States."

"So?" I said. "You know how these things are. A week from now nobody will remember that Middlefield exists, except the people who live here. And sometimes I'm not even sure *they* remember."

"But what if they discover that there's more of a story here than they thought?"

"Meaning?"

Josh leaned in close to drop his bombshell. "I was talking to a couple of reporters down by the church no more than half an hour ago. Seems one of them went investigating down by the 'spaceship' when the National Guard was looking the other way—and guess what he found?"

Bert Wheeler, a friend of Paul's who was helping out for the afternoon, snorted. "A couple of Martians playing mumble de peg?"

"Footprints!"

Fred Borden dropped the telephone receiver back into its cradle. Paul let out a low whistle. "What kind of footprints, Josh?"

"Not human ones, you can bet on that."

"Maybe some kind of animal..."

"Didn't sound like it from the way he described them. He said they were as long as a man's, but shaped like a hoof, with three toes in front. They ran from the side of the ship off into the woods, then disappeared when he came to the creek."

"How's that sound to you, Reverend?" Fred Borden asked. "A man runnin' around with hoof footprints? Looks like old Beelzy Bub himself has got an interest in this town."

"Oh, lay off, Fred," said Josh. "Listen, all of you. I don't want any of this leaving my office, you hear?"

* * *

But of course it did. By the time I got home Jeanne was already in a dither. Three of her friends had called her to tell her that some kind of a monster was loose in the woods and that their husbands were pulling their rifles out of mothballs and getting up a vigilante group to hunt it down. The evening paper didn't help any either. There was a big picture of Steve Stoner on the front page, under a headline reading: **INVASION VICTIM?**

Things calmed down after a few hours, though, when no sign of the mysterious monster cropped up; but Jeanne stayed nervous. We lived in a

rather isolated part of the town—only a few miles from the church, but cut off from the rest of the community by a thick swath of woods. When I had arrived in town to take up my position there was a lot of pressure put on me to move into the house next to the church, as my predecessor had done. But Jeanne had driven past this house and seen a "For Sale" sign in front of it; she had fallen instantly in love with the place. We had lived here happily for a year; but now it looked as though she were having second thoughts.

I assured her there was no reason to be afraid. I almost believed it myself.

The National Guard, along with a team of scientists from Washington, fenced off the area where the "spaceship" had fallen and placed a cordon of armed soldiers around it, giving Steve Stoner fits. It was his land, he declared, and they had no right to keep him off it. He was growing crops there; why didn't they take that outsized hunk of metal and carry it off to the scrap™ heap where it belonged?

The government men knew how to deal with irate farmers, though; they offered him a more than generous rental fee for their use of his property, and he shut up like a clam. The scientists began leaking tentative reports to the press, to keep everyone else happy. They said that there was no evidence one way or another to prove whether the object was of extraterrestrial origin or not; in other words, they weren't saying anything at all, probably because they were afraid that it might cause a panic. It didn't matter. The panic started anyway.

There was a run on the hardware stores in Middlefield and the six surrounding counties. People who hardly knew the barrel of a rifle from the stock bought guns the way superstitious folk used to buy talismans and amulets to ward off evil spirits. If the stores had sold silver bullets, they would have bought them, too. It got so Josh wouldn't go to a farm house at night without phoning the trigger-happy farmers first—and that wasn't easy, because Josh was up all night tracking down stories. Any and every sound a farmer heard at night was the alien monster coming for him.

For insurance's sake, people began buying crosses and dusting off family *Bibles*, but I myself wasn't in very popular demand until they found old Sam Lockhart dead.

Josh called me up and told me about it shortly after it happened. He needn't have bothered. It was all over town before nightfall.

It seems that Sam had lost track of one of his cows, a prize heifer with a penchant for straying and a taste for the clover that grew on the foothills to the west of town. Mrs. Lockhart tried to convince him that the cow would come back of its own accord, but Sam wasn't having any of it. He was determined to go out and bring it back himself.

Most of the flatland around Middlefield has been tamed and farmed for a century and a half, maybe longer, but to the west, like a crack along the edge of the sky, you can see a violet blur on the horizon that forms the mountains. There are forests there on the foothills—survivors of the primitive forest that once covered half the continent. The mountains come soaring up out of the ground in steep, smooth slabs, precipitous cliffs that present a formidable obstacle to anyone trying to go through them. The pioneers wisely elected to go around them or through the passes. Men who went to the mountains rarely came back, if you believed the stories that were told. People said there was a gate to hell up there from which devils rose to snatch explorers. Being a newcomer I never quite believed the stories and I explored the mountains until I knew them by heart.

Lockhart had been one of those, who most loudly declared that I would come to a bad end by going into the mountains, but when his wandering cow disappeared, his greed overcame his fear and he went up after it. The next morning, after Mrs. Lockhart's tearful call, Josh headed a small party into the foothills. They found the cow in a ditch with a broken neck, where it had apparently run in panic. Not far away they found Lockhart himself, slumped against a tree, his face contorted as if he had looked into the very heart of hell.

It wasn't a pretty sight. There was no blood or sign of serious injury, but circling Lockhart's corpse was a trail of small, hooflike tracks, tracks that weren't quite human, but weren't quite animal either. Apparently the Other—as Josh's men had come to call it—had caught Lockhart off guard and he had taken a shot at it. How it had killed him was another question entirely. Perhaps it had scared the old man to death.

The news got back to town fast. Josh might have tried tracking the Other down then and there, except that later that afternoon Jessie Pearl was found dead.

Jessie Pearl is—was—our town "character," an eccentric recluse who, if you listened to the gossip about her, was one of the richest women in this half of the state. You wouldn't know it to look at the miserable, unpainted shack she lived in. She wore an ancient pair of surplus army boots and a faded cotton dress that had been given to her by a niece.

Every Wednesday she would walk to her nearest neighbor's, pay a dime and phone her order into the store. This time the grocery boy arrived just as Jessie was scouring her house in search of a missing silver dollar and he accidentally saw the hiding place where Jessie kept her treasure. She called the sheriff's office in hysterics and when Paul Mullins went out to investigate the "attempted theft" he found the front door torn off its hinges. Jessie was lying in the center of the living room floor, clutching at her heart, her money scattered on the floor. They found the same hoof-shaped footprints outside in the yard—and the garden had been stripped of all its ripe vegetables. But by the time Josh got there an afternoon rain had washed the tracks away.

Everything broke open later that evening. Lea Abrams and Jake Peterson came racing into town in near hysterics, the hood of their car battered up as if someone had hammered on it with a baseball bat. They were reluctant to explain just what had happened—and none too coherent on the part they were willing to tell, but what Josh and his deputies eventually pieced together was this:

The two of them had apparently been parked at the local lover's lane, a secluded pull-over on the side of one of the nearby mountain roads, when they heard something stir in the bushes. Since one of the delights among the younger set around Middlefield was prowling through the woods at night and flashing lights in the windows of parked cars, they had assumed it was one of their friends; so they hit the horn and scared "the very devil himself" out of the woods.

All Lea would say about him was that he was frightening. Jake was a little better, saying that the monster had old Lockhart's face but Jessie's hair. The boy had panicked and thrown the car into forward, practically running the creature down. The Other grabbed hold of the front of the car and lifted the spinning wheels off the ground, not letting go until Jake had thrown it into reverse.

Jake backed all the way down the dirt road to the highway, then tore into town. Everyone knew about it within the hour; and before Josh could

do anything Peterson was forming vigilante committees.

Josh found that there was really nothing to do but go along. The next morning he set out at dawn with a full posse, armed to kill.

CHAPTER 4

The sun was just peeking over the horizon as I stood in the driveway leading up to our front porch. The sky was as blue and pale as the inside of a robin's egg, with no clouds in sight. It promised to be a day of rare and moving beauty. It promised to be a real scorcher as well.

I stood in a short sleeve shirt and let the breeze rustle softly through the fabric. Jeanne stood behind me, a small brown bag clutched in her hand and a look of worry in her eyes.

"You won't be gone late, will you, Gordon? I'll wait dinner for you if you think it'll be worthwhile. Karen has some things she wants to show you when she gets home from school. I told her you'd take a look at them if you had the chance..."

I smiled and took the bag from her hands. "I don't know when I'll be getting home. Don't wait up for me. If I'm back late I'll expect to find the both of you in bed."

She wiped three long strands of blonde hair from her eyes. "There's two sandwiches in the bag. And an apple. And here's a thermos with some coffee. Do you think you'll need some more?"

"I think I'll get along." I put the thermos in the bag and tucked it up under my arm. I took one of Jeanne's hands in mine and tried to help her relax. She was more nervous than I was.

There was a crunching of tires against gravel as Bert Wheeler's station wagon came rolling up the drive. Paul Mullins grinned out at me and waved to Jeanne. Someone threw open the back door and I slid in.

Paul threw an arm back over the seat. "Josh's already down on 105 with Jake Peterson and the rest of them. You sure you don't want a shotgun, Reverend?"

I told him I didn't. Bert turned the car around in the driveway and headed back out toward the main road. Jeanne yelled something after me that I couldn't hear and I waved back at her as we drove away.

Josh had half the town out beating the woods. Fred Borden was standing beside an old elm tree as I came up, a large rifle slung over his shoulder. I've never liked guns myself, to be perfectly honest; there's too much reminds me of senseless killing about them. And even when they're used for defense, as they were supposedly being used now, there seemed too many possibilities for accidental death—or just plain bad judgment. There is a place for guns, I suppose, but I'm not at all sure it's in the hands of human beings.

As I walked off of the road, a gunshot roared in the distance. Fred Borden looked up, then nodded at me as I walked past him. Josh came up out of the woods, swearing loudly, then stopped when he saw me.

"Howdy, Reverend. Glad you could make it. Bobby Gilliam just took a shot at a rabbit thinking it was the Other." He shook his head scornfully. "Ahhh, I don't know what I'm gonna do this morning. Do you realize that fifteen of these men have never carried guns before in their lives? What am I supposed to do with a group like this?"

"Maybe send them all home?"

Josh stared at the muddy shoulder of the highway. "I wish I could. I don't know how I got roped into this, I really don't."

"Oh, yes you do. It was Jake Peterson's idea and there wasn't anything you could do about it."

"No. There wasn't." Josh looked deep into my eyes. "How'd you like to speak with them? Talk them out of this? Maybe you can get some sense into their heads."

"I don't know that it would do much good."

"No, it probably wouldn't. I'm just afraid somebody's going to panic, and then..." He shrugged. "Come on. Let's get this thing underway."

We cut through the woods somewhere north of Fletcher's creek, bearing along the edge of what had once been a river bed, maybe five hundred

years ago. There were paths through the trees about every fifty feet or so, so, so that we didn't have much trouble keeping together.

There must have been twenty-five or thirty people in the posse, including Josh and myself. Half of them were townspeople I recognized; maybe fifteen in all. The rest must have been from neighboring communities. I fell into step beside a fat, burly man with bright red hair and a permanent scowl etched onto his face. He looked at me with a peculiar glance when he saw that I wasn't carrying a weapon, but it might not have meant anything. I didn't feel like telling him I was a minister, and I doubt it would have made much difference anyway.

I suspect Josh had asked me to come along with the posse as a moderating influence. I know that's why I accepted. We both agreed there was a creature out there someplace that needed to be caught; two people had died because of it and there had to be some kind of accounting. But I was afraid of the form the accounting might take. Give shotguns to thirty normally levelheaded citizens, tell them that they had to protect their loved ones from a bloodthirsty monster that had killed twice and might well kill again, and who knows what the result might be? What evil, as somebody used to say, lurks in the hearts of normal men? What kind of revenge are they capable of when they believe the welfare of their families to be at stake?

Just which of us was the "bloodthirsty monster?"

There was a shout from somewhere up ahead. The burly redhead tilted his gun at a menacing angle and ran ahead of me, thick jowls bouncing, flesh jiggling around his waist. Others hurried on with him, joining Josh at the head of the column. Someone had spotted a man-like form walking in front of us, more or less parallel to the direction we were travelling. When it heard us coming, it had apparently disappeared, but hadn't had time to go very far. Josh dropped the gun-strap from his shoulder and plunged deeper into that ancient riverbed.

We reached the creek without seeing a sign of the mysterious stranger. A large bird called from somewhere high in a tree, and a rabbit, scared by our sudden invasion of its solitude, ran from a thatch of tangled vegetation. Nothing else moved.

I don't think anyone was breathing right then. Sunlight filtered down through the trees in long, yellow columns, striking green branches here,

leaving deep shadows there. The creek gurgled as it flowed over small pebbles, the only sound in the stillness.

Josh waved his arm and we moved on along the sandy edge of the stream. Sixty feet tramped across the ground, but no one spoke. Tiny insects stirred in the warm, moist air and settled on the damp patches of sweat on my forehead and cheeks. They moved on as I brushed them away.

A gunshot cracked open the stillness.

The figure ran wildly through the trees on the far side of the creek. More shots rang after it; then everyone splashed through the water and back into the woods. I followed.

He was clad in a dark blue jumpsuit, with streamers of ragged, torn fabric flowing from the neck. He ran wildly, but nimbly, between the trees like a scampering rabbit. We struggled to keep up, but I lost sight of him after one or two minutes. Others rushed on ahead of me, but I found myself panting for breath, badly out of shape after too many years of easy living, and I eventually dropped behind. About twelve of the others did too; the rest surged on hopefully after the trail of the stranger.

Surprisingly Josh kept on. I saw him disappear into the thick of the forest, running like a young man. Fred Borden, like myself, sagged against the bole of a venerable oak and fought to recapture his breath.

After a few minutes we began walking again. The burly redhead and stopped a little ways ahead of us, hands against knees, sucking in air. We found the rest about a quarter mile farther on.

"We lost track of it," Josh growled.

Paul threw his gun to the ground and cursed. When Josh glared at him, he picked it up gingerly from the dirt. There was a sharp whistle from about fifty yards downhill. Somebody had discovered a patch of brambles that the Other had trampled through; on the ragged edges of the thorns glistened a blue green wetness that might have been blood. But it wasn't the human kind.

"We must have hit it," someone yelled.

"Come on," yelled another, and we hurried on after the fresh trail.

Periodically we found hoof-shaped footprints in the soft ground, but just as often they disappeared into the thick grass and weeds or over out-croppings of rock. But there was a trail. And we followed it.

Noon came. As the afternoon crept on, the trail became colder and more difficult to follow. I ate the sandwiches and drank the coffee Jeanne had given me. I got to know a school teacher from Wolverton, who had come over for the day when he had heard about the manhunt—or "thing hunt" as some of the teenagers had taken to calling it. He had never held a gun before in his life and didn't know what he'd do with it if called upon to use it, but he had seen his duty and had come along.

By evening we had worked our way up near Simpsonville and there was no more sign of the Other. We had found more traces of blue green blood and trampled vegetation, but even those disappeared after a while, which probably meant we were going in the wrong direction. When we tried to pick up the trail we had little success.

The posse came out of the woods on a stretch of road widely known for its scenic array of billboards and roadside diners. While someone drove the cars back from Middlefield to pick us up, we waited in a small cafe. Bert Wheeler let me off in my driveway at about eleven o'clock and thanked me for going along, then drove off. I was tired, as much in the soul as in the body, though the body had its share of aches and pains too. There were soil marks on my legs and a rip just above the cuff of my pants. I wondered what Jeanne would say when she saw them.

The moon was still high above the treetops to the west as I trudged up the winding gravel roadway. There was a blueness to the air: the blue of moonlight, of not total darkness. Shadows moved through the trees on both sides of the drive. My imagination could have peopled the woods with mysterious shapes and figures, avenging strangers from far away worlds; but my imagination had gone to sleep with the sun and my exhaustion was a poor spinner of tales. I kept my eyes on the road, which was bright and ribbony in the pale light of the moon.

Something dark had dripped on the gravel. In the blue light it looked like tar or dark puddles of mud. It came in splotches, one after another, forming a weaving path that meandered slowly up the drive. I leaned close, curious about what it was.

Dark green blood?

I reached down and dipped into a pool of it with my finger. It was still moist and fresh. Whatever had left it there—and how many possibilities were there?—had been this way recently, probably staggering from side to side along the road.

Dark green blood.

Until now the Other had been an abstract concept, a remote and unreal menace; even this morning when he had run from us in the forest he had been little more real than an image glimpsed on a movie screen. He, it, whatever it was, hadn't really touched me, hadn't affected my life in any way. But now...

I was frightened.

I hurried up the road, until I saw that my house was still there. It seems ridiculous to say I found that comforting, but I did; as if the Other could have climbed in through a window and piloted it off into the sky.

There were no lights shining, but of course Jeanne and Karen would be asleep by now. The windows stared out at me like unblinking eyes and the doorway was a great, silent mouth as I came up the walk. If the Other were there—and I prayed to God that he had bypassed the house and disappeared again into the woods—he could be watching me even then.

I remained close to the woods, watching the house carefully. I thought I saw a brief movement in a second floor window, but it was only a reflection of the moon. The cracking of twigs created a loud alarm beneath my feet. I came slowly to the back door.

Jeanne had left it unlocked, dear trusting Jeanne! In a town where heavy-duty latches and bolts had suddenly become a major industry, Jeanne had forgotten to lock the door. I suppose she'd feared I would be unable to get back in, but I wished she had been less considerate.

With trembling fingers I opened the screen—slowly, so that it wouldn't squeak.

The kitchen was dark. I've always found something both sad and horrifying about the interior of a house without lights on. Moonlight streamed from the kitchen window, throwing long, distorted rectangles of light across the refrigerator and the far wall. Shadows covered everything

else. Here and there a patch of dim light reflected off brightly colored surfaces, but it only made the gloom seem deeper.

My tennis shoes made flexing noises as I walked. I tightened my jaw and tried to ignore the sound as best I could, as if that would make it go away.

Jeanne! Karen! I wanted to cry. *Are you here? Are you all right?*

The living room was a dull area of darkness visible through a doorway surrounded by still more darkness. I walked toward it, fearing the surprises that might be lurking on the other side of that familiar corner.

And then he was standing in front of me, just the other side of the doorway.

Even in the dark I knew who—or what—he was. He seemed a hulking figure: brawny but sloping shoulders topped by an almost human-looking head, long hair flowing down from his scalp; height, perhaps six-and-a-half feet. I couldn't tell much more.

I debated whether to go forward or back. He stood squarely between myself and the living room, which didn't give me much chance of getting through. But Jeanne and Karen were in the bedroom and the only route to the bedroom was through that door, so I couldn't turn back.

I remembered what had happened to old Sam Lockhart. And to Jessie Pearl.

And I was afraid.

I don't mean that I was ordinarily frightened, or even mildly scared. I mean I was genuinely *afraid*, in a way that I had never been afraid before. The fear hit me like a wave from somewhere outside myself, as if... As if it radiated from the Other. I fought against it, struggled not to let my mind become submerged under the torrent of fright and terror, but I found myself scarcely able to think clearly, much less rationally. I wanted to run, to scream. My heart rattled like an overwound clock, as if it were going to burst—as old Lockhart's heart had burst, there on that lonely hillside, as the Other had faced him in his first encounter with humankind; as Jessie Pearl's heart had burst, when she had come unexpectedly on the Other stealing vegetables from her garden.

Was this what they had gone through in those final moments? Had they, too, been assaulted by great waves of agonizing fear? Was this how the creature had killed them? I couldn't let myself give in; it meant too much. I took a step forward and the Other withdrew slightly, backing off as if he, too, were afraid. The emanations increased, but I took another step. And another. The creature edged back slowly into the living room. Gathering my courage I leaped forward, hitting the Other with the flying tackle that had made me the terror of the intramural football teams in my school days. He stumbled backward and we landed together in the center of the room. I pulled myself away from him but he grabbed me by the neck, pressing a cold metal disc against my sensitive flesh. I flailed out against him, struggling to get out of his grasp, but there was a mild tingling along my spine and my arms suddenly relaxed. I went limp all over, tumbling loosely onto the rug.

With my entire mind, my entire soul, I struggled to stand; but I was paralyzed. I could not move.

CHAPTER 5

The Other rose and stood above me, so that I could see him from where I lay. He moved toward me almost timidly; then he bent his knees—if he had knees—and knelt at my side.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

My heart jumped sharply inside my chest. *He had spoken to me!* Hadn't he? If I could have moved my head just then I would have shaken it to clear the cobwebs away. He had spoken to me without using his voice—if indeed he had a voice at all—in words that simply happened inside my head. And I had understood him.

The words he was speaking were gentle, kind.

"I did not intend to harm you," he said, in just the same manner. In the dim light I could begin to make out the features of his face. Incongruously, though I should have been prepared for it after what Jake Peterson had told us, they were Sam Lockhart's features topped off by the ragged mane of Jessie Pearl's hair. But they were not Sam Lockhart's eyes. They were almost all pupil, and in their darkness seemed to be a depth of sorrow I could never plumb. In that moment he ceased to frighten me and I began

to feel a mysterious empathy for this being, this stranger from another world.

"I'm all right," I said, "but I can't move. Can you help me?"

I had spoken the words automatically, before I realized I could not move my lips; but I knew somehow that he had heard them, even though they were only in my mind. He pressed the small, metal disc to my neck again and this time the tingling seemed to release my nervous system from the paralyzing grip. I could move again.

He reached out a hand and pulled me to my feet. I stood for a moment, dizzy and a little nauseated, then sat down in an armchair.

The Other stood in front of me. "I wish to apologize," he said. "You startled me. I did not know what else to do."

"Don't worry," I told him. "It was my mistake as much as yours."

"I have made many mistakes," he went on. "The two I encountered earlier—they died, I fear. I did not mean to kill them."

"I think I understand. That horrible feeling that came over me before..."

He sat down on the edge of the sofa. "Horrible feeling? I do not comprehend..."

I reached out for the lamp beside my chair. "Do you mind if I turn on the light?"

"No, please."

In the sudden harshness of the light he looked different, far less human than he had appeared in the dark. Lockhart's face seemed masklike, no more realistic than the plastic faces children wear on Halloween, and it had no expression to it. His body was almost human, but there was something of the hulking quality of the gorilla in his torso. His shoulders were impressively rounded; the arms dangled below them almost like an afterthought. At the same time his legs were slender, almost delicate, with the grace of the dancer about them. He had, as far as I could tell, no hands or feet. Rather, at the end of his limbs there were malleable lumps of flesh that changed shape even as I watched, extending fingers and digits

apparently at will. He wore a single garment of blue fabric, fastened down the center with a stripe of darker color and cinched at the waist with a sash. I saw that his clothing had been torn along his left side and was stained a dark green.

"You're hurt," I said.

"Not badly," he replied. "I was struck earlier by a projectile. It is only superficial."

As he spoke to me I felt again the strange emanations that I had experienced earlier, but this time they were neither frightening nor disturbing. It was a calmer feeling, a sort of mingled contentment and relief. And then I realized that I could feel the things that the Other felt. Before, when he had felt afraid, I had been afraid, too; and now he felt relieved, almost happy. He radiated emotions, much as a broadcasting tower radiated television programs or a furnace radiated heat. That must have been what killed Lockhart and Jessie—the Other's own fear, magnified and hurled outward at them. He had not meant to kill; he had been unable to do otherwise. I had survived it, I suppose, because his fear upon meeting me had not been as great as his fear upon meeting the others, if only because he was somewhat used to the sight of human beings by now.

And there was a townful of people who were waiting to give him ample reason to fear them.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"My name is Trebar. I come to your world from very far away. I seek refuge, peace."

He had come to the wrong place for that, I reflected. "I hope I can offer you those things." I groped for something to say. "Your appearance now—I know it can't be your normal one..."

"No. I tried to adopt a human appearance, but I do not seem to have succeeded. I had hoped that perhaps you would find it less terrifying than my own."

"May I see your true form?"

He nodded. The lines of his face fluctuated as I watched, then re-formed. Jessie's hair wavered and vanished, becoming thick green scales. Lockhart's features vanished, too, and where once the nose had been there was now a small round hole in the middle of a flat, green plain. The eyes seemed to detach themselves from the face; where the hair had been, two long extrusions appeared, with the eyes mounted on their tips, like stalks growing from his scalp. Instead of a mouth he had something resembling the mandibles of an insect: a hole out of which extended two small tusk-like pincers for grasping and chewing food.

Amazingly, his appearance was somehow beautiful. There was an aura about him, a sense of dignity and power. He filled the room about him with the rich scent of musk.

"I hope I do not startle you."

"You don't," I said. "You look like nothing I've ever seen before, but it doesn't startle me."

And it was true. Deep within the blackness of his eyes, mounted even as they were on those almost comical stalks, I could see the reflection of the lamp beside me; and it was like seeing the light of his soul staring out. I realized that he was really no different from what we were, this extraordinary creature from beyond the stars. He had a soul, he had a mind, he feared and thought—and probably loved—just as we did. This was the creature we had pursued so heartlessly through the woods this afternoon, whose death we had been so intent upon. I asked myself the same question I had asked earlier: Just which of us was the "bloodthirsty creature?" This Trebar was an intelligent being; he deserved his life and happiness as much as we did. But would anyone else understand that?

Trebar turned to face the door leading to the stairs. I turned, too; and there was Jeanne, like a hovering ghost in a white nightgown, the light from the living room causing her almost to glow against the darkness of the hallway behind her. She had her hand to her mouth and her eyes were open wide. She neither stepped forward nor backed away, but stood rigid, startled.

"Gordon," she said. "Oh, my God!"

Trebar seemed confused, unsure. I felt the waves of fear coming from him again, but to his credit he fought against it this time and they did

little more than raise the hackles on the back of my arm. But I could see that Jeanne felt it too.

"It's all right, Jeanne. This is Trebar. He's not going to harm us. Don't be afraid."

"But he's the monster," she gasped. "He's the one who killed Sam Lockhart and Jessie Pearl."

I went to her side and put my arms around her shoulders. She trembled against me, her heart pounding.

"Those were accidents, Jeanne. He meant well. He's hurt, don't you see..."

She looked up and met Trebar's eyes across the room. Her expression changed and I could sense a battle within her. Fear and suspicion warred with her need to trust others, to give love. In the end, calm and trust won out. Knowing Jeanne, I had never feared it wouldn't.

Trebar cautiously extended a hand toward her. "I come to you in peace," he said. "I do not mean to... disturb you."

Jeanne stared at the offered hand, then she looked at me. She hesitated; then she drew slowly away from my arms. Of course she was frightened; I could hardly blame her. But she walked timidly to the center of the room and extended her own hand until it touched Trebar's. I saw her shiver as her soft skin touched alien flesh, but she did not flinch and she did not pull away.

It did not occur to me until much later that I had been present at an historic occasion that evening: the first contact—literally—between a man and woman of Earth and a man from the stars. I supposed that someday there might be a chapter of a history book about this moment alone; perhaps a shelf full of books about the events that had happened this night. But, as I say, that did not occur to me until much later.

At the moment I wondered if the world would ever know Trebar had arrived. If Jake Peterson or any other of those rabid vigilantes were to discover him here, they would give him little opportunity to explain his true intentions. They would shoot first and then wonder what they had done. I could not allow that to happen.

Jeanne had Trebar lie on the sofa while she brought some kind of warm, soapy solution from the kitchen. She cut the fabric away from the green-stained wound and washed the flesh clean of caked blood and dirt. Then she bound it with fresh gauze. She was a ministering angel, my Jeanne, treating this being from another world just as she would a friend or neighbor. She brought Trebar a bowl of vegetables and some meat; he ate ravenously. Apparently he had already discovered which of our Earthly foods were safe for him to eat.

"What about Karen?" Jeanne asked, while Trebar dined.

"She'll have to be told," I said. "How about right now?"

"Oh no, Gordon! She's asleep."

"Then I'll wake her. I want her to meet Trebar as soon as possible."

Karen rubbed her eyes sleepily when I woke her, but she did not complain as I led her from her bed to the stairs. Her slippers made slapping sounds on the steps as we descended and she looked like a drowsy little princess there in the half-darkness. On the last step she turned and sniffed the air.

"He's here," she said. "Isn't he, daddy? Is he an angel?"

I don't know what remarkable powers of instinct and observation had told her of Trebar's presence. But I was glad then that I had not tried to hide him from her. The conviction that I was doing the right thing grew.

"Not quite, Karen," I replied. "He's a visitor who has come from far away to see us."

I brought her through the door to the living room and there was Trebar. They stared at one another for what seemed a very long time. Then Karen took a deep breath and, putting on her very best party manners, said, "How nice of you to come."

Trebar smiled. It wasn't a movement of his facial muscles so much as an overall rearrangement of his body. I felt waves of happiness and delight radiate from him, as the fear and terror had radiated before.

They became fast friends, those two.

* * *

We showed Trebar the guest bedroom and it was there he spent the night, sleeping, it seemed, much as humans do.

In the morning we showed him the rest of the house: the books, the machines, the way we lived. He took it all in with a marvelous curiosity, a sense of wonder about the life we Earthlings led. In return he told us of the world he came from.

It was called Poliqa. It orbited a star a thousand light-years from Earth, which meant that the star we saw in the sky where Trebar's star should be was the star it had been almost ten centuries ago.

As the next few days passed, Trebar told us of Poliqa and how it had died.

And we listened, all of us, and were changed.

PART TWO: Departure

CHAPTER 6

... and it was but a ball of death, cold and black, and the Trigod looked upon it, and He breathed out life upon the face of the rock and water; and, yea, He breathed out warm beauty upon the chill and the dark...

He was coming out of it now. In the instant before the docking maneuver was completed, Trebar felt the bitter cold of the void pressing against the membranous skin of the starship, like death against life, non-existence against existence; and then it was gone. He withdrew his extensors from the central core of the Command Unit, feeling the molecules of his flesh folding in on themselves, stepping down the power inputs as he moved. The rhythmic pulsations of the engines dulled until they were little more than a monotonous throbbing behind his sensory apparatus.

He slumped against the control module, exhausted.

"Is everything all right, sir?" asked Kwaol. Trebar revolved his eyestalks until he could see his young copilot perched on the secondary control level behind him, his tactile extensors dancing across the command circuits like small, graceful animals. He was broadcasting an aura of concern across the lower empathic wavelengths. Trebar let the emotion wash over him, drawing from it some small measure of strength.

"Yes," he said. "Everything's all right. It's been a long trip."

Kwaol smiled—or at least his empathic vibrations became less concerned and more enthusiastic. "Yes, sir," he said. "That it has, sir." He returned to his circuits and keyed in the impulses that would attach their ship securely to Orbital Platform Four. A muffled clang floated up from beyond the airlock.

Trebar tilted his eyestalks back toward the control module and disengaged his extensors from the central linkage console, allowing them to return gradually to their normal shape. He always felt depressed when he unhooked himself from a computer interface, but this time it was worse than ever, as if he were experiencing a severe emotional hangover. It was as though he were cutting away a part of himself, amputating important sensory organs, leaving only a blind and senseless hulk.

He wished he could tell Kwaol what it was he had felt during the last moments of the flight, but knew without trying it would be hopeless. There were no words in his vocabulary to describe the sensations, no analogies. All he knew was that when they had come roaring out of netherspace and into the normal space/time continuum, he had experienced an ecstasy so intense, so blindingly perfect, it had been almost religious in nature. For a brief moment he had been more than a single organism, more than a tiny mote tossed upon the vast uncaring sea of space. He had been as one with the entire universe, an immense godlike thing, almost as if he had been part of the great Trigod Himself...

He cut the thought short. Belief in the Trigod was not encouraged among Trebar's kind. It was, in fact, actively suppressed. It was only by chance that Trebar was aware of such things. He wouldn't dare express those thoughts aloud...

He inhaled sharply through his intake ducts. Tightly closing his visual irises, he began the ritual declimatization exercises, counting slowly to ten and listing the multiple stations of the Imperial Authority. *One: The*

Council of the Nine. Two: The Presidor of the State. Three: The army, brave and strong...

When it was over he opened his irises and looked tentatively about at his surroundings. Things looked a little better now, a little less hostile. He knew intellectually that the declimatization exercises were absurd; furthermore they were blatant propaganda; but there was little doubt that they worked. The state's hypnotherapy program was frighteningly effective.

"Ready to debark, sir?" asked Kwaol.

Trebar turned to him and smiled. "Are all stations shut down and in stasis? Good. Come on; let's get out of here."

Kwaol stood and bowed deferentially. Trebar returned the salute and led the way to the airlock. The atmosphere barrier dilated; they stepped through and into the tiny cubicle beyond. Two more crew members appeared from the engineering pit to join them and Trebar realized that they had been flying with little more than a skeleton crew this time out. Not that a large number of crewmen were needed to fly the *Suntreader*; in point of fact, Trebar and Kwaol could probably fly the ship by themselves if they had to, but when she made her big trip five days hence, she was sure to have her full complement on board, even if most of the officers and crew were just for show.

The outer hull irised open and they found themselves staring into the lock of Orbital Station Four. Trebar led them across the threshold, and they took seats in the decontamination chamber. A light mist sprayed out of hidden nozzles; Trebar felt an almost imperceptible tingling sensation spread across his body.

In the center of the room an elevated sphere glowed its intense, throbbing purple. Trebar reached out and touched it with his tactile extensors. From within it he could feel the warm vibration of a mind-message trying to communicate itself through his skin. Words blossomed inside his head. It was the "voice" of Station Commander Melois:

"Welcome back, Mission Captain Trebar. I hear your test run was a resounding success. May I be the first to congratulate you and your crew and to offer you the unlimited hospitality of our station."

Trebar looked up and saluted the television camera that he knew must be concealed somewhere behind the wall. "Thank you, Commander Melois. But I'm afraid we won't be staying long."

"Then I wish you a fast and successful flight home. Peace of life to you."

The sphere dimmed. Trebar wished, briefly, that he could take advantage of Melois' offer. He liked the old man, had even served under him for a short time when he first joined the fleet; but the test run had been a lengthy one, the longest flight yet for Poliqa's only operational starship, and Trebar was anxious to get home. It had been more than a week since he had last seen his family.

He turned and watched Kwaol pull a stimtab from a small dispenser. "Tired?" he asked.

"I guess you could call it that, sir. I've been too excited to notice it before now."

"I know what you mean. Just make sure you get a lot of rest this coming week. I have a feeling you'll be needing it."

Kwaol brightened. "Yes, sir! I understand, sir."

Trebar smiled quietly to himself. There were no guarantees that Kwaol would be chosen as his secondary for the upcoming mission, but he had little doubt that things would work out that way. It was perfectly within his power to recommend Kwaol for the post; he was a good man and Trebar worked well in his company. He felt confident the council would agree, when they saw his report on the test run.

Overhead, a red sign flashed: DECONTAMINATION COMPLETE. Trebar stood and the others gathered at his side. A doorway irised open and the harsh light of the station interior flooded the dimly lit cubicle like a sudden explosion. A torrent of mind-voices followed:

"Captain Trebar! Could we converse with you for a moment?"

"Mission Captain! Do you think it's possible that... ?"

"Could you say a few words about... ?"

Trebar blocked the light with an upraised arm. The passageway was filled to capacity; he had never seen the orbital platform so crowded. Looking closer he realized that there were actually no more than six or seven individuals in the corridor, but the platform itself was so cramped that it seemed like a mob.

One of them, obviously a reporter, thrust a holographic thought recorder within a few inches of his face and asked him something about the future of Project Ascension. Trebar waved him to silence.

"All I'm at liberty to say right now is that the interstellar mission will go off as planned, in five days, assuming that the *Skyhope* checks out all right. Our test run in the *Suntreader* went off almost flawlessly. We took her out past the orbit of Lopcyea and back; farther than any other mission to date. All netherspace transitions went exactly as our projections said they would."

"Mission Captain?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to beg off now, friends. Like I said before: that's all I'm at liberty to say. If you want to find out more, I'm sure that the Council of the Nine will be releasing a press report within a few days."

"Captain Trebar! Is it true that the *Suntreader* and the *Skyhope* will be armed with defensive weaponry in case you should encounter hostile aliens?"

Trebar looked up and met the reporter's gaze with carefully controlled anger. "Absolutely not! And you'd better avoid that kind of rumor mongering in the future; it could get you into bad trouble with the council. Neither the *Suntreader* nor the *Skyhope* will be equipped with any kind of armament, defensive or offensive. Not if I have anything to say about it. Now if you'll excuse me... "

Trebar stepped forward and the reporters reluctantly moved aside to let him through. Halfway down the corridor he found Captain Bix of the *Skyhope* waiting for him with extensors outstretched.

"Well, you old ether-breather. Back from your jaunt at last. We missed you here. Congratulations!"

Bix was a few years younger than Trebar, but he had been handpicked

by Trebar's superiors to fly the backup ship in the upcoming mission. They intertwined tentacles in a friendly embrace and Bix did a little dance of greeting. Trebar responded half-heartedly.

"Skip the formalities, Bix. Just get me away from those reporters."

"No problem. Come on. There's something I want to show you, anyway."

Bix pulled an admittance tab from his sidepouch and plugged it into a socket; a small portal opened in the wall beside them, swallowing them hungrily and then closing as they passed.

"They won't be able to follow you here. That's one of the advantages of high rank."

Trebar shrugged. "I'm afraid I left poor Kwaol at their mercy. I hope he doesn't mind."

"He won't. He's young. Nestlings love that kind of attention."

They glided down the corridor together until, eventually, it widened into a sitting room. The far wall of the room was pure glass and beyond it waited space itself. In the center hung the *Skyhope*.

Trebar pressed his extensors against the window. The distant light of the sun shone off the *Skyhope's* glistening hull in dazzling colors. "It's... it's beautiful. How long has it been finished?"

"It's not yet. They're adding the last touches now. I'm taking her out on a test run in two days, so we'll be back in time for the mission next week." His extensors brushed lightly against Trebar's shoulder. "She *is* beautiful, isn't she? How does it feel to be chief designer of a ship like that, Trebar?"

"Hard to describe. It's a little like being..." He caught himself and stopped. A nervous tremor passed through his abdomen. He had almost said... *like being Trigod himself*.

"Like being the Presidor of the State," he finished, lamely.

"I can imagine," said Bix.

Leaning closer against the glass Trebar could see the great bluish-white

orb of Poliqa, mother of life, far below them—the nesting ground of a race that would soon reach the stars. He shivered with a kind of awe; he always thrilled a little to the sight of his home world. He had flown eleven missions now to other worlds, including the first mission to Lopcyea, the awesome gas giant at the far edge of the solar system, and yet he still waited breathlessly for that moment when Poliqa grew from a tiny point of light on his viewscreen into a great cloud-encrusted globe, speeding toward him with its promise of life, renewal, redemption. It had been the high point of every trip so far and he knew it would never pall.

"You'd better get a move on," said Bix. "Your shuttle's waiting."

"Just a minute. I... I want to watch for a moment longer."

Bix smiled and radiated an understanding warmth that caught Trebar by surprise. "Sure. Go ahead. You've got all the time in the world."

* * *

The trip back started well. The shuttle-host saw that the reporters took seats in the back while Trebar's crew sat up front. Trebar sat alone by one of the thick, blue-tinted glass windows so he could catch a last glimpse of the two starships. As they prepared to seal the doors to the cabin, Bix came rushing in, eyestalks bouncing in irritation, and took the seat next to him.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were making a test run in two days."

Bix shook his head. "I am. At least I think I am. We just got a message from the council. They're holding a special meeting this afternoon and they want both of us to be there."

"This afternoon! Look, Bix, I'm exhausted. Can't this wait? I'm thirty hours off my sleepcycle already."

"Don't complain to me. You think I want to shuttle down to Poliqa just to come back again tomorrow? Besides, you should have caught some sleep during your flight. That's what you've got a co-pilot for."

"I know. It's just... I guess I was too excited. You know how it is. To be part of an incredible machine like that, out there in the middle of space.

The middle of everything! I felt so... *exalted!* As if, well, you'll understand after your test flight; it's not the kind of thing I can describe."

"I think I understand already, Trebar. Give me credit for *some* feelings. Only I wouldn't use those terms to describe it to the council. It sounds, ah, a little mystical, you know?"

Trebar shook his head. "But that's what it is, don't you see? A mystical experience. It's almost..."

"Religious?" Bix laughed reprovingly. "I'm sorry, Trebar, but that's what you were beginning to sound like—and that's how you'll come across if you start spouting that kind of stuff at the meeting this afternoon. Don't get angry, Trebar. I just meant it as a friendly warning."

"I'm not angry!" But he *was* angry and he knew it; not because Bix was wrong, but because he was right. The council *would* think that he was spouting religion if he tried to tell them what he had told Bix; council members were peculiar that way, jumping on the slightest reference as if it were evidence of high treason. They seemed at times to have been chosen for their advanced paranoia—or maybe it was just an occupational disease. At any rate it would be better if he didn't tell them about his "mystical" experiences, not in those terms, at any rate.

He touched Bix's extensor in a gesture of apology. "Sorry, old man. You're right. I appreciate the advice." As if to say *You're among friends*, Bix shrugged and picked up a reader-selector from the rack in front of him, dialing a periodical from the shuttle library.

Trebar leaned back in his seat and felt the heat-responsive fabric curl sensuously around the angles of his body. Oh well, he thought. What did it matter? The council wasn't privy to his private thoughts. He couldn't be drummed out of Project Ascension for having ideas that someone might interpret as religious; not unless he started preaching them out loud. In five days he could think whatever he pleased—and who was to know? He would be on his way to Unicorn Prime, the brightest star in the constellation of the Unicorn. That was what mattered now. For centuries it had hung in the skies like a tempting jewel, a luscious fruit; and he would be the first of his race to cross the heavens and pluck it from the celestial bough.

He laughed, silently, at the lushness of his metaphor. Space travel was

bringing out the poet in him. For better or worse he seemed to be discovering emotional depths in himself that had never before been tapped. Did it frighten him? Perhaps a little. He wasn't sure. Maybe Lilwey would understand. He would have to tell her about it when he got home. If he ever got home...

The shuttle jumped, almost imperceptibly, and edged slowly away from the platform, revolving until it had oriented itself to the re-entry orbit. Trebar craned in his seat to get a last look at the *Suntreader* and the *Skyhope*; then, as the shuttle fell gradually downward and away, he watched them become little more than points of light lost among other points of light. Trebar turned from the window.

He closed his visual irises and searched for sleep, but it refused to come. A single image haunted his thoughts, playing over and over in his mind like an endless film: the *Suntreader*, bursting free of netherspace like a seed squeezed tightly from its pod; the heavens opening around him, absorbing him, becoming part of him; the great ball of Poliqa, suddenly beneath him, warm and alive; words forming inside his head:... *and He breathed out life upon the face of the rock and water; and, yea, He breathed out warm beauty upon the chill and the dark...*

A shudder passed through him. He opened his irises and focused on the shuttle again, awake and shivering. Those words seemed so familiar, as if he had read them somewhere recently, as if...

And then he remembered.

CHAPTER 7

He had been old, older than Trebar's father had been on his death bed, and that was old indeed. He lurched forward, making incoherent noises; at first Trebar had thought him merely intoxicated on some drug—and then he had realized that the old one was sick, perhaps dying.

Trebar caught him as he fell, lowering him slowly to the soft pavement. The old one struggled against him for a moment, his extensors curling and uncurling with a quiet desperation; and then he lay still. His color was pale green, his flesh tight against the malleable bone structure underneath.

Trebar asked: "What's wrong, old one? Are you ill?"

The old one's thoughts were a haze of static, almost offensively chaotic; his articulators moved as if he wished to speak, but all that emerged was an incoherent muttering. Trebar pressed closer to his face and the old one uttered two short, barely audible sentences.

"They did this to me," he choked. "They made me like this."

"Relax," Trebar told him. "Don't try to move. I'll get a medical technician for you..."

"No!" the old man shouted, startling Trebar with the vehemence of his reply. He lifted a leathery extensor with what seemed to be his last burst of strength and pulled a small, leather-bound book from his sidepouch. It was old and crumbling, but that was hardly a surprise; books had been largely replaced on Trebar's world by the reader-selectors, portable computer terminals that allowed one, theoretically at least, complete access to the public information stores in the central libraries. And yet here was an actual paper book. . . .

"Here," the old one whispered. "Take this. Please. Keep it away from them." He pressed it insistently against Trebar's extensor, then sank back to the ground.

"I don't understand, old one. Why do you want me to have this?"

The police-craft landed with a soft hiss of compressed air. Trebar looked up to see two dark-uniformed officers strut across a small park to where he was kneeling. Without thinking Trebar stuffed the book into his pouch.

The taller of the two officers pointed toward the old one and asked: "You know him?"

"No," replied Trebar. "I. ..."

The other asked: "Did he say anything to you?"

"I... I don't think so. He tried to, but he's very weak."

Both officers smiled. "Yes. He is. Thank you, highborn. We'll take him

now." They gathered the old one into their linked extensors and carried him silently back to their craft.

Trebar watched without moving. When the police-craft had risen smoothly back into the sky he reached into his sidepouch and, with trembling fingers, pulled out the book. There were three words inscribed on the cover, in elaborate gold script: The Forbidden Tome.

* * *

Coming up out of sleep he could hear someone singing: a single, painfully high-pitched note, the kind that could shatter glass. His extensors went automatically to his auditory openings to shut it out.

"Glad to see you're awake," said Bix. "We're coming in."

He opened his irises. The "singing" was the screaming of the landing jets, tiny retro-rockets on the shuttle wings designed to slow their descent speed. As Trebar watched they flickered out and the shuttle dropped below the clouds.

Beneath them, visible through the small triangle of tinted glass at his side, sprawled Malinqa City like a vast garden of spike-shaped flowers growing in the fertile bowl of Haika Valley. Leaning against the window Trebar could see the immense pyramid of Judiciary Hall, around which the other triangular skyscrapers clustered like obedient children, tucked safely in its shadow. The simile, thought Trebar, was apt; Judiciary Hall was the nerve center of the entire Poliqaan Complex, a network of eighteen once-sovereign nations bound together by a single government and a single ruling council; and in its nearly two hundred miles of hallways walked the most important individuals on the planet, including the Nine themselves.

In a few hours Trebar, too, would walk those halls.

The shuttle touched down gently against the hard steel of Malinqa Field and spun slowly around toward the waiting debarkation tunnel. Trebar pulled his pouch from the tiny overhead compartment and tossed his dress cape smoothly over his shoulders, buckling it smartly in front. The shuttle host stood at the head of the aisle, giving instructions for debarkation.

"It's good to be back on solid ground," said Trebar. "Gives one a feeling of security."

Bix laughed. "Don't give me that stuff. If you'd wanted a feeling of security you'd never have joined the space navy."

The cool valley air caressed their skin lightly as they stepped onto the narrow platform leading from the shuttle to the tunnel access. The reddish-orange Poliqaan sun glared down on them like a monstrous, unflickering torch. Trebar flattened an extensor and held it as a shield against the light. Trebar could make out some of the taller Malinqaan skyscrapers rising sharply above the shuttle hangars; beyond them, colored pale blue by the intervening distance and haze, bulked the impressive mass of Judiciary Hall. Trebar watched it for a few moments, then turned to enter the tunnel.

A large truck drew up beside the shuttle and squealed to a halt. An official-looking individual threw open the passenger door and dropped to the pavement below. A sharp wind snapped the tarpaulin that covered the truck's cargo.

"I wonder what that is?" mused Trebar. "Supplies for the *Skyhope*?"

Bix turned to watch a large transport craft touch down on the adjoining runway. "How would I know?" he asked.

Trebar ignored him. "I thought you said they were almost finished with construction. Shouldn't everything be on board by now?"

"I don't know." Bix grabbed Trebar by the waist and pulled him toward the tunnel. "Let's not talk about it now." The doorway irised open and the two of them glided through.

"You sound like you know something you're not telling me. Hey, stop pushing!"

"We're running late. How would you like to explain to the council why we held them up?"

Trebar shrugged. They hurried on into the terminal.

* * *

Malinqa City reared up before them like row after row of finely pointed teeth, sparkling as the afternoon sun flashed against thousands of polished windows. Even at a distance the sight was impressive, despite the thick smog that clustered around the city walls like bunched fabric.

As the government driver wheeled their four-seater carriage onto the sharply inclined access ramp leading to the elevated highway, Trebar grabbed at the seat ahead of him for support. The engine howled as the driver dropped it into a lower gear, then whined loudly as he merged with the swift traffic.

"Don't make them like they used to," commented Bix, as the acceleration pushed him backward into the thickly padded seat.

"Thank the stars!" laughed Trebar. "The last time I travelled in a government carriage it broke down halfway between Dorlis and Alvers; we had to walk to the nearest traveller's station. It was a charming experience, believe me."

The sound of Trebar's words seemed to echo for several seconds after he spoke them; it was the first time he had spoken aloud in several weeks and it felt strange indeed. The low-pitched vibrations in his throat seemed awkward and unfamiliar, but at least he had not forgotten how. It was a good thing, too: council sessions were always conducted verbally.

Oral speech was a holdover from an earlier era on Trebar's world. There had been a time when all intra-personal communications among Poliqans had been verbal, but as the *psi* powers had waxed, vocal ability had waned, becoming, over the centuries, very nearly a forgotten skill, cultivated only by a few. About fifty years before Trebar's birth, however, the verbal arts had undergone a renaissance of sorts among the Poliqan upper class. Most forms of theater had come to be performed aloud—as well as affairs of state. Anyone with an eye on a career in politics or the arts found it wise to cultivate his or her vocal abilities early, because the task was nearly impossible for one not trained from birth. The upper classes, accordingly, had taken to training their children to speak at a very early age. It was considered a mark of good breeding; few members of the lower classes possessed the necessary training, except—on occasion—the servants of upper class dignitaries. Needless to say, there was very little intermingling of the classes in Poliqan society.

Trebar turned to Bix. "The meeting this afternoon; did they say what it

was about?"

"No. I suppose they'll have something to say about Project Ascension, though. Hope they're not having second thoughts."

"Are all Nine in town now? I heard that old Jokun was ill."

"That's true. Last I heard they weren't expecting him to pull through. They've got him strung out on some kind of new pain reliever. Probably enjoying himself, the old dog."

"I hope so. It's a shame, really."

"And Morgi is out on the Tentacle Islands, giving some kind of tactical assistance to the local government. They've been having problems with the working classes. Some kind of uprising, I think."

"So I've heard."

The carriage bumped sharply as the driver rolled it off the highway and onto the shiny, metallic access road that sped arrow-like into the heart of Malinqa City. Trebar watched the sunlight fan briefly into the window at his side, then vanish behind a row of buildings.

"So everybody else is in town, right?" he asked.

"It appears that way, which is a little surprising. I think something more is afoot than just our project, but I don't know what."

"You're probably right. The only one who seems genuinely interested in the project is old Lorpik—at least he's the only one who's worked with me on it so far. The others probably know very little in the way of details and I doubt that they care."

Bix wrapped his extensors thoughtfully about his shoulders. "My guess is that something serious is happening right here in Malinqa. I wish I knew what it was. I guess I spend too much time out at the project; I feel rather disconnected from things sometimes."

"Me too. I'm waiting for the day when I come home and Lilwey and the nestling don't recognize me."

"Hard on them?"

"Little Kowerc couldn't care less. Too busy moulting to think about his old man. But Lilwey—I'd say Lilwey is having a hard time of it."

"Think she'll put her print on the renewal jelly?"

"It's not a contract affair, Bix. She's my forever mate."

Bix nodded sympathetically. "Sorry, Trebar. I'd forgotten that."

"I know it's out of fashion now, but that's the way we planned the relationship. And that's the way it will stay."

"All right, all right. Where's your sense of humor? I wasn't criticizing."

Trebar leaned back wearily. "I'm sorry, old friend. I'm tired, that's all. Forget what I said; I'll buy you a snort of Drax after the meeting, okay?"

"You don't have to do that. Just put in a good word with the Presidor about me and we'll call it even."

With a sigh, Trebar turned to the window and watched the thick crowds of pedestrians squeezing through the narrow sidewalks of Malinqa City; they seemed, he thought, to wander aimlessly through the streets, like animals in an endless maze. It seemed so futile, so pointless...

He *was* tired. He shouldn't think like that. He had let himself go too long without rest, and now depression was setting in. Sometimes—he couldn't stop the thought from coming—life seemed like one frantic dash from start to finish, arbitrary points on a great, outsized game board. He thought about how rarely he got to see Lilwey any more, or little Kowerc. And yet the project was so important, so necessary. He had dedicated himself to it from the beginning, because he believed deeply in its significance for the future of his race.

And yet sometimes he doubted even that.

He waved the thought aside. If only he had time for a little sleep. He could wake refreshed, perhaps get away from the cynicism to which he seemed to be falling prey of late. But no; they had the meeting to attend, the council members to appease. Sometimes he wondered if politics were really necessary to a sane world.

"Face front, space pilot!" Bix punched him good-humoredly in the side. "We're here."

* * *

So immense was the great pyramid of Judiciary Hall that, viewed from the narrow angle of one who could only see its base, its bulk was not immediately apparent. From where Trebar sat in the carriage he could only see the bottom floor, an expanse equal, roughly, to five average city blocks, but not terribly impressive to the casual observer. It wasn't until he stepped from the carriage that he became aware of the overwhelming weight of stone and metal that towered above him—and he felt strangely oppressed by it. Pausing, he looked up toward the peak; it seemed to flicker in and out of the smog like an insubstantial phantom. The building frightened him; it seemed almost a tangible symbol of arrogance and power, of a monolithic government machine, quite capable of flattening its citizens with the sheer weight of its bureaucratic mass.

No, that was his exhaustion speaking. The government was a large part of his career. It had been responsible for putting him where he was today. Surely he didn't find it monolithic and oppressive.

A footman scurried to meet Trebar and Bix at the curb, bowing and posturing in a complicated attitude of welcome. A volley of martial music burst suddenly from the outside speakers.

The footman stepped forward and performed the complex dance of servility, sweeping low and kissing the feet of his guests, then executing a tight series of pirouettes on the extended points of his feet. He was an obvious member of the central class, raised, most likely, in the warrens on the eastern edge of the city. Trebar felt an unexpected stab of guilt at the footman's dance; he tried not to let it show on his face.

"A million humble greetings, o wanderers of the starways," said the footman aloud. "My masters await your arrival with anticipation."

"Thank you," said Trebar. "What's your name, friend?"

The footman looked distressed. "My name, your goodness? Why would one so exalted as yourself concern himself with a matter of as small importance to the great scheme of destiny?"

Bix nudged his shoulder. "Trebar?"

"Not now, Bix." He turned back to the footman. "I..." He groped for the words, forcing himself to use the curiously formal language of oral speech. "I desire your name so as to properly thank you for the splendid display of talent you have so vivaciously dispensed for our, ah, entertainment; so that I may properly commend your performance to the members of the council. Is that such an untoward wish?"

"Well..." The footman seemed confused. It was rare that a member of one of the higher classes paid him any attention at all, even when he was performing his office duties. And yet he could not risk angering the highborn one. "Very well, sir. As you will. I have been given the name 'Kopl' by my nest parents. My appellation is officially 'door dancer.' And I... I thank your loftiness for your generous though undeserved words of praise—may I prove worthy of but a tenth of what you say."

"And I thank you, Kopl," replied Trebar. "I wish you peace of life."

Confused and decidedly nonplussed, the footman led the way through the gleaming Judiciary Arch. As he passed, Trebar felt a distinct aura of gratitude radiating from his empathic nodes. It was a good feeling.

"What," asked Bix, "was *that* all about? Don't you realize what you just did is totally against all protocol? Not to mention standard etiquette."

Trebar shrugged noncommittally. "Come on, Bix. Be flexible. He puts a lot of himself into his work. Probably no one's ever told him that he enjoyed it before."

"Do you think he cares? He's just a..."

"Shhh. Here comes Lorpik."

A tall, poised and distinguished looking individual strode through the archway as the sliding doors disappeared into the surrounding walls. His ritual dance was short but enthusiastic; he offered an extensor of greeting first to Trebar, then to Bix. He smiled warmly.

"Come, come!" he exclaimed aloud. "It's good to see you. Trebar. Bix." He waved his eyestalks happily. "The others are waiting inside, but I thought I'd get first crack at you. You don't know how good it is to see you

again."

They exchanged pleasantries for a few moments, then Lorpik turned and followed Kopl, the door dancer, across the wide asymmetrically domed lobby and into the intricate catacomb of passages beyond. The layout of the corridors within the building had always baffled Trebar; the passageways were not, as logic seemed to dictate, arranged at right angles to the sides of the pyramid's base. Rather, they seemed to meander off in some bizarrely intricate design, a maze of sorts. Every floor was different; none mirrored the one beneath it. In point of fact, the building did not have "floors" at all—not in the conventional sense of the term. Passageways rose and fell in a seemingly whimsical pattern and, indeed, the inexperienced visitor was as likely as not to find himself hopelessly lost in the vast labyrinth of corridors if he did not employ one of the footmen—or "door dancers" as they were called—who served as guides for all but the most experienced of the building's residents.

The tiny footman led them through a seemingly endless, spiralling corridor and up two flights of stairs into a long hallway decorated with brightly colored and smoothly textured ornaments; Trebar noted busts of former and present council members lining the walls. The lush, blue carpet felt soft and resilient under their feet; it led eventually to a double doorway of delicately crafted, stained glass.

Kopl skittered along enthusiastically in front of them. At the doorway he fiddled briefly with the bolt, then pulled the doors slowly open on their massive hinges. Purplish light poured out. Trebar paused at the threshold, the opulence of the room beyond pushing him back like a solid force.

The room was large. In shape it was vaguely hemispheric, though one end stretched out elliptically, giving it a false perspective of great depth. The far side seemed almost to recede into purple mists.

In the center was a table, though the term seemed hopelessly inadequate. It was a circular mass of transparent plastic that shone in the artificial light as if thousands of tiny jewels had been imbedded in its surface. Around its circumference sat six Poliqans ranging in age from perhaps thirty years to considerably more than a hundred. In one corner of the room a harp player strummed lightly, unobtrusively, on his instrument.

Kopl the door dancer revolved nimbly on one heel and turned to those

behind him. "May I beg your leave, good sirs?" he asked.

"Yes, yes, door dancer. Begone!" muttered Lorpik.

Kopl bowed deeply and scurried rapidly from the chamber. Trebar looked after him and said, "A most talented and accomplished door dancer, don't you think?"

Lorpik cleared his throat. "Yes," he replied. "Indeed."

On the far side of the table an orange-robed Poliqaan of perhaps seventy-five years of age rose and spoke in a resonant vibrato. "Come, come, Lorpik! Introduce us to our two young heroes."

"Yes," echoed a smaller individual to his right. "I'm anxious to meet our famous space travellers. Bring them here, Lorpik."

"As you will, Monwin." Lorpik grabbed Trebar by the extensor and pulled him forward. "This is Mission Captain Trebar of the *Suntreader*. And Bix, captain of the *Skyhope*. Trebar, Bix: the Council of the Nine."

Trebar bowed slightly from his waist. Despite his exhaustion a sudden thrill ran along his empathic receptors. *The Council of the Nine!* The full significance of what was happening suddenly struck home: He was being introduced before the council as a figure of national importance! Despite everything, he found himself becoming excited. He was ashamed of himself for having felt too tired to attend.

Lorpik introduced them to the remaining council members: Eylok the Courageous; Nexar, Commander of Myriad Strengths; Monwin of Alvers; Olion, keeper of the Eternal Records; Ynox the Undying; Perlin, worshipful elder of the council. Trebar and Bix bowed ritually to each.

Lorpik motioned for the two to sit, then waved to an attendant to bring them each a bowl of wine.

Across the table, Nexar rose to his feet and performed a brief dance of greeting. He was a muscular individual, taller than the others, slim and well-formed. He wore a leather cap with bright green tassels dangling from its sides; his torso was wrapped in a severe black cloth of military cut, indicating his position as Commander of the Poliqaan Armed Forces. He was the youngest member of the council and it was no secret that he

was the most ambitious. It was also no secret that he was the most roundly disliked, the most actively feared; even among the council itself. He had won his position less than a year earlier in a brilliant display of tactical acumen and physical skill during the Leadership Games. As he spoke, he spit out the words quickly and glibly.

"We're all curious," he began, "to hear Mission Captain Trebar's description of his flight. I know I am. I trust we can dispense with the usual formalities and ask young Trebar to make his speech."

Perlin nodded. "I see no reason to deny your request. Are there any objections? No? All right, Trebar; would you mind telling us about your mission?"

Trebar came slowly to a standing position. He felt awkward, out of place. It seemed as if there were something caught in his throat. "I... " he began, "I'm not sure where to start."

Old Perlin smiled warmly. "That's understandable. It need not be a detailed reconstruction. Just a brief summary." Trebar caught the outward wisps of an aura of goodwill from the old Poliqan. It made him feel better to know that Perlin was on his side; he took a deep breath and made a conscious effort to relax.

"You must understand," Perlin went on, "that space travel is rather new to some of us. There are those among us who never dreamed, in our youth, that we would someday be engaged in sending men to the stars. It's all rather strange to us and you must be understanding." He smiled again. "But talk to us now, Trebar. Tell us of the flight in your own words."

Trebar cleared his throat. "Yes, your grace. We were, as most of you are aware, testing the performance of the newly developed Netherspace Drive. There had been tests made earlier, of course, but this was the first to be conducted under conditions of actual starflight—and the first to involve the *Suntreader*. The Netherspace Transition—the term we use for the departure from normal space into the adjacent continuum where faster than light speeds can be attained—went smoothly. We emerged about five light-weeks, roughly five hundred billion miles, outside the orbit of Lopcyea—which is about five hundred billion miles farther than anyone has ever gone before." He allowed himself a brief smile at that, though even as he did so it struck him as overly smug. None of his listeners seemed to mind, though, and he went on.

"We remained there for several days, taking readings, performing experiments; then we returned. The mission, I think, was an unqualified success—and I recommend that Project Ascension be continued as planned." He pressed his extensors against the glistening surface of the table in front of him to indicate that he was finished.

Nexar leaned back into his seat and asked, "That sounds like a reasonably unbiased, objective report, Mission Captain, but what of your own subjective responses? We're also interested in the psychological results of the test run; we'd like to know what kind of stresses and strains you encountered in netherspace, as you call it. You seem unusually exhausted now; is that a result of your trip? Have the mission planners failed to allot enough time for rest?"

Trebar flushed. "No, your grace. It's just—I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that I failed to take full advantage of my sleep cycle periods during the flight. I was much too caught up in my duties to think about rest. I must have overextended myself."

Perlin said gently, "I don't find that so hard to grasp, Nexar. Young Trebar is a very conscientious officer, as dedicated as we could hope to find. I think that his actions were quite commendable."

"Thank you, your grace," said Trebar quickly. "I'm afraid the mission was far more exciting than I'd expected. I guess I really didn't think. But Netherspace travel is so... exhilarating."

Nexar leaned forward. "Exhilarating, Trebar? Could you explain?"

"Well, I suppose I mean that, ah, when you're part of a huge machine like that—as I am when I'm hooked up to the Command Unit—it's not hard to forget yourself. Sometimes I was reluctant to unhook. You understand?..."

"No," said Nexar. "I don't."

Perlin waved an extensor. "Nexar, I really don't think this questioning is necessary."

"My apologies, Worshipful Elder. But if I may beg your tolerance for a moment..."

Suddenly afraid of angering one of the council members, Trebar interrupted: "I don't mind being questioned, your grace."

Perlin shrugged. "Very well then. You may continue, Nexar."

"Actually, I was just curious about what young Trebar meant by the word 'exhilarating'. It's a small matter, Mission Captain. I'd just hoped you could clarify it for me, that's all."

"I..." Trebar hesitated. "I didn't mean much at all, really. I just meant that I was extremely excited, worked up; almost exalted..."

"Exalted?"

Trebar froze. It was the same word he had used earlier with Bix. He hadn't meant to use it, but somehow it had slipped out.

"Exalted?" repeated Nexar. "That's a very significant word, Mission Captain."

"Really," interrupted Perlin. "You're pouncing on shadows, Nexar."

"Am I? 'Exaltation' is a favored word with the so-called 'Heretics'. It was one of the underground code words during the Balzan Rebellion."

Eylok chuckled. "You see heresy behind every fruit crate, Nexar. Next you'll be telling us that young Trebar is religious!"

Nexar hesitated. "I do not wish to be rash..."

"Then," said Perlin, "I'd suggest you hold your tongue. Mission Captain Trebar is our guest here. It is not our intention to hold an inquisition." He revolved slightly in his seat. "Trebar, I'd like to apologize for my fellow council member. Nexar has been working closely with the problem of the Heretics—I'm afraid he forgets himself at times. We didn't really ask you here to discuss the psychological implications of netherspace flight. There is, I'm proud to say, a far more serious reason for our calling this meeting. We'd like to put a proposition to you, if you don't mind."

Trebar stirred nervously in his seat. "I'm not sure I understand, your grace."

"It was a decision we arrived at during our last session. There was," he

glanced surreptitiously at Nexar, "only one dissenting vote." He leaned back slowly into his chair and paused, as if for effect.

"We'd like you to become a member of the council."

CHAPTER 8

As he sat rigidly before the eyes of the assembled Council of the Nine, his mind raced wildly and his extensors almost visibly trembled. It seemed, Trebar would think later, in that moment, that all time and motion in the universe had stopped. All time and motion, that is, except for the insane beating of his heart.

He couldn't believe it. It was absurd. They were offering him more power than he had ever dreamed he could possess, a chance to become a member of the council itself. No one wielded more political strength, more personal influence, than a member of the council. The Presidor, theoretically, had an equal share in the operation of the Poliqan government, but his position had degenerated over the years into that of a mere figurehead.

They wanted him to become a member of the council...

Had he dreamed it? Perlin was staring at him as if he were expecting some kind of a reply—and yet, perhaps Trebar had misunderstood the question. Perhaps—and he realized that it was absurd even as he thought it—perhaps he was so tired he had begun to hallucinate. No, no; that couldn't be. He had heard correctly. There was no mistake.

And yet how would he answer?

Trebar looked at Bix. The young pilot sat frozen, almost immobile in his chair. His eyestalks were irised wide with disbelief. Could Trebar blame him?

He turned back to Perlin. "Your grace," he said. "I am overwhelmed." It was, he reflected, scarcely an exaggeration.

Perlin intertwined his extensors into a pensive knot. "That's understandable, Mission Captain. I'd hate to think you took our offer lightly."

"No, your grace. I... certainly do not."

"It was not a decision that we made lightly. I think our reasons for it are valid. It's no secret that old Jokun is dying—and when he passes on we will need someone to take his place. You're a very popular young person, Trebar; well-known and well-liked by the public. We need someone like that on the council. We've had some problems of late..."

"Problems, your grace?"

"Yes. I'm sure that you're familiar with the Balzan Rebellion; Nexar made reference to it earlier. And I'm sure you've heard of the recent troubles in the Tentacle Islands. The events have a great deal in common. They're both the work of a small but very active group calling themselves the 'Heretics'. They use the name sarcastically, I'm sure; it has a certain significance in their philosophy. They're a religious faction, a genuine rarity in this day and age. Religion was outlawed—wisely, as I'm sure you'll agree—some years before even I was born and I thought that I'd seen the last of the religious traitors go to the execution chambers years ago. But these Heretics..."

Nexar banged an extensor against the table. "The Heretics won't last long. Anyone who places any being higher in their estimation than the government itself deserves to face the full wrath of the State."

Eylok nodded. "I must say that for once my illustrious colleague has made a statement with which I can agree. I feel sorry for some of the innocent victims who have found themselves caught up in the Heretics' web of intrigue, but I'm afraid they'll have to meet the same fate as their corrupters. The Tentacle Islands uprising will come to the same end as the Balzan Rebellion. There's no room for mercy in a matter like this."

"More to the point," interrupted Perlin, "public opinion must not be allowed to side with the Heretics in any manner. As you say, Eylok, it's regretful that certain unfortunate individuals have chosen to cast their lot with the Heretics, when they could have led honest, productive lives. This is the State's loss, and it is regrettable. That, Trebar, is why we need you on the council. You're young, glamorous, even charismatic. We believe you can draw those people out of the hands of the traitors who would destroy our government."

Trebar sat unmoving. It's all unreal, he thought. Things were

happening too fast. He needed time to think, to consider what was being offered.

Radiating a warm understanding that Trebar found more than a little reassuring, Perlin said, "You don't have to make your decision today. Go home, Trebar. Think about it. Talk it over with your nestmate. I'll give you my message code and you can contact me when you've made up your mind. I trust you, Mission Captain. I think you can be relied on to make the right decision."

Perlin rose and the others stood in unison. Trebar leaned against the table for support. Lorpik placed an extensor on his shoulder.

"Congratulations, Trebar. I was dying to tell you earlier, but I couldn't. I'm proud of you, boy. You're a credit to the space program and a credit to the State."

They intertwined extensors briefly, then Lorpik joined Eylok and the others and disappeared through the double doors. Kopl, the door dancer, reappeared and waited to usher Bix and Trebar from the chamber.

"Congratulations," said Bix, his voice strangely reserved. "I always knew you had it in you."

"Thanks, Bix. I just wish I agreed."

They left the chambers together and returned to the carriage. It wasn't until he was halfway home that Trebar realized he could not accept the position.

* * *

Lilwey, surprisingly, seemed unimpressed, perhaps even disturbed, when Trebar told her what had taken place. She was happy he was home, but that went without saying. When he told her what the council had said she seemed cold and remote.

"I'm happy for you, Trebar. Really I am."

"You don't act it," he said.

She smiled tentatively. "I'm sorry. It's just that—oh, I don't know;

maybe it's that I see so little of you as it is. You'll be going off on the mission next week and I'm proud of you for that, honest I am, but I'm not sure that I'm prepared for this other thing as well."

He wrapped his extensor gently around her waist. She trembled against him as he held her, then relaxed. She was still attractive, he thought; as attractive as he had ever remembered her being. It was his great fear that someday he would come home and find her changed, aged in his absence; that she would grow old while he raced between planets and the bloom of her youthful beauty would be gone. But no; it hadn't happened yet, though he never stopped fearing it. She was still young and desirable, the same wonderful Lilwey that he had gone into marriage contract with—how many years ago was it now? The skin on her neck still had the same mellow, pinkish tint that he had fallen in love with the first time they had met, but how much longer would it remain? How much of his life could he spend on space missions or with the council? How much did he have a right to spend with his family?

"Then you'll be glad to hear," he said, finally, "that I've decided to turn them down." He caressed her lightly at the base of her spine.

She looked into his eyes. "Turn them down? Trebar, don't do that just because of me. I didn't mean to sound as though I didn't want it for you, darling. If it means a great deal to you..."

Trebar sighed. "It does, in a way. But I can't. I don't know why; but I can't."

"I'm glad," she said; and he knew that it was true.

They ate their evening meal, later, on a balcony that overlooked Malinqa City, and he thought about it again, over and over coming to the same irresistible conclusion. He *was* going to turn them down, though it wouldn't be because of his family—and it wasn't true that he didn't know the reason either. He just couldn't discuss it, not even with his nestmate.

It was *The Forbidden Tome*.

The Forbidden Tome, the book that the old man had pressed into his extensors that day in the city. It had come to haunt him, to possess him in a very real sense. It had made him—he realized more and more—a traitor to his planet, a traitor to the State. And yet that in itself did not disturb

him... or, at least, had ceased to do so.

After the meal he went to the sleepchamber and looked for it in the storage bin where he had left it, but it was gone.

It was gone...

Panic surged like cold liquid through his veins. He ran his extensor along the shelf where he had placed it six days earlier, but it was no longer there. Who could have possibly moved it? Could the council, for obscure reasons of their own, have seen fit to have his chambers searched in his absence? No, that was absurd. What reason would they have had? And even if they had looked, it seemed unlikely that they would have happened onto the book. He had been careful to conceal it. "Lilwey!" he shouted, broadcasting her name loudly into the room beyond. He tried to press down the fear inside himself, but it seemed to rise up despite his efforts.

She appeared in the narrow chamber doorway, her face haloed by the light from the common room behind her. "Husband?" she asked, softly, her voice a gentle caress in the half-darkness. "You need me?"

"Yes," he replied—then found himself at a loss for words. He had never told her about the book, for obvious reasons; now how could he ask her why it was missing? He framed possible questions in his mind, then discarded them. She waited patiently for him to speak. What could he tell her?

The truth, perhaps? "I had a book," he said. "I lost it. You wouldn't happen to know... what happened to it?"

"You mean the book you were keeping in the bin?" His heart jumped. He felt an instant surge of relief—and just as quickly it vanished. How had she found it? He had been so careful to keep it hidden. What had she thought when she realized what it was? Had she been disgusted? Shocked?

And then he realized that she was smiling. "I'm sorry, Trebar. I knew that you didn't want me to find it, but I'd seen you looking at it and I was curious. I knew you were hiding it and I knew where. I'd seen you put it in the bin."

"Did... did you read it?"

"Some of it. Yes."

"And... what did you think?"

"It's a very beautiful book. I was moved."

Relief came flooding back and Trebar received it gratefully. Suddenly weak, he bent down and sat on the edge of the sleepmat.

"You realize," he said, "that it's illegal for me to possess a copy of it. If the council knew about it, they could put an end to my career."

"Is that why you're refusing their offer?"

"In a way. Yes. But it's more than that. That book has had a profound effect on my thinking, on my ideas. It hasn't changed them, exactly, but..."

"Yes," she said. "I think I know what you mean. I found that it was saying things that I had known to be true all along, yet hadn't realized it. It expressed them more eloquently than I ever could have. Is that how it affected you?"

Trebar felt the blood flush warmly through his veins. She had understood after all. Another person, someone he loved, had discovered the secret he had been carrying around with him like a crippling weight—and had understood, had empathized! He could not express the relief he felt.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, Lilwey. That's how it affected me."

They talked about it long into the night. Trebar forgot his exhaustion, forgot his recurring depression, forgot the cynicism that had pursued him as he had driven to the council meeting with Bix. He told Lilwey how the book had come into his hands and how he suspected the old man who had given it to him of being a member of the Heretics.

"The Heretics?" she asked. "I don't think I've heard the name..."

"They're an underground organization. A throwback, apparently, to the religious movements of several centuries ago. They believe in the Trigod; they worship in their private churches and temples..."

"And there's something wrong with that?"

"It's illegal. Religious belief, worship of a deity; those things were banned by State decree more than a century ago. The council feels they represent disrespect for its authority."

"Do they?"

Trebar smiled ironically. "Yes. I guess they do. It's hard to believe in an Almighty Being who says that all men are equal in his eyes and also believe in a government that oppresses two-thirds of its society. Yes, I guess religion does tend to foster disrespect; disrespect for *abused* authority, anyway."

Lilwey knelt a few inches in front of Trebar, her warm breath tingling against his skin like soft electricity. "This Trigod; do you believe in Him?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I know I believe in what He stands for."

"And that is?"

"Love, happiness, equality. It's not hard to believe in those things. I don't believe in what the council stands for, though. Not any more."

She brushed an extensor lightly against the soft flesh of his neck. "Then that's why you can't accept their offer?"

"Yes," he said. "That's why I can't accept their offer."

He reached out and touched her shoulder, lightly, pulling her toward him. He could feel the blood rushing beneath her skin, like a warm river of life. Dear Trigod, he loved her!

Sometime before the sun rose they slept.

It was noon before Trebar woke. Lilwey roused him by gently rocking the mat, a bowl of *ravis* in her other hand. There was a call for him, she said, on the message unit in the common room.

He drank the *ravis* and threw on a light tunic. His mind felt fuzzy, but he knew that he had slept well; too well, perhaps. Not yet fully awake, he stumbled from the sleepchamber and took a seat in front of the message screen.

It was Kwaol, his co-pilot. He was working on the final programming

for the flight; they had struck a few snags; could Trebar come down for a few hours and give them a hand?

"Sure," Trebar said, fighting to stifle a yawn. "I didn't have any plans for the afternoon. I'll catch an air shuttle out to the base. Anything else?"

"No, sir," said Kwaol. "It doesn't look like it'll be much of a problem, really. Just thought you'd like to take a look at the specs before we finalize anything. Okay?"

"Good idea. I'll see you in about an hour, then. Peace of life to you."

"Peace of life." Trebar punched the circuit breaker and Kwaol faded to a glowing, white dot.

He arrived just as the second class technicians were gathering for the afternoon shuttle to Station Four. Trebar pushed his way through the milling crowd and met Kwaol in the entrance to the Command Center, a dome-like structure on the roof of the public terminal, where most of the ground control equipment for Project Ascension was housed. Kwaol led him through a maze of corridors and equipment, into a tiny chamber cluttered with computer terminals. Trebar took a seat as Kwaol punched figures into a keyboard.

The problem was not a difficult one. They had it worked out within an hour. Kwaol offered to buy Trebar a meal for his troubles and Trebar accepted, adding an invitation for Kwaol to visit his home for dinner sometime before the mission. Kwaol agreed readily.

They ate in a small bubble of a restaurant that floated leisurely between the spaceport and downtown Malinqa City, where it moored briefly at the Galactic Tower; then they headed back to the edge of town. A central class waiter brought them two steaming plates of boiled *bronzi*, a large bird found in the wilds outside the city.

They talked about the project and they talked—for the first time—about their private lives. Trebar learned that Kwaol had a nestmate and two nestlings, both female. They discussed music and they discussed politics, albeit briefly. Trebar realized that he and Kwaol had a great deal in common, though not so much that it made their conversation boring.

How much they had in common he did not guess. Kwaol cut him off

abruptly in mid-sentence.

"Look, Trebar," he said; they had earlier dropped all pretense at formality. "I know you might not want to talk about this, but I'm afraid there's no way that I can get around it. I know that a few days ago—before we left for the trial run in the *Suntreader*—you were given a copy of a certain book."

Trebar looked up from his meal. He had been in the process of bringing a glass to his lips, but he froze in mid-movement. A *certain book*! Had he imagined that Kwaol had said that? Could there be any doubt as to what book he meant? Calmly, carefully, Trebar continued the movement of his extensor toward his face, sipping a small amount of the mildly intoxicating liquid from the glass, then replacing it on the table.

How had Kwaol known? Was he a spy for the council, investigating possible traitors? Or was this some kind of test of Trebar's loyalty? Frightening images flickered through his mind: he had walked into a trap; council agents would appear suddenly through the doorway behind him; he would be spirited away to a high-security prison, never to see Lilwey and Kowerc again. Or was he being absurd? Was what Kwaol had said purely coincidental?

He tried not to let his panic show, but he knew that he was only partially successful. As calmly as possible he replied: "What in the world are you talking about?" Kwaol leaned forward earnestly. "I'm sorry, Trebar. I didn't mean to startle you. You see, we arranged to have the book fall into your hands."

Arranged to have him find the book? Did he mean that the whole thing had been planned by the State? The old man—had he been sent by the council to give Trebar a copy of *The Forbidden Tome*, thereby incriminating him through inaction, if nothing else? *No!* Trebar told himself. *Stop being paranoid!*

"Don't worry," Kwaol went on. "We're on your side; at least, we think we are. We chose you because we thought you were someone we could trust; someone who thought as we do. Our group isn't a very large one, but it's growing. It's called the Fellowship; you probably know us as... the Heretics."

"*The Heretics?*" Trebar's mind raced wildly. *Could* this be a trap? It

was possible. The council could be using Kwaol as the bait to lure him out...

But why? They had no reason to suspect him of disloyalty, did they? They had asked him to become a council member just the day before. He had never discussed his thoughts on the matter with anyone, except Lilwey, and he knew she could be trusted. Unless, of course, the law enforcement officers had seen him place in his pouch the book the old man had given him—or the old man had lived to tell them himself.

"Yes," he said, finally. "I've heard of you." He lifted the glass again and took a deep swallow. "Are you really sure you should be telling me this?"

Kwaol shrugged. "As sure as we can be. We've watched you pretty carefully, Trebar. We know more about you than you'd think. We know that you're against the oppression of the lower classes. We know that your opinions don't often coincide with those of the council. We may be wrong, but we think you'll agree with a lot of the things we have to say."

"But you were responsible for the Balzan Rebellion..."

"That's not how we see it, Trebar. The Balzan Campaign was planned as a peaceful, non-violent demonstration for the rights of citizens; but the council sent in the local Guard to stop the action, and well, there was a lot of damage done and a few lives lost. We didn't want it to happen that way. If we had it to do over again we'd try to change those things. Now it looks like the same thing is going to happen in the Tentacle Islands and we're doing our best to prevent it. But we also know that we're not going to achieve our ends without some people getting hurt. We're prepared for a certain number of losses."

Trebar felt a little dizzy. All this was happening too fast. Kwaol *seemed* sincere and the idea that he might be a government agent was absurd on the face of it; and yet...

He had to be cautious; there was no other choice.

His career depended on it. But if there were a chance that he had made contact with others who believed as he did, wasn't that worth a certain amount of risk?

Caution dictated his next move: "You know that I should run to the

nearest law enforcement officer, Kwaol, and have you taken in."

"I don't think you will."

"If I don't," said Trebar, "it's because you're a friend—and a good officer. Not because I have any sympathy with this organization of yours."

"I can't believe that, Trebar. Not after all I know about you. We saw to it that the book got into your hands because we hoped that it would change your life—just as it's changed all of ours. Our plans almost didn't succeed. The old man who gave it to you—the council found out that he was one of our agents and surreptitiously administered a slow-acting poison to him while he slept. He died later, but he knew he had to get the book to you while he still lived. He was a very dedicated individual; very singleminded, very selfless. I don't mind telling you, Trebar, that I loved him like my father. And now he's dead..."

"I'm sorry, Kwaol."

"He wasn't the first."

"I find it hard to believe the council would do something like that."

"No, you don't, Trebar. Don't fool yourself. You know, as any intelligent person knows, that the council is endlessly self-serving; that they'll stop at nothing to attain their ends."

"That's treasonous talk."

"Yes, it is, Trebar, and we're traitors, every one of us. And we're proud of it, too; because in being traitors to the council we're being true to our own souls. And that's the only loyalty that matters."

For a moment they remained silent. Trebar sipped slowly, thoughtlessly, at his drink, aimlessly fingering a small eating utensil. He longed to confess his feelings to Kwaol, to admit his own treasonous thoughts. Why couldn't he? Was he so afraid of the council that he had to barricade his soul behind doors so thick they could never be opened before another individual? There was Lilwey, of course; darling Lilwey. But was that going to be enough?

Kwaol waited silently. Trebar touched an extensor lightly to his

shoulder. "You're my friend, Kwaol. I'm going to place my life and my career in your hands. I hope that I can trust you." He wiped a napkin across his ingestion ducts. "Yes, I read your book." He paused and considered his words carefully. "And, yes, I agree with what you say." With a sigh, he leaned back into his chair and laced his extensors in his lap. "Now if you're a government agent you can pull out your stinger or slap chains on me or whatever it is you do to a traitor against the state."

"I'm not from the council, Trebar. I wasn't planted here to entrap you, though—Trigod knows!—it's the kind of thing the council might do. No, I was sent here to tell you about our organization and to ask you if you'd like to become a member."

"Go on."

"All right. Our current organization was founded a little more than seven years ago, though our antecedents go back much farther. There has always been a religious underground of some sort on Poliqa, whether or not the council has chosen to acknowledge it. The movement has existed, in one form or another, since the Anti-Worship Acts were passed at the beginning of the last century, shortly after the founding of the complex itself. The government attempts to wipe out our membership every so often—there's a major purge almost once every decade—but they've never managed to get us all at one time. Some of us think there's going to be another purge in the near future; maybe they're right. But this time we plan to act first."

"And how do you plan to do that?"

"That's something I can't tell you yet. But you'll be a part of it, if you'll come in with us."

"You know, you could have waited until we were out on the mission to tell me this, where we wouldn't have to worry about the council."

Kwaol laughed. "That's true. We *could* have. In fact we had planned to, but something came up."

"And that was?"

"Look, Trebar, I don't know if you're aware of this or not; we only found out about it because we have members pretty highly placed in government

circles." He paused. "Did you know that we're taking full military armament with us to the stars?"

"What?"

"I gather you didn't. At this very moment they're in the process of shipping weapons out to Station Four to be taken up to the *Suntreader* and the *Skyhope*. Not just defensive weapons, either; but offensive ones as well."

"That's impossible!" roared Trebar. An elderly matron at the next table cast a withering glance over her shoulder. Whispering, Trebar added: "I was told—no, not just told: *promised*—that there was to be no weaponry on shipboard at all! Why would they bother? What's the purpose?"

"We don't know, we can only guess. It's not hard to figure that the council is restless for some form of military aggrandizement; their last chance to widen their sphere of conquest on Poliqā disappeared with the formation of the complex. There are no more territories left unconquered on this world, but there are other worlds."

"Come on, Kwaol! That's absurd! Are you trying to tell me the council is authorizing interstellar exploration simply for the purpose of finding new lands to take over and races to dominate?"

"Why not? It fits in with what we know about council mentality. It's hard to become one of the Nine without being a power-hungry megalomaniac. And if by some fluke a member isn't one to begin with, he certainly becomes one before very long."

"But it wouldn't work, Kwaol! Use your head. I'm the captain of the *Suntreader*—and the head of the entire mission as well. The council knows that I'd never allow weapons to be used—certainly not for the purposes you're suggesting. They must realize that such a scheme could never be carried out without my cooperation."

Kwaol shook his head. "The council has its way of swaying people, Trebar. They have their leverage, even on you. They'll tantalize you with a glimpse of power or wealth, then threaten to take it away from you if you don't cooperate; and if that doesn't work, well, there are certain techniques—drugs, perhaps—that will."

A tantalizing glimpse of power? Trebar felt suddenly cold inside. *They had offered to make him one of the Nine.* Was that the lure they were to dangle in front of him? It was a startling idea. And would they threaten to take it away from him if he refused to cooperate?

Yet he had planned to refuse the position—what would they do then? Drug him? Brainwash him? Torture him into submission?

Could he have been so totally wrong?

"All right, Kwaol," he said, "I shouldn't be telling you this, but I need to tell someone. I'm almost afraid to think of the implications of it, but it seems to fit in with what you're saying." He took a deep breath and expelled it slowly between clenched teeth. "Yesterday they offered me a position on the council."

"What? Trebar, that's fantastic!"

"I plan to turn them down, of course."

"Turn them down? That's the last thing you should do. Do you know what that means to us, to have a member of the Fellowship on the council itself?"

"Wait a minute, Kwaol. Slow down! You seem to be jumping to conclusions. I don't remember saying that I was going to become a member of your organization."

Kwaol looked thunderstruck. "But I thought..."

"Why don't you ask me?"

"All right, Trebar. How would you like to become a member of the Fellowship?"

"Sure," Trebar replied. "I'd love to."

CHAPTER 9

He was floating in a vast sea of eddies and waves, an open lagoon of gentle waters lapping playfully against his naked flesh. It was peaceful there, undisturbed by the rest of the universe. He lay quietly, unmoving;

clouds floated leisurely overhead.

The waters stirred and Trebar felt himself being stirred with them. A gentle current tugged against him. Unresisting, he allowed himself to be pulled along into rougher waters, flowing slowly toward the ocean mouth beyond. There was no need to fight the current. When the time came it would be easy to swim back to shore.

The air turned suddenly cold. Trebar rolled over and began stroking steadily toward the mainland, his extensors flattened like paddles—but the green strip of land in the distance seemed to recede even as he moved toward it. Panic stirred uneasily within him, but he fought it down. If necessary he would simply let the waves carry him outward toward the ocean, then moor himself to the softly curving reef that marked the edge of the lagoon.

He turned—and looked in the direction he was being swept. There, on the thin coral reef, stood Lilwey. And there was Kwaol at her side; and there—dared he believe his eyes?—was the old man who had given him *The Forbidden Tome*. His heart jumped at the sight. They beckoned him on, gesturing for him to release himself to the insistent pull of the current. Yes, yes, he thought. Yes, Lilwey. Yes, Kwaol. I'm coming. I'm coming now.

The water grew swifter, more violent. For a moment Trebar was afraid it would overcome him. He fought to keep his head above the savagely cresting waves. He choked on the briny water; his mouth filled with it, then his lungs. But still his friends beckoned to him and Trebar allowed himself to be swept toward them, to be dragged along like driftwood on the receding tide.

They were closer now; he was almost there. He reached out for them with an extensor. They seemed close enough almost to touch. He began swimming towards them, across the pull of the water. He had to reach them before he was swept out to sea. It wouldn't take much effort...

And then he saw the whirlpool, yawning like the maw of some prehistoric titan, like the mouth of the sea itself.

Above him he saw Lilwey, Kwaol and the old man, still beckoning him on, still calling to him above the deafening roar of the maelstrom. And beyond them he saw the faces of the council themselves, all nine of them, even old Jokun, shriveled and dying on his hospital bed, beckoning him

onward, onward.

And then he was falling into that suffocating hole...

* * *

It was a gray dawn. The room was full of the somber light of sunshine filtered through thick clouds. Trebar lay quietly on the sleepmat, Lilwey curled at his side, her face burrowed into the soft fabric beneath her.

The nightmare came back to him. It was fading quickly, thank Trigod, but the climax was still unnervingly vivid. *Falling, falling, into that nest of salty brine.*

He rose quietly and donned some light clothing. He would let Lilwey sleep; there was no reason for her to be up early this morning. Padding softly into the service chamber he pulled a small bowl from a dispenser and poured himself a half-pint of *ravis* from the tap. The liquid was hot and murky-looking. Trebar sipped at it cautiously.

He debated showing up at the Command Center and lending a hand with the last minute preparations for the flight. He was supposed to be on vacation until the day before the mission, but he was feeling restless. He knew he wouldn't be getting any more sleep today.

It was the matter of the weapons, of course; it disturbed him greatly. He realized, in retrospect, that he had been a fool to trust the council on something that important, but they had seemed so sincere. They had promised him time and again that there would be no military angles to the flight. It was the price he had demanded for his cooperation. There had never been any doubt that he was needed on the mission. He was the only one with the know-how to design a ship like the *Suntreader*, the only one with the experience to fly it.

Of course, the military angle had come up before. Several times. Trebar particularly recalled Nexar's name in that connection.

Lilwey was up a little while later; and little Kowerc, who wouldn't be starting school for several months yet. Trebar settled down in his den and tried to read, but he was nervous, distracted. When Lilwey and Kowerc left the apartment around midmorning, Trebar went to the message unit in the common room and punched out old Perlin's message code. A secretary

of some sort answered, putting him on hold. As he waited for Perlin to appear, Trebar considered what he was going to say.

There was always the direct approach, of course; just come right out and ask the Worshipful Elder why they were mounting weapons on his ship. That was the best way to go about it: simple, direct, straightforward—

and possibly dangerous. What if Perlin denied everything? What was Trebar to do then? And yet he really had no other choice. There was no time for subtle detective work.

The screen flickered back to life. Old Perlin smiled out, his eyestalks dancing gaily. There was nothing sinister about him, to Trebar's mild surprise; nothing obvious at any rate. For a moment Trebar almost forgot to be scared.

"Good morning, Trebar!" Perlin beamed. "I gather you've come to a decision on our offer. We've been waiting to hear from you. I don't mind telling you, boy, that we have high hopes for your career."

"Thank you," said Trebar. "But I, ah... haven't quite made up my mind yet, your grace. There are still some questions I'd like to ask."

"Feel free, Trebar. We're on your side. No reason to be afraid. Anything you want to know."

"Well, your grace." Trebar stopped cold, not knowing how to continue. "Well, your grace, I've been informed... that there are weapons being installed on board my ships."

There was silence. Perlin's face went slack, the happy dancing of his eyestalks ceased. "Weapons aboard the *Suntreader* and the *Skyhope*? You heard that, did you? I don't suppose you could tell me from whom you received this information."

Trebar's heart thumped loudly. "No, your grace. I'm afraid I can't. But I believe it was a reliable source."

"I see. Well, Trebar, I think you've earned the right to a frank answer. It wouldn't be fair to keep the facts from a potential council member. So as a demonstration of the trust I feel for you, I'll tell you this: Yes, there are

weapons being installed on both ships."

"But I was promised..."

"Purely defensive weapons, Trebar! A repellor field to guard against the possibility of an encounter with a hostile alien force. But that's all that's being installed. I promise you that."

"Just a shield?"

"Of course. Nothing more. I hardly see how you can object to that."

"But that's not what I heard. I was told that there were both offensive and defensive weapons being installed." Trebar felt sick inside. There was no way to document his case, at least not without revealing the source of his information, and that was out of the question.

And there was always the possibility that Kwaol had been wrong.

"I'm sorry, your grace," he said. "I seem to have made a mistake."

"That's all right, my boy. I've made more than a few myself. Over the years you'll find that they're inevitable. Don't think I don't understand."

"Yes, sir. I don't, sir."

When they rang off Trebar sagged limply into a softly padded chair. Yes, he had made a mistake, but he wasn't at all sure what it had been. Perhaps Kwaol had been wrong about the weapons, but then again perhaps not. It was thoroughly possible that Perlin was lying to him. It wasn't, he suspected, the first time a council member had lied to him.

Whom was he to believe?

He went to the balcony and watched the slow movement of the traffic twenty stories below. He had arranged to meet Kwaol tonight at the Space Center. The Fellowship would be holding a meeting sometime this evening; Kwaol, of course, had been unable to tell Trebar where it would be. He probably wouldn't know himself until the afternoon.

Maybe tonight Trebar would find out some answers.

* * *

It was dark. The Space Center was quiet. A sharp breeze snapped across the roof of the terminal as Trebar came up the stairs outside the Command Building.

He pulled a key from his pocket and coaxed the stiff lock open. The air was still wet from the morning and evening rains and Trebar shivered as the moisture seeped through his skin and into the bones underneath.

There was no one inside the building. Trebar came swiftly along a deserted corridor and up a long metallic staircase to the second level. Through a small window he caught a glimpse of the field outside. An empty shuttle sat waiting for the morning run to Station Four, and a pair of large, tarpaulin-covered trucks sat by its side. Moonlight glistened on dark puddles of rainwater.

"Trebar!"

He turned swiftly, his heart pounding raucously inside his chest. Kwaol stood a few feet down the hallway, his face concealed by a slanting bar of black shadow. He stepped forward.

"Kwaol," said Trebar. "You frightened me."

"Sorry, Trebar. Nobody's supposed to be in the building at this hour except top officials. I was afraid it might not be you."

"How'd you get in here?"

"I never left. I stayed back in the computer room and they locked me in a couple of hours ago. I've been waiting."

"Come on then. We shouldn't be wasting time."

They slipped quickly down the stairs and out into the brisk night air. As they came down the staircase on the outside of the terminal building, Trebar pointed out the trucks on the field.

"Are those the weapons you were telling me about?"

Kwaol followed his gaze out across the pavement. "I guess so. It's hard to tell."

"You know, I talked to Perlin this morning."

"And?"

"And he said they were only installing defensive screens. Is that true?"

"Hardly. We got word that some major new weapon was going to be used. Something quite devastating. Only nobody seems to know what it is."

A light breeze rustled Trebar's cape. "We could take a look."

"You mean go out there and take the covers off those trucks? Are you out of your mind?"

Trebar laughed. "Why not? They don't seem to be guarded. Even if we were caught I suppose I could come up with an excuse for being out there."

"All right. If you'd like to give it a try."

They strode quickly but casually across the open expanse between the terminal and the shuttle. The distance seemed to stretch as they walked. The trucks, Trebar saw, were larger than he had realized. Whatever they were carrying was very bulky, very heavy.

"Kwaol," said Trebar. "You stay here and keep an eye out for unwelcome guests, okay? Call me if you see anyone coming."

Kwaol shrugged. "Okay. But don't be long."

Trebar approached the first truck with exaggerated caution, but there didn't seem to be any reason for apprehension. The area was deserted, the night almost unnaturally silent and peaceful. Trebar tugged at the tarpaulin that covered the truck and found it secured tightly underneath the carriage. He would have to crawl under it and that meant he would need a torch of some kind in order to see.

The cabin of the truck was unlocked. A small lantern had fallen between the seats. Trebar retrieved it and looped an extensor twice around the handle. He carried it back with him to the rear of the truck.

Grabbing the edge of the flatbed and boosting himself quickly up on his extensors, Trebar crawled into the darkness beneath the tarpaulin.

The lantern flickered on. In the dim yellow illumination he could make out a large metal sphere in front of him, perhaps ten feet in diameter. There were more behind it, but he had difficulty making them out in the dim light.

There was an inscription on the one in front of him. He leaned close to read it. The writing was small and hard to decipher, but he caught a glimpse of the word "antimatter." A shiver ran along his empathic receptors.

Dear Trigod! This can't be what I think it is.

A shrill scream pierced the air outside.

"Kwaol!" esped Trebar. "Kwaol! Are you all right?"

There was no reply.

Trebar brushed lightly against the tarpaulin, afraid to push it aside for fear of what he might see beyond.

"Kwaol! Do you hear me?"

Wind whistled hollowly along the sides of the truck. He turned off the lantern and let it fall onto the truck bed behind him. Gathering his courage he grasped the tarpaulin in his extensors and slithered beneath it to the pavement.

Nothing moved but the wind. There was an almost ominous quality to the silence.

"Kwaol!" he repeated, speaking it aloud this time.

The thin beam of a stinger discharge flashed within inches of his face and hissed loudly against the tarpaulin behind him. Flames licked harmlessly at the dark shroud, then faded, leaving a ragged hole in the material. Instinctively, Trebar flattened himself against the pavement, sprawling almost drunkenly on his stomach. *What in the world?*

There were voices from somewhere in the darkness.

Trebar rose cautiously, sweat beading heavily on his face, and scampered away in a running crouch. Grabbing the hood of the truck to

brake himself, he dropped to his knees behind the cab. He peered out from between the wheels. Nothing was visible between where he was standing and the terminal, but he had a vague memory of where the beam had been fired from. Calculating rapidly, he plotted a course that would take him away from his unseen assailants and back toward the exit. He steeled himself for the run, his legs trembling with fright.

For about ten seconds he ran silently across the open field, bending as close to the pavement as he could. Then he struck something bulky with his feet and sprawled forward recklessly.

Trebar held his breath. Had they heard him? The noise of his fall had seemed painfully loud in his ears, but perhaps they had overlooked it. He prayed silently, passionately, waiting for another stinger beam to come flashing out of the darkness.

None came. He rose slowly. Looking back he tried to discern what it was he had stumbled over.

Kwaol! Dear Trigod, he had been shot!

The young officer lay sprawled on the pavement, unconscious—or worse. Trebar crouched by his side, rolling him gently onto his back. He cradled Kwaol's head in his extensors.

Bluish-green ichor dripped from a slash along his left shoulder. The wound was a bad one, but it seemed to have been fairly well cauterized by the stinger beam; only a little blood had escaped. Black ash had formed beneath the torn fabric of Kwaol's uniform.

"Kwaol!" hissed Trebar. "Wake up!"

He was still breathing, though fitfully. His chest rose and fell sporadically. There was a light rattling sound from his chest. Trebar felt a sudden panic wash over him. Kwaol had to wake up, had to stay alive. Trebar shook his young co-pilot's head lightly to rouse him. Kwaol's irises fluttered open.

"Trebar?" he muttered. "Is that you? Thank Trigod, you're still alive."

"Don't talk," Trebar thought back at him. "We've got to get out of here."

Footsteps echoed loudly across the field.

"They're coming closer. They must be guards."

Kwaol raised himself tentatively to one elbow. "The only guards who are allowed to use stingers in this city are..."

A brilliant red shaft stabbed out not twenty feet from where they sat, kicking up bits of blackened cement as it played back and forth over the grounds, questing for a target.

"... are the council's."

The beam flicked out, leaving a blurry after-image on Trebar's retinas. Kwaol stumbled to his feet, leaning heavily on Trebar's shoulder. They staggered forward together, awkwardly, trying to make as little noise as possible. Trebar was frightened; his legs seemed on the verge of collapse and his lungs felt as if they were filled with molten, bubbling lead. He pushed forward.

The terminal seemed impossibly far away...

An amplified voice boomed out tinnily into the night. "You're not going to escape!" it said. "We've got you in our sights. Put down any weapons you may be carrying and step forward with your extensors raised!" The voice, Trebar thought, seemed familiar.

"They're bluffing," he whispered. "It's too dark. They *can't* see us."

"Trebar," groaned Kwaol, his breath coming in short gasps, "I'm not going to make it. There's a truck across the field, about halfway between here and the terminal. Do you see it?"

"What-do you mean you're not going to make it? Keep walking. I'm not letting you give up now."

"The truck, Trebar. Do you see the truck?"

"Yes I see it. What about it?"

"It belongs to the Space Center. I've got a master key for it. Take it. If you can get to the truck you'll be all right."

Another stinger beam sliced through the air about ten feet to Trebar's right. He dropped to the pavement in a quick, reflexive movement, Kwaol grasped tightly in his right extensor, and crouched close to the pavement. The beam flickered by within inches of his head.

"That was a warning," the voice boomed. "You have ten seconds to surrender, starting... *now!*"

Trebar grabbed at Kwaol's waist. "Come on, friend. You're coming with me."

"No. I'm too weak."

"Don't be stupid! Get up. Come on."

"Trebar, listen! There's not much time. The Fellowship will be meeting at the Haven Hotel, Compartment 984. The password is 'Joy in Trigod'." Kwaol pressed a thin piece of metal against Trebar's extensor. "This is the key to the truck. Take it. Go."

"Not without—"

There was the glint of metal to Trebar's left. A uniformed guard stood between the two of them and the terminal, a bulky stinger rifle in his hands.

"You there!" he barked. "Halt!"

Kwaol reared suddenly to his feet, almost knocking Trebar to the pavement. Like a person gone mad he plunged desperately forward. Startled, the guard raised his gun rapidly to firing position. Trebar watched in frozen horror, somehow unable to move. The stinger beam sliced unheeded through Kwaol's abdomen, burning blood and flesh alike into indistinguishable dry ash. The sheer momentum of his attack carried his body forward, already dead, into the guard's arms. The two of them fell clumsily into a bloody heap.

Trebar came unfrozen and ran. Sheer terror drove him on. It was obviously too late to help his friend. Kwaol had given his life so that he could escape; he really had no choice. He had to get to the truck.

Footsteps sounded loudly behind him. They were closing in, circling

him. A scarlet beam flashed somewhere in front of him. Could they see him? The noise of his boots against the pavement seemed ridiculously loud. Would that give him away?

Then suddenly he was at the truck. He stumbled into one side of it, striking it with the flat of his chest. He fell backwards, stunned. The key fell from his extensor and clattered to the ground.

Blood trickled into his mouth. The acrid taste of it startled him to full consciousness. Footsteps pounded to his rear. An amplified voice boomed out: "We know you're there, Trebar!" *So they knew who he was!* "Give up, now! You won't get away!"

Trebar slapped the ground with a flattened extensor. Where was the key? He had heard it fall. Hadn't it been right over here?

They were coming closer. He had to get into the track, get it started. This was insane. Where had the key gone to? Why couldn't he find it?

Flesh touched metal. Trebar grasped the key tightly, threw open the door and stumbled into the cab.

The engine coughed to life. He threw the truck into gear and coaxed it forward. His heart thumped so loudly he could hear it over the roar of the pistons.

A stinger beam struck the left-hand window, melting it to molten slag. *They were in front of him!* Three uniformed guards rushed into the cone of his headlight beams. A burst from a stinger pierced the windshield just above his head.

The exit was ahead of him, somewhere beyond the figures that danced awkwardly in front of the track. They had pretty effectively cut him off from it, which meant he would have to find another way out.

Trebar threw the truck into reverse and backed it into a long curve. As the headlight beams shot out across the field he caught a momentary glimpse of the person with the amplifier. He recognized the face almost instantly. It had, after all, been only two days since he had seen it last.

Gunning the truck up to high acceleration, Trebar raced haphazardly toward the perimeter fence. It was designed, he knew, to keep trespassers

from getting in, but he doubted that it would prevent a determined truckdriver from getting *out*.

The voice boomed loudly behind him: "You won't get out that way. The fence is electrically charged. You'll never make it."

Yes, thought Trebar, the fence *was* charged, but only mildly so. It was enough to keep unwanted visitors from climbing over it, but the truck should be well insulated...

A stinger beam fanned across his rear tires and the truck veered suddenly out of control as they burst open. Fighting the wheel Trebar managed to bring it back into line, but just barely. The track had seven wheels in all, including the one under the cab, and could get along well enough without the ones in the back, but it didn't make the driving any easier.

He threw the accelerator switch up to full. The truck hit the fence like a falling meteor, sending the shards of interwoven metal scattering like the petals of a flower. Trebar found himself thrown forward against the wheel, then snapped backwards into his seat, but he managed to retain control. Sparks crackled around him.

Pieces of twisted fence wire screeched underneath the truck's chassis. Trebar veered wildly through the grass; for a moment he thought the truck would be hurled onto its side by the twisting contours of the ground outside the perimeter. But no; it struck a reasonably solid surface and kept to its course.

Voices boomed behind him. Trebar reached the road and turned the truck toward Malinqa City, leaving the sounds of his pursuers fading somewhere in the distance.

As he drove he saw the face of the person with the amplifier again in his mind, clearly outlined in the beam of the headlights, as if he were standing in front of him once more.

Nexar.

CHAPTER 10

At the edge of town Trebar called Lilwey on a public message unit and instructed her to take Kowerc and go to the home of a friend. He would be there as soon as he could, but there were things he had to take care of first. She was to take her things with her, everything she would need if she were expecting to spend the night away from home, but she must hurry.

She was hesitant at first, but she heard the urgency in Trebar's voice and obeyed. It was very important, he told her. She wasn't to worry, but she must get out of the apartment immediately. He would see her later.

The Haven Hotel was a small, inconspicuous building in the central class part of the city, buried like an insignificant pebble amid the towering skyscrapers that surrounded it. Trebar passed quickly through the small, poorly lit lobby, ignoring the stares of the clerk behind the front desk.

The ninth floor was drafty and ill-heated. Trebar pulled his cape around him to protect him from the cold. Though the accommodations were obviously designed for those of a lower class than he was accustomed to associating with, they seemed well kept and not unattractive. Trebar rapped once, twice, then three times on the heavy wooden portal marked 984.

"Yes?" said a female voice from the far side.

"A friend sent me," Trebar replied. "Joy in Trigod."

The door cracked and an attractive, slightly built female stared out from the warm room beyond. "What friend would that be?" she asked.

"Kwaol, ma'am. My name is Trebar."

"Oh, yes. The space pilot. We've heard a great deal about you—especially from Kwaol. Won't you come in?"

There were others in the room, perhaps twenty-five in all. The apartment was not large. Trebar stood in the center of the common room and handed the female his cape. She draped it over a hanging bar.

"How is Kwaol?" she asked. "Will he be coming this evening?"

Trebar felt a lump forming inside his stomach. Exhaustion swept over him, catching up with him now that he had finally stopped running. He

didn't feel like telling her what had to be told, but he knew that he must.

"Kwaol won't be coming tonight. He's... dead."

A hush fell over the room. The female put a startled hand to her face, the color draining from her features as if someone had opened a hole and let them out. A young male stood to Trebar's right, his face slack with surprise. Trebar felt strong vibrations ranging from terror to grief. He had to turn off his receptors, unable to withstand the sudden onslaught.

"Kwaol is dead?" whispered the male.

"But how?" asked another.

"This evening. We were at the Space Center. We thought we'd take a look at the weapons they were shipping out to the station. I guess you know about those already."

"And they found you there?"

"Yes. Council guards. They seemed to know who we were. It was as if we were expected..."

The female spoke slowly, haltingly, "You walked into a trap?"

"Yes. I guess we did. They shot Kwaol. He died trying to save my life." He bowed his head briefly, remembering. "I imagine they're pursuing me now," he added.

"Sit here," someone offered. Trebar collapsed gratefully into the proffered chair, his muscles screaming with suddenly realized fatigue. Someone placed a bowl of hot *ravis* in his extensors and he drank from it, absorbing its warmth as if it could bestow new strength, new life, to the parts of him that had died. He realized vaguely that the others in the room were surrounding him, forming a circle about his chair. Someone touched his extensor.

"Are you a believer?" she asked.

Trebar looked up from the bowl and met her eyes. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps. I've read your book, *The Forbidden Tome*."

"Ah-h-h-h-h. I see." She wrapped her extensor tightly about his,

squeezing it with reassuring pressure. "I'm the leader here, as much as any of us is the leader. My name is Janex. Kwaol offered your name for membership. Do you wish to join us?"

"Yes. I do."

"Then it is done. You are one of us now. There is no ceremony. Would you like a room where you could lie down? You must be tired."

"No." Trebar sat up again, placing his feet on the floor. "There are things I have to do. I don't have the time. Could I ask you some questions?"

"Certainly."

"Kwaol told me that you had inside information concerning government matters. Is that true?"

"We have our sources."

"There are some things I have to know. The weapons they're shipping out to Station Four—does anyone have any idea what they are?"

A white-skinned male on the far side of the room rose to his feet. "I can make a guess, if that helps any."

"That depends on what kind of information you're working with."

"I guess I'd better introduce myself, then. I'm a physicist. I'm employed by a research facility that does occasional contract work for the state. I've never been directly involved in weapons research, but I know some of those who have been; naturally they're not allowed to talk about what kind of work they're doing, but they drop enough hints for me to put two and two together and get some idea of what's going on. Of course none of them are aware of the full nature of what was being developed—they were all specialists, you know, each one involved with his own particular aspect of the project. But I've talked to all of them, so I can see it from all sides."

"And what conclusions did you come to?"

"The project has something to do with the production of antimatter. You're familiar with the concept, aren't you?"

Trebar felt a sense of foreboding sweep over him. *Antimatter!* Yes, he knew what it was—and he understood what it might mean. He had seen the implications when they had been at the Space Center earlier, just before Kwaol was shot, but he had not had time to consider them until now. The Netherspace Conversion—which Trebar had been instrumental in developing—required trace amounts of antimatter to produce the prodigious amounts of power that it needed. His research had given Trebar a wide familiarity with the practical applications of antimatter theory—and some of what he had learned was indeed frightening; so frightening that he had taken great pains to conceal it from the council and their representatives. And yet, it was always conceivable they had discovered it on their own.

"Yes," he replied, finally. "I'm a scientist myself."

"Then you know that antimatter is, in a sense, antagonistic to ordinary matter; when the two come into contact violent destruction results. The matter and antimatter are almost totally annihilated at the moment of contact, a process that releases untold amounts of energy."

"Yes, I know."

"My theory, then, is this: The antimatter weapon—if such we can agree to call it—is to be used as a kind of interstellar blackmail, to coerce the races that inhabit the distant planets into submission."

"You mean if they refuse to cooperate with us, we simply drop the antimatter weapon on their planet?"

"Oh, no! Nothing so crude. We would drop the weapon into their *sun!*"

Trebar felt the blood rushing hotly through his veins. "And then?"

"The antimatter would be encased beneath several layers of extremely heat-resistant shielding, of course, held in place by stasis beams in the midst of a total vacuum, so that there would be no chance of it accidentally coming into contact with normal matter. But when it entered the sun the shielding would be burned away and the antimatter—by that time deep inside the solar furnace—would be released. The resulting annihilation would be cataclysmic, but that would be just the beginning. The explosion would create an energy vacuum within the heart of the star—and it would begin to collapse inward on itself. Not much of a

collapse, mind you, but enough to generate huge amounts of gravitational energy beneath the surface. And then—"

"Nova!"

"Exactly. The star would balloon out to many times its size. Perhaps it would explode, perhaps expand into a bloated red giant. Either way the inner planets of the system would be scoured clean of all life and the Poliqaan Space Force would have its revenge on those standing in the way of its burgeoning empire. Diabolical, isn't it?"

"Yes. It is... diabolical." Trebar lay back in the chair, his extensors visibly trembling. "There's no question, then. The mission must be stopped."

"But how?" asked Janex. "The council has the entire power structure on its side. What can you do against that?"

"I can refuse to cooperate with them."

"With all due respect, Trebar, I'm afraid that would not suffice. It's too late now. Do you think they'll allow you to pilot the *Suntreader* after what happened tonight at the Space Center?"

"Who else can they get?"

A small female in the corner said, "I think they might let Trebar head the mission, Janex; but only after a short visit to the Treatment Center."

"That's true," Janex allowed. "Do you know about the Treatment Centers, Trebar?"

"I... no, I guess not."

"The Treatment Centers are where the council sends those whose opinions differ from their own. It only takes a few days to adjust their 'defective' ways of thinking—then the council allows them to return to their regular lives."

"If you can call that living," added the small female.

"Yes. Most of them are little more than automatons when they get out. But that's the price you pay for disagreeing with the Nine."

Trebar shuddered. "I would never go along with something like that."

"You're not given a choice," Janex said gently. "Of course, there are instances when the conditioning doesn't take. Old Jokun, for instance."

"Jokun is a member of the council," said Trebar incredulously.

"Being a Council member doesn't make you immune to that sort of thing. Jokun was foolish enough to attempt certain reforms in the structure of the complex. His fellow council members decided that he needed to change his thinking, so they had his mind changed for him. It didn't work, however; Jokun was a stubborn old codger and even the Treatment Centers couldn't make him alter his views. So they had him 'eliminated'."

"Wait a minute! Jokun is sick, dying."

"The council has many ways of eliminating its opposition, few of them as obvious as outright assassination. There are poisons, for instance, virtually undetectable, that can be made to imitate any of a thousand different diseases—and they have the added benefit of being noncontagious. Wouldn't want to start an unwanted epidemic; not unless there was a good reason for it."

"Then Jokun is being deliberately murdered?"

"I'm afraid so. It could happen to any of us, at any time. But don't worry about it too much. When the council chooses to eliminate us, they'll probably use more conventional methods. We are, after all, blatant and obvious traitors."

Trebar closed his irises and tried not to allow the horror of what she was saying take hold of him. "What is there left for me to do?" he heard himself asking.

"Come in with us. We need you, Trebar. The state is *not* invincible. It can't stand against the concerted might of its own outraged citizens. Not for long. We're a small organization now, but our support is constantly growing."

"But the antimatter bombs! Don't you understand?"

I'm responsible for that. I'm responsible for the mission. It has to be stopped."

"It may be too late. The mission will go on whether or not you're there to lead it. The other captain—his name is Bix, isn't it?—will be the leader if you're not. There's not much you can do now. There *will* be a revolution. We firmly believe that. But I'm afraid it will take time."

"And what am I to do until then?"

"Join us, Trebar. Fight with us. Bring your family to us. We'll protect you, shelter you. You'll be safe here. Safe from their poison, their Treatment Centers."

"If what you tell me is true, I doubt that I'll be safe anywhere."

The rapping came in three loud, staccato bursts. The door seemed to rattle loosely in its frame for a moment, then the pounding ceased.

Trebar looked up, startled. "Are you expecting someone else?" he asked.

There was no need for an answer. A gruff, bellowing voice roared: "We demand entrance, by the authority of the Council of the Nine."

Trebar's heart leapt wildly. *This was insane. It couldn't be happening. Not twice in one night.*

That voice was following him, haunting him. Would he ever get away from it?

Someone grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the common room. It was obvious who they were looking for; perhaps his coming to the meeting had been a mistake. Had Nexar known all along that he would be coming here?

"Is there a back entrance?" he asked.

"No," replied the male at his side. "There are windows, of course, but it's a nine-story drop to the street."

"No thanks. I guess I'd better find someplace to hide."

His benefactor showed him a small storage bin in the back of a sleeping

chamber. The door into the service chamber beyond was about three feet to his right.

He huddled into a corner of the bin, his head cramped beneath the lowest shelf. It was not a comfortable place to be; comfort, however, was not what he was looking for at the moment. It seemed, though, that there was little chance that Nexar wouldn't find him there.

Nexar's voice seeped in from the common room: "Where is he? I know he's here someplace!"

"Who are you talking about?" someone asked.

"Trebar. The traitor. You know who I mean, you..."

"There's no one here by that name," warbled a frightened, panic-stricken voice. "You must have—"

The voice was chopped off abruptly. Trebar pictured the speaker being garroted with the long barrel of a stinger rifle. Strong emanations of shock and fear radiated through the walls.

"Search the apartment!" shouted Nexar to his henchmen. "You! Vox! Check in there. Jick! Look in the sleeping chamber."

Trebar held his breath. He pulled his extensors in tightly against his body, rolling himself up into a compact ball. He felt vulnerable, exposed.

The door to the room clicked open and Trebar heard heavy footsteps pound in. Someone—Jick?—thrust the butt of a stinger into the sleeping mat to see if anyone were concealed under the unmade bed sheets. There was a dull thudding sound as the metal stock connected with the stiff bedboard. The guard's footsteps grew closer to the bin.

There was a loud clattering from the service chamber. Trebar heard Jick scamper away through the doorway to his right, following the sound.

He cracked the door an inch and stared out. The room was empty. There were noises from the common room, but Trebar tried not to think of what might be going on out there. He stood, slowly, and pushed the door open wide.

Jick was speaking to someone in the service chamber. There was the sound of a stinger butt crunching into unprotected flesh and a muffled feminine whimper. Jick laughed sadistically. *The animal!*

Leaning back into the storage bin, Trebar found a heavy box on the next-to-the-lowest shelf. He gripped it tightly in both extensors and walked cautiously to the doorway.

Jick was big; tall and heavy set, his rippling muscles visible even under the fabric of his uniform. He had his back to Trebar, which was fortunate. A frightened looking female crouched in front of him, blood running profusely from her forehead. Jick bent slowly by her side and ran his extensors along the contours of her body.

Trebar was on him in two rapid steps. Jick started to turn, but he never got the chance. Trebar brought the box down hard on the top of his head. Jick tried to stand, awkwardly, spastically, his arms flailing the air in front of him. Trebar brought the box down again. There was a sickening crunch as the guard's skull collapsed.

Trebar heard rushing sounds behind him. He stooped and yanked a stinger-pistol free of Jick's holster. He had never held one before; it felt strange, alien. He had never fired one, either, but he had seen it done. His finger came to rest on the firing stud.

Two guards burst through the doorway almost simultaneously. They seemed to move in slow motion, like figures in a dream. Trebar fired the stinger with a total absence of feeling, as if it were necessary to drain himself of all emotion before he could perform the acts that he knew must be committed.

The beam sliced across the first guard's throat with almost surgical precision. Blood spurted, then ceased. The second guard stumbled over the falling corpse and the beam caught him as he fell, slashing just beneath his eyestalks and severing them completely. Trebar tried to turn away, tried not to see, but something forced him to watch.

Then it was over. The apartment was silent. There were no more guards; there was no more necessity for murder. Trebar stood paralyzed, the whimpering of the female almost inaudible behind him. Finally, after what seemed the better part of eternity, he found himself able to look away.

Dear Trigod, what had he done? He had killed them, three of them, slain them like mindless cattle. He had never taken a life before, not even an animal's, and now this...

He forced down the horror inside himself. It had been necessary, he told himself. These deaths had been unavoidable. There had been no other way. He had been forced into this situation and was not responsible for what he had done.

Nexar was the cause of it. It was all Nexar's doing.

Nexar!

Trebar threw open the door and strode boldly into the hallway. "Nexar!" he shouted. "Damn you, Nexar! Are you still here? I want to see you, Nexar!"

He realized in that moment that he would kill Nexar if he found him in the apartment. Despite his revulsion at the deaths of the guards, despite his inability to rationalize the necessity for murder, if Nexar were to appear before him right then...

But no; Nexar was gone. Trebar entered the common room with the stinger clutched tightly in his extensors. An air of horror hung like a dark shroud over all those who remained. The female who had opened the door for him—had it only been fifteen minutes earlier?—stood in a corner, sobbing uncontrollably. Others crouched in attitudes of prayer, oblivious to their surroundings. Janex, the one who had called herself their leader, lay dead in the center of the room, her body awkwardly contorted, as though it had been broken in two and poorly reassembled. Another corpse, that of a young male, lay nearby, its fingers reaching out in futile supplication toward whatever demon had, briefly and forever, held dominion over its life.

Trigod give me strength! thought Trebar.

None of it was real, he realized suddenly. None of this was happening, because in a sane world things like this just didn't take place. And, above all else, he knew that the world was sane. *It had to be sane:*

A great sense of calm came over him. If none of this was real, then it followed that he was no longer bound by the restrictions that the real

world had placed upon him. He was no longer expected to fight fairly; he no longer had to run when Nexar pursued. If Nexar could bring about this sort of insane abomination...

He walked slowly, casually, into the corridor. In the distance he could hear the *whirr* of the elevator as it descended to the lobby below.

All right, Nexar, he thought. You're the one who's running now. I've got the weapon and I'm going to fight back—and now you're the one who's afraid. You'd better run, Nexar. You'd better run while you can.

The stinger felt warm and comforting at his side.

CHAPTER 11

A thin, hazy rain spattered slantwise across the windshield of the car Trebar had stolen from the parking lot of the hotel. The wipers caught most of it as it fell, but they were also spreading a thin film of grime across the glass, cutting Trebar's vision to a dull blur. Another car swerved, squealing, out of his path as Trebar plunged heedlessly through a major intersection.

"You'd better watch where you're going," said Lilwey. "You'll frighten Kowerc." Her head touched lightly against his shoulder as he drove. Kowerc was nestled silently in her lap, apparently asleep. Trebar smiled grimly at the incongruous serenity of their little family scene. He had told them they were going away on a vacation for a few days, until it was time for him to make the flight. Supposedly he had rented the car just for the occasion.

It hurt him to lie, but he wanted to keep the truth from them for as long as he could. That wouldn't be much longer. He had a plan—oh, yes, he had a plan. The odds were perhaps twenty to one against its succeeding, but it was all he had left. All considered, those odds seemed extravagantly generous.

Lilwey's hand massaged the soft nape of his neck; he wondered, privately, if this were the last time they would be together like this. If so he wished he could prolong it as long as possible, savor it forever.

He was a hunted criminal now. Obviously there had been an informant

of some kind within the Fellowship. How else could Nexar have known he was to meet Kwaol at the space center—and how could he have known he would go to the meeting afterward? Nexar must really have it in for him, he reflected. It had been apparent since the council meeting two days before.

Had it only been two days?

The rain eased up as Trebar drove outside of the city. The clouds parted and Trebar imagined for a moment that he saw starlight winking down from the coal black sky. Perhaps it was a good omen: the storm passing, the sky opening. He needed good omens just then.

He turned off on an old rutted road that led behind the Space Center. Little Kowerc groaned lightly as the car bounced across potholes in the road, but he did not wake. Finally Trebar pulled the car underneath the overhanging branches of a low tree.

"Trebar?" asked Lilwey. "Why are we stopping here?"

"Come on. I'll explain in a few minutes. We've got to get out."

"Are you crazy? Trebar, we're in the middle of nowhere."

"I'm sorry, Lilwey. Just get out."

"Do you want me to take my bags?"

"No. I don't think we'd better carry anything heavy. Just hold on to Kowerc."

The perimeter fence was almost lost in the thick jungle-like foliage that grew in profusion along the sides of the road. Trebar pulled out the stinger and levelled it into the trees. The beam cut cleanly through the branches and the fence beyond; wire mesh clattered down into the thick grass.

"Trebar! What in the world... ?"

"No time to talk. Follow me."

"Mommy, are we... ?"

"Shhhh. Be quiet, Kowerc. Everything's all right."

Trebar brushed the fallen branches aside and cleared a path for Lilwey and Kowerc to follow him through.

The field seemed quiet and peaceful, though Trebar knew by this time how deceptive appearances could be. The shuttle loomed ominously about a half mile ahead of them.

Halfway across the field Trebar stopped and listened to the wind. The rain had stopped now, but a light breeze was skimming in from the northeast, sending Trebar's cape billowing out behind him. Lilwey and Kowerc waited patiently at his shoulder, quiet and unquestioning. Somewhere out there—he was sure of this now—Nexar and the guards were waiting for him. How he knew this he could not say, but they had anticipated his every move up until now, so why shouldn't they anticipate this one as well?

Unless his luck was changing.

"There's something wrong, isn't there, Trebar? Something's happened."

"Yes."

"I won't ask what, but I would like to know where we're going."

"I wish I knew. We're going to take the shuttle out to Station Four. And then... I don't know."

They walked forward again, the breeze caressing their faces like soft velvet. The terminal lay mostly in shadow, but the shuttle caught the first rays of the rising moon, lining it with a pearly gray radiance.

Pain burst through Trebar's right extensor like a series of tiny explosions.

He turned and saw the stinger beam as it burned through the fabric of his jacket just below the shoulder and then through the flesh beneath. Pulling his arm out of the line of fire and revolving backwards in a single movement, he grabbed Lilwey and Kowerc and pressed them against the hard pavement. The needle-thin spurt of coherent light sliced through the air inches above their heads.

Kowerc whimpered quietly, but did not speak. Lilwey looked up at

Trebar, her irises wide with astonishment. "Are... are they trying to kill us?"

"I think so. They don't want us to reach the shuttle, at least. Just stay down for a minute."

Far away in the darkness Trebar saw a bulky figure bound rapidly between two ground vehicles. Holding the stinger tightly against the ground, Trebar sent a quick spurt of crimson energy into the breach. The figure disappeared.

"Did... did you hit him, Trebar?"

"I don't think so, but he'll keep under cover now he knows we're armed. That should be to our advantage."

"Are we just going to stay here?"

"No. Do you see that carriage back there? About a hundred feet behind you? Yes, that one. I want you to take Kowerc and make a run for it. Stay as close to the ground as you can, but move fast. Get behind it and stay there until I join you."

"If you think we can make it..."

"I'll stay here and give you some cover. Just stay low."

"All right. I trust you, Trebar."

She scooped Kowerc's trembling form into her extensors and rose slowly to her feet. Somewhere Trebar thought he saw a wisp of movement. He fired a short burst from the stinger and it was gone. *That was a foolish thing to do*, he thought. *Have to save as much ammunition as I can.*

Cautiously, awkwardly, Lilwey began to run.

From somewhere near the terminal a scarlet ribbon of light lashed out across the field, passing within about two feet of Lilwey's right extensor. Trebar pressed down on the firing stud and poured a steady stream at its source. There was a distant sigh of pain.

Thirty seconds passed. As soon as he dared, Trebar turned and looked behind him. Lilwey and Kowerc were no longer in sight. That was a good

sign. She must have made cover.

Trebar scrambled slowly backward. Rising tentatively, he stumbled slowly in the direction she had gone, keeping constant watch back toward the terminal. Then he turned and broke full speed for the carriage.

There was a searing pain in his left leg. He fell hard, swivelling as he did so, and let three quick bursts fly into the night. The firing stopped. He tried to rise again, but the pain brought him back to his knees.

Dear Trigod, it hurt!

He forced himself to stand, limping toward the shelter of the small vehicle. The rushing blood sounded loudly in his ears. A tingling sensation rose up from his injured limb, *Lilwey? Where was Lilwey?*

"Trebar! Here!" She stretched her extensors out toward him, gathering him into her grasp. "You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Grazed my leg," he muttered. He tried to shift it into a comfortable position, but the ground was rough and the pain persisted. "It's not too bad," he lied. "I can still walk."

Somewhere on the far side of the carriage footsteps rang out across the pavement. Lying flat against the ground, Trebar gazed out between the carriage wheels. Two dark uniformed figures were rushing across the field, stinger rifles gripped tightly against their chests. Trebar fired and one collapsed awkwardly to the ground. The other disappeared behind a distant vehicle.

Trebar cursed silently to himself. *How many of them were there?* Nexar might have brought an entire army with him; or only a few soldiers.

How much chance did a lone individual stand against them—especially with his nestmate and nestling in tow?

He tested his weight against the injured leg. Yes, he would be able to walk, but it would be painful.

Of course, it would be a lot better if they could ride.

"Get in the carriage," he shouted, abruptly.

"What?"

"Here. You and Kowerc squeeze in and slide over to the far seat. I'll drive."

"But... but you don't have the keys to it, do you?"

"That doesn't matter. Just get in."

Lilwey and Kowerc slipped past him and slid across to the far end of the front seat, heads held low so that they would not be visible through the window on the opposite side. Trebar slid into the driver's seat.

He knew ways to start a carriage without an ignition key, and he had done it before. All he had to do was to splice a pair of wires together under the dash. It was as simple as that.

Lowering his head practically to the floor he searched in the shadows for the wires he would need. There were wires down there, all right, far too many of them. Which were the ones he was looking for?

"Trebar!" Lilwey screamed.

A searing red beam cut through the window above Lilwey's head like a sharpened knife through animal fat. Trebar raised the stinger above his head and fired blindly in a sweeping arc. Somewhere outside there was a scream of agony. The beam disappeared.

Cautiously raising his head, Trebar saw a lifeless figure sprawled on the pavement in a position that would have been impossible for a living being. Behind it another figure scampered back into the shadows. Trebar fired at it, but it vanished before he was able to take careful aim.

The field was empty again.

They were still out there someplace—the faceless, anonymous enemy. Trebar shivered at the thought.

Crouching under the dashboard again, Trebar fiddled with the wiring until he found the two that generated a spark. The engine coughed, then rattled to life.

The vehicle bolted forward; Trebar kept a tight grip on the wheel as he

threw the accelerator switch up to full. Figures appeared in the distance ahead of him, rushing out of the darkness. Trebar held the gun out of the window by his side, holding the firing stud in place as he drove. One figure dropped as the beam fanned across his chest, but another fired in time to slash a rent in one of the front tires. Trebar pushed forward anyway, as the carriage bucked and kicked with a jarring regularity. The figure who had fired at him vanished, but a stinger beam appeared from somewhere to his right and sliced across the hood, sending it flying open across Trebar's field of vision. There was a rumbling sound from the engine.

"Lilwey! Get out!"

Trebar grabbed her hand and, with Kowerc in between them, they tumbled out onto the pavement.

The engine exploded with a roar. Smoke and flame bellowed upward in a dense cloud.

A figure appeared suddenly through the smoke, apparently unaware that Trebar had survived the explosion. Trebar's stinger beam caught him across the legs and he fell forward onto his stomach.

The figure seemed somehow familiar.

Trebar rushed forward under cover of the smoke and grabbed the fallen individual by his collar, rolling him slowly onto his back. Half-opened eyestalks glared up at him with pain and hatred burning inside them. The face was one that Trebar knew all too well.

It was Nexar.

He looked at Trebar, then turned and spat in disgust on the ground. "So you're still alive," he gasped.

"Come on, Nexar," said Trebar. "You're coming with us."

"I'm hurt. I'm not going anywhere."

"Then I'll carry you." There were footsteps audible somewhere behind the dense cloud of smoke that surrounded the mutilated carriage. "But tell your men to stop shooting first."

Nexar scowled but said nothing.

Trebar held the stinger out steadily at arm's length. "Do it, Nexar, or the next one won't just hit your legs."

Nexar pulled himself up onto one elbow, his face a study in twisted hatred.

"Nexar!"

The young commander hesitated, then rose to a sitting position and yelled, "All right, men! Get back to your standby positions. Everything's all right here."

"Now come on."

"I can't stand up."

Trebar turned back towards the burning vehicle. "Lilwey!" he stage-whispered. "Come here!"

She appeared suddenly at his side, Kowerc bundled protectively in her arms. "Yes, Trebar?"

"Hold this gun, okay? I'm going to help Nexar to walk, so that he can go with us to the shuttle. If he tries to get away I want you to aim this at him and press this button."

"But Trebar, I couldn't..."

"You'll have to, Lilwey. Our lives depend on it. If he tries anything at all—I want you to shoot him."

"Yes, Trebar. I will."

She took the stinger from him with a trembling extensor and pointed it at the prostrate Nexar. Trebar reached down and wrapped an extensor around Nexar's shoulder. With a sharp tug he raised him slowly to his feet.

Nexar groaned.

"Come on," replied Trebar grimly, "one of your men took a shot at one

of my legs and one of my extensors earlier—and now I have to carry you as well."

Together the four of them stumbled forward across the field, Trebar and Nexar in the lead; Lilwey, stinger clutched tightly in front of her, and Kowerc behind them.

The shuttle loomed ahead of them like a gargantuan creature of the night. "Is there anyone on board?" asked Trebar.

"No. No one at all."

"Don't give me that, Nexar. I don't believe for one minute that you'd leave the shuttle unguarded if you knew we were coming here. Now tell them to let us in. Lilwey. Needle him a little around the feet. Not so much that he won't be able to walk again, but..."

"All right, Trebar! There are five guards inside there."

"Then tell them to lower a ramp for us."

Leaning back and cupping his fingers in front of his articulators, Nexar shouted, "Open up in there. This is Nexar. We're coming inside."

A smooth metallic walkway slid free of the shuttle's polished metal siding and slithered downward to where the four of them stood. At its head a panel slid open, revealing the dark, gaping hole of a doorway beyond.

"You first, Nexar."

With Trebar's aid Nexar staggered his way up to the ramp. Inside, the five guards waited silently, keeping vigil as the four of them entered, stingers loose at their sides. Trebar took the stinger back from Lilwey and held it against the base of Nexar's skull.

"Tell them to drop their weapons, right there in the middle of the floor."

"Put down your stingers, men."

The five rifles clattered simultaneously to the deck and the lead guard, a rugged-looking individual with a bright red sash pulled tightly around

his waist, looked up with dull expectation.

"Now tell them to get out of here," barked Trebar.

"You're dismissed now, men."

The lead guard shrugged and signalled for the others to follow him. One by one they filed sullenly through the exit portal. The doorway panel hissed closed behind them.

"Good work, Nexar. Now take a seat over there in the corner."

He watched while Nexar slumped into a seat.

"Lilwey, hold the stinger on him while I search the rest of the shuttle."

Taking one of the stinger rifles the guards had discarded, Trebar searched the fore and aft compartments as thoroughly as time allowed. They were alone; no other guards remained. Returning to the small foyer they had entered, Trebar sent Lilwey and Kowerc back into the passenger section, while he brought Nexar with him to the pilot's cabin.

"This is totally insane, you know," said Nexar. "You won't get away. They'll stop you."

Trebar tripped the lever that started the huge shuttle engines warming. To his relief, the fuel gauge read full. "We'll see," he replied.

"And even if you get away, where will you go? To the *Suntreader!* Then where?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"I should think it would matter to you. Why don't you give yourself up, Trebar? Go back now while you still have the chance. You'd save your family a great deal of grief."

"And let the authorities pick my mind apart at one of their Treatment Centers? No, thanks. I know too much now to ever go back to a normal life. And I'd rather not become a zombie, thank you."

"It's not like that, Trebar. We won't hurt you. We offered you a seat on the council, remember? It's still yours if you want it."

"Be quiet, Nexar. I've got a shuttle to fly."

The huge flying machine edged slowly forward across the field like a great, lumbering, prehistoric beast. Praying that all systems were in working order, Trebar taxied the shuttle down the runway.

They left the ground smoothly. Trebar tried to relax, but his muscles seemed permanently clenched. It had been a long day—too long, as far as Trebar was concerned. He ached for a chance to rest, to sleep. But no; he was still being pursued; and it was a pursuit that might well never end. Even now the council would be readying another shuttle to intercept him at the station. How long would it take them to get there? Half an hour? Forty-five minutes? However long it would be, Trebar was certain he could reach the station first, but he did not know how much of a margin there would be. He still had Nexar as a hostage. That would count for something. But Nexar had been right; there was no place to run to after that—

Except the stars.

He cradled the stinger in his lap and turned his attention to the instruments in front of him. Since he was the only one on board who could fly the shuttle, Nexar wouldn't dare attack him while they were in flight. But when they arrived at the station it would be a different story.

As they rose high in the atmosphere, dawn broke over the forward horizon. The sun seemed harsh and repellent after the long night. Trebar blinked his irises against its brilliance. Dear Trigod, he was tired! He wasn't sure, now, how much longer he could hold up. His leg stung viciously where the stinger had struck it, and his extensor smarted badly, but he could endure the pain.

And then Station Four appeared in the forward viewscreen.

CHAPTER 12

Docking was clumsy. In his fatigue Trebar misjudged the distance to the hull of the station and the shuttle nudged against it with a resounding *clang*.

The second time he got it right. The airlock seals joined together

smoothly, the suction plates linking with a single, sharp gasp. Taking the stinger from his lap, Trebar motioned Nexar toward the exit chamber. Lilwey and Kowerc peered cautiously out of the rear compartment.

Trebar considered the situation. Too many things could go wrong now; he had to be prepared. He made his companions don lightweight pressure suits, then did so himself. While they were in the airlock of the station it would be too easy for someone to remove the oxygen or release toxic gases through the ventilation system.

The doorway irised open and Trebar pushed Nexar through into the adjoining lock. The others followed.

The station was almost empty. When the inner lock door irised open Trebar found Station Captain Melois and two guards waiting for them inside.

"Hello, Trebar," Melois said, his voice low and carefully controlled.

"Hello, Captain Melois."

"I had hoped we would see each other again soon, but I would rather the circumstances had been otherwise. I don't suppose I could persuade you to put down your weapons?"

"I'm sorry, Captain. I mean that; I really am. You understand, don't you?"

Melois nodded, slowly. "I think so."

"We'll be going to the *Suntreader* now," said Trebar. "Don't try to follow us. Nexar will be with us at all times. You understand what that means."

"Nobody wants any violence, Trebar."

"Good. I don't want any either. At least, not if I can help it."

No one blocked their passage as they moved to the far side of the station. Only one passageway made a complete circuit around the interior of the great wheel and Trebar prodded Nexar ahead of him as they made their way around it.

"You're taking me with you, then?" asked Nexar.

"I don't have any choice," said Trebar. "You're the only guarantee we have that we'll get away alive. If I had the choice, believe me—I'd rather leave you behind."

The airlock into the *Suntreader* irised open at the touch of a button. The sterile, white interior reminded Trebar of more peaceful times. With a shock he remembered that he was to have piloted the *Suntreader* on a mission for the state in only two and a half days—and now he never would. But the ship was still his; he had designed it, he had flown it, now he would take possession. It seemed his due, somehow, after all the state had taken—or tried to take—that he should take back what was rightfully his.

They stripped off their suits and hung them inside the lock. "Sit here, Nexar," Trebar said. "I don't want you causing trouble."

Unresisting, Nexar acquiesced and took his place in a small observation chair in a far corner of the bridge. Taking some loose replacement cables from a storage bin, Trebar lashed him securely to the seat, leaving only his head free to move.

"This is far from comfortable," Nexar grumbled.

"You'll adapt. I'll untie you later, when I'm sure I can trust you."

Trebar gave Lilwey the co-pilot's seat, briefly instructing her in a few basic rules of systems maintenance. The rest, he knew, could be controlled from the pilot's seat; at least he hoped they could be. He had never taken such a load on himself on a single flight, but there was no reason—he told himself—that he should be unable to manage it. No reason at all.

He took his place before the control module. Running his extensors into the Command Unit like questing snakes, he linked himself to the central core. The inner vibrations of the ship burst loose inside him. He became part of the circuits, part of the great complex of cybernetic instruments that controlled the powerful nether-space engines. He sent a command to the central computer to begin systems operations.

The *Suntreader* came slowly loose from its moorings. With excruciating slowness it edged away from the great wheel of Station Four.

Trebar lost himself in the fascinating intricacies of the command circuits. The station spun away from them in its rapid orbit around Poliqa and the ship itself moved gradually out into the void, accelerating with remarkable suddenness.

They were on their way, at least.

The message came, unexpectedly, out of the ship's intercom system. Trebar looked up, irritated, at the interruption.

"Trebar," the voice said. "What in the name of sanity do you think you're doing?"

It was Bix. Trebar felt briefly confused; where had Bix come from so suddenly?

"I read you, Bix," Trebar replied. "Tell me where you are now?"

"In the *Skyhope*." Static crackled loudly between words. "We were preparing for Netherspace Insertion when we got word to come back. Something about your hijacking the *Suntreader*. Is it true?"

"More or less. What do they expect you to do?"

"Stop you, of course. We're coming in off your port bow. Get ready to be boarded, Trebar."

"I can't let you do that, Bix. There's no going back for us now. We've made our decision."

"What's gone wrong, Trebar? Why do you have to run?"

"It's a long story. I have my reasons, believe me." He listened to the static for a moment, then added: "I can't let you board me. I'm sorry."

"I've got my orders, Trebar. I don't have any choice."

Nexar strained futilely against his bonds. "You heard him, Trebar. Let him come aboard."

"Shut up, Nexar."

Trebar activated the exterior vision apparatus and opened his "eyes" to

the void. Yes, there was the *Skyhope* looming up rapidly to port. There seemed to be no way of avoiding it. The ships were too evenly matched. He could give them a run for it, right through Netherspace, but it would come to the same thing in the end. In a moment Bix would turn on the tractor beams and that would preclude all possibility of escape.

Was this the end, then?

As the *Skyhope* pulled alongside, Trebar let the *Suntreader* roll easily, casually in place, until—as if by accident—the propulsion jets faced broadside to the other ship's bulkhead. Trebar waited, patiently, as Bix drew nearer.

"Thanks for waiting. I'll try to make them go easy on you, Trebar, honest I will."

"Thanks, Bix." Trebar held his breath for a moment, watching the *Skyhope* loom ominously near. "But no thanks."

Trebar pulsed a sharp command through the circuits. The immense propulsion engines of the *Suntreader* flared to life with scarlet intensity. The sudden acceleration nearly wrenched Trebar loose from the interface panel, but he held on tightly despite the inertial forces that threatened to pull him free. Behind him he could hear Lilwey tumble from her seat and sprawl to the floor with a gasp. Somewhere Kowerc cried and Nexar shouted something he could not understand, but Trebar did not turn from the Command Unit. Through the vision hookup he saw the *Skyhope* tumble away, like a barrel rolling end over end through space. The kick he had given it had been sufficient to knock it a good distance from the *Suntreader* and it dwindled quickly from view.

Bix's voice came gasping over the intercom: "Trebar, what in the world?"

"Sorry, Bix. Hope I didn't shake you up too badly."

"I... I'm not sure. I think something's jammed here, Trebar. My propulsion units aren't responding."

"Try kicking in the auxiliaries. Might be a localized power drain. Didn't think I hit you that hard."

"I've tried the auxiliaries already. Nothing's happening. We're still tumbling."

Trebar felt a premonitory chill. He had meant to temporarily disable the *Skyhope*, but he had never doubted that Bix could regain control after the *Suntreader* had escaped into Netherspace. But if something were wrong with their propulsion units...

No, that would be no problem. A rescue ship could be sent from Poliqa within a few days at the latest. Bix would have only to bide his time until they arrived.

"Still no response, Trebar. That was a nasty kick. Think you'd have more respect for a piece of your own machinery."

"I guess I didn't know my own strength. You'd better send a message through to Space Center. I'm breaking contact now."

The *Skyhope* had already faded from visual contact, though Trebar strained to discern it among the thousands of stars that shone in the vast interstellar night. The kick, apparently, had been sufficient to free it from Poliqa's gravitational control, so that it would spin eventually into orbit around the sun. That made Trebar uneasy. The *Skyhope* was headed sunward, but that meant nothing. Its orbit might bring it close to the sun, before a rescue could be performed, but its shielding would be more than sufficient to protect it from the fierce solar heat. Still, there was the chance...

No, that was highly unlikely. Trebar turned his attention to the Netherspace engines in his own ship. They were already warming, sending waves of power pulsing through the console. In a moment they would be ready...

Nexar was shouting something from behind him. Annoyed, Trebar withdrew his attention briefly from the Command Unit and turned around. Nexar yelled: "You're making a mistake. Trebar. Plot the *Skyhope's* course before it's too late. She may be falling into the sun."

"That's ridiculous. I don't have time now. We're getting out of here."

"Don't be a fool, Trebar. It's not ridiculous at all. Calculate the chances: the *Skyhope* went spinning away in a sunward direction, didn't it? Look, I

don't know the mathematics involved, but you do. Run it through the computer. See what happens."

It bothered Trebar to admit it, but Nexar could well be right. The *Skyhope* could well be falling into the sun, but it was unlikely—or was that just wishful thinking?

"All right, Nexar, I will. But why so altruistic all of a sudden? What does it matter to you if the *Skyhope* is destroyed? Will you really weep for the death of the crew—or do you hate to see a lot of good machinery go to waste?"

Nexar shrugged. "I have reasons."

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't want to hear them."

"I think I would."

"All right, all right. You know about the weapons we were going to install on board the *Suntreader*, don't you? Of course you do. I caught you looking them over yesterday evening along with your friend Kwaol. But do you know what they're for?"

"I think so, yes. They're antimatter weapons, right?"

"That's right. And do you know what they're capable of doing?"

"I've heard theories. Someone told me that they're designed to make a sun go—" Trebar felt a sudden, icy chill. "What are you trying to tell me, Nexar?"

"I think you've figured that out already. Damn it, Trebar! *We've already installed them on board the Skyhope!*"

For a moment the world seemed to spin wildly out of Trebar's grasp. *Why hadn't that occurred to him before?* The antimatter weapons—*the nova weapons!*—were on board the *Skyhope*; and they were in serious danger of falling into Poliqa's own sun! If they did, the sun would explode, which would mean the end of all life anywhere in the solar system, the end of all life on Poliqa.

Trebar ran the figures into the ship's computer, but the results were inconclusive. There were too many variables. He did not know their exact positions at the moment he had turned on the propulsion units—or the precise amount of thrust he had applied.

He re-opened the communications web and searched the ether for a message from the *Skyhope*, but if they were still broadcasting, their signal must have been far too weak to receive. Most likely the power drain that had cut into the *Skyhope's* propulsion units was also affecting its broadcasting ability.

He had to find the *Skyhope*, but how? He could run a visual/radar search of all the possible positions that it could, at the moment, be occupying, but that might take days, weeks, even months! And yet there was no other choice. If there was the slightest chance the nova weapons might fall into the sun...

Trebar fed the computer a list of the possible trajectories along which the *Skyhope* might have been launched. The computer, in turn, plotted a map of the area that Trebar would have to search. It was immense.

Most of the paths would have nudged the *Skyhope* into solar orbit—and were therefore no danger to the welfare of Trebar's homeworld. He began his search along those paths that would send the *Skyhope* into the heart of the sun—but even that area was hopelessly large.

Fifteen hours passed. Trebar released Nexar under Lilwey's supervision and continued the search. Then, unexpectedly, the *Skyhope's* signal came crackling over the *Suntreader's* intercom. The voice was no longer Bix's; it was weak and tremulous, broken not only by the millions of miles between source and receiver, but by its own fatigue as well.

"*Skyhope* to Space Center. *Skyhope* to Space Center. Is anybody listening?"

Trebar opened up his transmitter. "This is the *Suntreader*, *Skyhope*. I read you. Where've you been?"

"Thank the stars!" gasped the wavering voice at the other end. "I thought we'd never get through. We've been trying to get our power back on for hours."

"How's your thrust, *Skyhope!* Are the propulsion units operational?"

"Yes, but they're too weak. We've been trying to pull out of our trajectory, but we don't have the strength. Our acceleration's too high already."

"Where are you now? If you're close enough I can try to pick you up."

"Not much chance of that. You'd never make it in time."

"I don't follow you, *Skyhope*. Tell me where you are."

"We're falling through space, *Suntreader*. At our present rate of acceleration I'd say we've got about three more hours left before we enter the corona..."

"Don't give me that! Where are you?"

"Damn it, *Suntreader!* Where do you think? We're falling into the sun!"

* * *

Trebar made a valiant attempt to save them. The distances involved were too small to utilize the nether-space transition, but too great to cover in three hours, even at maximum thrust. It was ironic, thought Trebar. If the *Skyhope* had been a billion miles away they might have made it in time, but as things stood they didn't have a chance.

When the explosion came, they barely made it into netherspace in time to save their own lives.

* * *

This, then, is netherspace: a limbo-land of grays and whites; an inverted universe where rays of light crawl at negligible velocities and even the lowliest chunks of matter race at unbelievable speeds; a negative place where white is black and black is white; a world without sound.

This is netherspace.

There are no planets in netherspace, no suns. Only great gaping holes where those planets and suns belong. Occasionally a piece of wandering flotsam is sucked into one of those holes and is crushed and mutilated by

the cataclysmic gravitational forces that nest within.

The *Suntreader* is one more piece of flotsam: buoyed along on the eternally shifting tides of that outer sea, it swings past the immense hole that was once Poliqua's sun and roars off at speeds unimaginable in another universe—toward distant worlds and stars.

Within that tiny piece of flotsam live four intelligences, four living entities, sole surviving members of a race that had momentarily reached for the stars and are on the verge of achieving their ambition only after their extinction. They are in shock, these four living entities, which is to say that their hearts and minds have received an infusion of pain so unimaginably great that they cannot allow themselves to fully comprehend it. And therefore they relegate it to the rearmost portions of their brains, allowing it to remain there until it can be faced with some small measure of rationality.

Until then they are numb, anesthetized. In shock.

Wandering in netherspace.

* * *

Trebar removed his extensors slowly from the Command Unit and allowed his fatigued body to sink limply back into his chair. For long moments he stared at the ceiling, studying its contours and patterns as if they had genuine significance and meaning; and then he slept. How long he remained that way he did not know, but eventually someone grasped his shoulders and shook him free from his dreams. It was just as well. His dreams had been gruesome and uncomfortable. He had dreamt that he had destroyed a world.

Lilwey brought him a bowl of *ravis* from the ship's galley. He drank it without thinking, scarcely even aware that he drank. The liquid seemed bland to him, as if he were no longer capable of distinguishing flavor and warmth. He accepted it mechanically, and when he was finished he seemed no less empty than before. But it was a new kind of emptiness, one he suspected could never be filled.

For hours no one spoke. Trebar wondered, vaguely, if the others were even aware of what had happened. Nexar should be; he had been listening to everything, as had Lilwey. And Kowerc seemed oddly subdued, as if he

too understood, though Trebar doubted he was fully capable of it. Were any of them *fully* capable of understanding what had happened?

They ate, silently, at a small, collapsible table: Nexar, Kowerc, Lilwey and Trebar. Trebar tried to bring himself to hate Nexar again, as he had hated him the night Kwaol had been murdered, but he could no longer do so. There was only one individual on board that he found himself capable of hating, and it was not Nexar. Nor Lilwey or Kowerc.

After they had eaten, Lilwey came to him. They sat in a darkened corner of the bridge and linked extensors, without speaking. After a time they embraced. Trebar cried, his tears washing wet tracks across the worn lines of his face. Lilwey tried to comfort him, but it did not remove the pain.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll find a new home somewhere. A place where they'll take us in, where we can live and be happy. I know we will."

And, though the tears still came, Trebar told her that he believed her, that he believed it would come true.

They spoke little the next day. And the day after that.

And then she took sick. And Kowerc. And Nexar. All of them except Trebar.

First they became nauseous. Trebar fought it with medicines from the ship's stores, but they had little effect. Slowly, over a period of days, he watched them wither away.

Then Kowerc died.

Trebar cried at first, but kept it from Lilwey. He was unsuccessful. She knew almost immediately.

"I think," she said, "... I think I'm dying too, Trebar. I don't want you to... have to be alone."

"You *won't* die!" he told her, and for a moment he almost made himself believe it; but not quite. He held her tightly in his arms, as if he could physically bar her from death, but she slipped away despite him. He cried again, needing her then as he had never needed her before, but knowing

he would be unable to keep her.

How could this have happened? he asked himself. How could all of them wither away like that—and yet leave him untouched? What disease would affect them all simultaneously, as this one had done, while bypassing him completely? What virus would fail to respond to all of the medications that had been included in the ship's medical unit?

Poison?

The Council has ways of eliminating its opposition, they had told him, the night he had gone to the Fellowship meeting. None of them as obvious as outright assassination. There are poisons, for instance, virtually undetectable, that can be made to imitate any of a thousand diseases.

He held Lilwey so tightly that for a moment he feared he would choke off her breathing—and then he realized that she breathed no longer. He lowered her gently back to the mat where she lay. He watched her for a time, then walked slowly from the room.

Nexar. He had to see Nexar.

Anger rose in him like a boiling liquid. He threw open the door to Nexar's compartment and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him violently to wakefulness. Nexar's face was pallid, his eyestalks bloodshot and rheumy. He obviously had only a small time left to live, but that did little to mitigate Trebar's hatred. It felt good to hate someone besides himself. Nexar gasped as Trebar shook him by the throat, but he was unable to speak.

"You poisoned them," Trebar screamed, almost incoherently. "Why did you let them die? Why did you kill them?"

Nexar gagged and pulled himself free. His coughing rattled loudly in the small compartment; he seemed almost to go into convulsions. Then he lay back and stared up at Trebar's face. For a moment he appeared to smile.

"That's not the right question," he wheezed. "Better you should ask: Why did I let you live?"

He coughed again and Trebar remained silent. Then Nexar chuckled

lightly and said: "I hate you, Trebar. I've hated you since before I met you, for reasons you'll probably never understand."

"What reasons could possibly justify what you've done?"

"I had plans, Trebar. I was going to move up very rapidly in the government. I was going to become the most powerful individual on Poliqua. I was going to smash dissent and treason wherever they arose and consolidate my power in a thousand different places. And I would have done it, too, if it hadn't been for you.

"The other council members are—were—unambitious old fools. Oh, that may not be the way you or your friends saw them, but I knew how easily they could be manipulated. I was the only one with a genuinely strong ambition, the only one with a goal beyond that of sitting around a table and directing the world. I could have walked over them as I had walked over the others who had stood in my way, until *you* came along.

"You were different, damn you! You were young, like I am. And you were idealistic, which is to say you were a fool, but of a particularly dangerous kind. When you were nominated to become a council member, I knew you would stand in the way of my goals, so I decided you had to be eliminated. And I almost succeeded."

"I can't believe that anyone would go to such lengths..."

"And then *this* happened. There's really nothing for me to live for, so I chose to die. And I chose to let you suffer. Why should I allow you to be happy? You're the one who brought this about, the one who destroyed my world, the one who brought me here. I hate you as I've never hated anyone. That's why I've let you live. All alone, with no place to run home to, the last member of your race. You're going to suffer, Trebar, and that almost makes me glad."

Nexar coughed again and fell silent. For an endless moment Trebar raised his extensors above his head, wanting to bring them smashing down across Nexar's unprotected form, wanting to crush the despicable life out of him, bit by bloody bit. But no; he could not. And when Nexar died a few hours later, Trebar realized that he had lost the final link to the only life he had ever known. He realized that even so small a link had been precious beyond all measure.

And if even the life of a being that he should by all rights have detested was that valuable, how precious then were the millions, *billions* of lives that he had destroyed when he tossed the *Skyhope* into Poliqua's sun? Could he go on living with that great a burden weighing down his soul? Would death not be preferable—or insanity?

But neither came.

And life went on.

PART THREE: Destination

CHAPTER 13

When Trebar finished the story of the escape from Poliqua and the death of his family, there was a long moment in which the four of us sat silently, alone with our thoughts.

"I wandered for a long time," said Trebar, finally. "There were other worlds before Earth. Many others."

"Why didn't you choose one of those?" asked Jeanne.

"I almost did. There were times I grew so weary of searching the stars that I almost chose a barren desert planet and left myself there to die. But I could not."

"Didn't you find people on other worlds?"

"Oh, yes. Several others. I lived with one group for a time. They called themselves the *Lori*. They treated me with great respect, gave me everything I needed, everything I wanted."

"That sounds ideal," I said. "Why did you leave?"

"One day I discovered they believed me to be a god. They were worshipping me, offering sacrifices in my name. I could not bear that."

I smiled. "Some men would find that a highly enjoyable state of affairs."

"Perhaps. But it did not seem right. I knew that I was not a god and I had no right to present myself as one. So I came here. My ship was damaged some millions of miles before I reached your world, as I passed through a wide belt of debris. I would have landed on the red planet beyond yours..."

"Mars!" Jeanne exclaimed.

"... but my instruments showed it to be barren and virtually lifeless. I continued on to your world and, as you are aware, was barely able to land."

"But why," I asked, "didn't you reveal yourself to us then? Why did you run away?"

"I... was afraid. Before my instruments ceased to function I was informed that someone was attacking the ship with a primitive projectile weapon and that the computer was activating a repeller field for protection, but I was afraid that if I left the ship I would be unable to defend myself. The systems were breaking down rapidly. Then there were more explosions and I knew that I had to get away. I jettisoned myself and escaped into the woods."

"You were fortunate to survive."

He looked at me and laughed. "Was I so fortunate? My body has been spared many deaths, but my mind has been spared not a one. It is a cruel, harsh universe, Gordon, that denies even the anesthetic of death to those who suffer most. I would remove myself from this misery if I could, but I cannot."

"You mustn't, Trebar, even if you could."

"I wish you could understand, Gordon. Then I would not be so alone."

"There is always God," I said, in a faint, slightly embarrassed whisper, as if he were some parishioner who had come to me for solace and advice.

"God!" he spat. "The God whose millions of worshippers perished side by side with the nonbelievers in the cataclysm that destroyed Poliqua? The Trigod who could no more save his millions of followers than he could prevent the evils that rotted the lives of my fellow citizens? I cannot believe

in a God who would allow such things to occur. And yet..."

"Yes?"

He looked at me fiercely, then turned away.

"And yet I keep searching, as if I were seeking something that I was destined never to find."

As am I, I wanted to shout, but did not.

He laced his writhing tentacles beneath his chin. "I should like to learn more of your world, Gordon."

I told him I would teach him whatever I could. But it was late and it was time for Karen to be in bed. She went protestingly to her room. I followed her as far as the hallway and she looked up at me with big, sad eyes.

"Daddy, why did he talk like he was a bad man because of what happened to his planet and all? It wasn't his fault. I'm sure it wasn't."

"You're right, honey. He's not a bad man. But he feels that he has a lot to be guilty about and sometimes it's better for a person to think he's suffering for his sins than to think he's getting away with them. He'll feel better in the end.

"I hope so. You know what, daddy? I like him a lot. He's a very nice man."

As she went to her room I found myself smiling, not just because Karen liked Trebar, but because she had called him a man.

* * *

During the next week I found myself leading a strange double life. During the day I received frightened townspeople in the rectory, using reason and soothing words to comfort them in their moment of fear. It became obvious, however, that what they wanted was not words but action. They had thought, I suppose, that I could exorcize this demon from the town, hopefully to the next town. I paced about the floor in front of them and told them not to worry, that God would see them through—all

the time aware that the best solution would be to take them to my home and introduce them to Trebar so they could see for themselves that the terrible "demon" was a kind and lonely being not unlike themselves. But that was impossible. When I could stand it no longer I told Jeanne to tell everyone I was out and went home to my study.

Karen had taken it upon herself to teach Trebar to read English. We had brought a desk and a reading lamp to the guest room where Trebar stayed and piled the floor high with books. Within days he was reading Karen's third grade reader—and asking more questions than Karen was prepared to answer. The more he read, the faster he read; before long his reading speed had increased to the point where he was devouring a book every few minutes. He had a tremendous vitality when it came to acquiring new knowledge; he was determined to learn all he could about his new friends.

One evening Trebar and I sat in my study, discussing his reading, and I saw in all humility that on science and metaphysics it was he who taught me. Trebar politely refrained from commenting on my science books, but I could tell that some of what he read had amused him. Kant and Hegel fared only a little better. He had as many questions as a small child and he asked them with the same sort of insensitivity, pressing me for answers to questions that I confessed I did not know.

My own vocation was a puzzle to Trebar. Despite his brief encounter with religion on his homeworld, he had never met a priest or a minister before. He had searched through all the fiction books, but they only made him more confused. Karen, however, had managed to impress him with what she thought was my importance. Karen, I might add, had very definite ideas concerning our status and to my regret had sometimes taught her ideas to the other children with her fists.

"Why do you help me, Gordon?" Trebar finally asked. "The others—they ran from me and hunted me. Only you have befriended me. Why are you different?"

"I'm not, not really. I suppose many others would have acted as I did."

"No, Gordon. Perhaps it is because you look up at the stars more than they do. You have wondered if there existed intelligent life on worlds other than your own, just as I wondered on Polliqa."

I smiled. "We both know, now, don't we?"

"For all the good it does us," he replied. With an almost nonchalant wave of the hand, he indicated the books on my shelf. "On my homeworld, as I told you, there was a book, which was the foundation of the Fellowship. Have you a similar book on which you base your faith?"

It was the question I had dreaded, yet expected. What would a creature of Trebar's intelligence make of the Bible? I feared that my few remaining strands of faith might be snapped altogether by his reaction to that ancient collection of documents.

I went to the shelf, pulled out a copy, and handed it to him.

Without speaking he took it and flipped through its pages, pausing about five seconds for each. That was slow for him, but from his intense interest it was obvious that he was studying each page carefully. I watched him as he scanned, trying to read emotions into his alien eyes, but it was impossible.

At the end of the hour he had finished the Bible. He closed it softly, laying it on the arm of the chair in which he sat, and stared, without speaking, at the carpet before him.

I wasn't sure what I wanted him to say. Did I desire confirmation of my Christian beliefs, a re-affirmation of my flagging faith? Or did I want him to laugh at it, to tear its logic to shreds and throw it back in my face? I wasn't sure. I was ambivalent. Perhaps either would have been sufficient, sufficient to rescue me from the battle being fought within my mind.

But he took neither stand.

"It is very much like the Forbidden Tome," he replied.

I stared deeply into his face. "As I recall, you were profoundly interested in that book."

"I was interested in the power that it possessed to stir the Poliqan heart to rebellion." He sat silently for a moment. "No. That is not the total truth. There was much in that book that seemed good and true. Just as there is much in this book." He looked up at me. "Gordon, you are a seeker too, are you not?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are like me. You seek a higher level of meaning to life than just your personal survival. And yet, even now, you are having trouble believing the truth of the volume I have just read."

I sat on the edge of the chair and cradled my face in my hands.

"Yes, Trebar. That's quite true."

"I feel very close to you, Gordon. I have travelled many light-years through physical space searching for a reason to remain alive, searching for relief from the terrible guilt that hangs around my neck. You too have travelled on a journey toward the truth, Gordon. It is a noble and terrible thing to search for meaning in your life, but perhaps together we will find it. We have found each other and that is something, is it not?"

His extensor reached out for and found my hand.

"Yes, Trebar," I said. "Already I am changed because of you. Just to feel that I am not alone is a great thing."

His face assumed the familiar contours that I had come to think of as a smile, but I felt his extensor quiver when I spoke the word "alone."

CHAPTER 14

I found Trebar in the living room the next afternoon, curled up on the sofa, his extensors flicking rapidly through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I sat across from him and watched, fascinated, as his eyestalks darted back and forth across the pages. I had never read the book myself; at least I had never gotten more than fifty pages into the first volume. And yet here was Trebar plowing through it as if it were an illustrated comic book, absorbing and understanding it better than I ever could. It was embarrassing, in a way, but perhaps I needed to be humbled a little. As he turned the last page he looked up at me and spoke a brief word of greeting. His eyes seemed sad.

"Your people fight many wars," he said, as he passed the book into my waiting hands. "And the people that Gibbon describes seem little removed from barbarians."

"What he's writing about happened a long time ago," I said.

"Have things changed since?"

I smiled. "Not really. Sometimes we still act like barbarians. Or worse. But I like to think we've made some progress."

For a moment he seemed genuinely puzzled. "In what way?" he asked. "I read your newspapers, your magazines, and they tell of senseless acts of violence, of men dying in wars that they do not even understand. The Romans fought their wars with cruder weapons than you do now, but that hardly speaks well of the uses to which you have put your technology. Is there a moral difference between fighting a war with spears and swords and fighting it with tanks and machine guns?"

"No," I said. "I guess you're right. We really haven't improved much, have we? But were your people any better?"

I saw the look of pain in his eyes and realized that I had touched on something that was troubling him. "No," he said. "They were not. I was not aware of it for much of my life, but I suppose I led a sheltered existence. I was taught that sentient beings were naturally kind and benevolent, that violence was an attribute of the lower kingdoms of animals—and then I met Nexar and the council. I saw how their violent methods propagated themselves, how they drove others—myself included!—to commit hideous acts. And I realized that I was really no better than they."

"That's not true. The fact that you committed acts of violence doesn't mean that you're basically evil. You fought to protect your family and yourself; you were driven to commit acts that you found personally despicable..."

"Is that an excuse?" he shouted, emotion rising suddenly inside him. "If I were not basically evil then I wouldn't have been capable of doing what I did." He raised an arm to hold back my protest "Oh, it's not my fault; I know that. I come from an evil species, as—" He looked at me with regret in his eyes. "—as do you, Gordon. I travelled for years across the universe and not once did I meet a race that had truly risen above the level of beast. It is not possible, I suppose. The laws of evolution would not allow it. A non-violent species could never compete, could never survive long enough to reach any kind of maturity. But I can wish..."

"There is a way," I said. I leaned toward him across the intervening space, straining to see if the scars on his soul were reflected in the lines of his face.

"I said that I could wish," he whispered. "I did not say that I could believe."

I wanted to tell him that man—or Poliqan—was imperfect by nature, but was redeemed by his very struggle to escape those imperfections, as Trebar was struggling now. Man was still a beast, yes, but alone among the beasts man could strive to be something more.

I never had the chance to put those thoughts into words, however. There was a clattering from behind me and I turned to hear Jeanne shouting, "Reverend Ames is busy now." Floorboards rattled as somebody walked across the front porch and a young boy's voice said, "I have to see him. It's important."

The front door jerked open and suddenly Mark Peterson was standing there, his jaw hanging halfway down to his chest. A lonely, rather neglected boy, he came here often, but I never dreamed that he would come barging into the house on that particular summer day.

He stammered something that was too incoherent to understand, then he turned to run. Jeanne was the first to react. She grabbed him as she came back in through the front door and held him tightly, though he struggled against her as if she were a monster herself. I jumped from my chair and grabbed him securely about the waist and together we pinned him down into a chair.

He kicked and scratched, his face contorted with fear. I slapped him across the face, hard, and his struggling ceased. It was necessary, I told myself. I had to do it for Trebar's sake.

I handed him over to Jeanne. "Hold him here and don't let go," I commanded.

"We can't keep him here forever!"

"I need time. I have to get Trebar to safety before the boy can bring the others. Just hold him here till I get back."

I told Trebar we would have to leave and a look of sorrow crossed his face; but he saw my purpose and agreed readily enough. I led him out to the car and had him sit in the back seat while I tried to think of some place to take him. I couldn't leave him in the woods again—but it was no longer safe for him to stay in our home. Certainly the church was out of the question. When Mark Peterson spread the word back into town, as he certainly would do, the church would be the second place the vigilantes would look. I feared what they might do to it in their wrath.

As I stood thinking by the side of the car, I heard the sudden crackling of gravel and looked up to see Paul Mullins's brown Mustang come swinging around the corner. My heart leaped. I grabbed for the door handle and considered making a wild break for the highway, but I couldn't bring myself to try it. I waved Trebar down in the back seat and did my best to look calm and unconcerned.

"Howdy, Gordon," Paul shouted. "How's everything this afternoon?"

I smiled back at him, surprised at how easily I dissembled, and said, "Pretty good, Paul. What brings you out this way?"

He parked the car and stepped out onto the drive. "Oh, Josh has got me running around tryin' to see if anybody's seen the Other. I swear, he's had me goin' all over the county for three days now. Seems the town council's puttin' a lot of pressure on him to bring the creature in. Can't say I blame them, but Josh has been working his tail off for the last week and a half and I thought I'd take some of the work off his hands."

"Well, I appreciate your concern, but I can tell you right now, I haven't seen any sign of the monster. So I suppose you're wasting your time by coming up here now. Sorry."

Paul looked hurt. "Aw, shucks, Gordon. I mostly just came out here to see you and Jeanne. I'm tired of talkin' to half-cocked farmers who like nothing better than to cuss me out because we haven't been doing our duty protectin' them from the horrible creature. Actually," he smiled, "I was hoping you'd invite me in for a cup of coffee."

I laid a hand on the side of my car and was surprised to find that I was trembling. My mind raced. "Why... we'd love to have you, but I was just heading out now. Jeanne's, ah, not feeling too well and I was going into town to get her some medicine."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Gordon."

"That's okay," I said, starting to draw a relieved breath. "Why don't you come back—"

My relief was short-lived. Just then there was a shout from the house. Mark Peterson threw open the front door and pounded across the porch, screaming, "Deputy Mullins! Deputy Mullins! They've got the monster here! He's in the car!"

I went for the door handle and was halfway into the car before Paul had pulled out his gun on me. I don't know where he kept it; it seemed to spring magically into his hand.

"Hey, Gordon!" he shouted, just as startled as I was. "Get back out. I don't want to have to hurt you or anything."

The Peterson boy threw himself against Paul's Mustang. Jeanne appeared in the doorway, a look of horror and despair on her face, and I saw Karen peeking out from behind her. I stood slowly away from the car, wondering how far Trebar could get if I threw myself in between him and the gun. But no; I had a family to worry about—and there was always the chance that Paul would *really* carry out his threat to shoot.

But I had to do something.

"Aw, Gordon," said Paul. "Why'd you have to start running like that? I trust you. Who cares what some stupid kid says?"

"But it's true," yelled Mark Peterson. "The monster's here and it's in the car. Take a look, Deputy Mullins!"

"Oh, all right. Step aside, Gordon."

He peered in the back window. It apparently took him a minute or two to get used to the dim light inside, but I could tell when he saw Trebar. His eyes widened and his nostrils dilated; he raised his gun to the window.

"Get out, you!" he shouted. "Get your hands up and step outside!"

He opened the back door and Trebar came timidly to his feet. It broke my heart to see the look of fear in his eyes—and I could see that those

peculiar emanations were reaching Paul even before they got to me. Sweat beaded on Paul's forehead and his gun hand began to shake.

That worried me. The radiating fear might cause Paul to lose his sense of judgment, which meant that Trebar might end up with a bullet through him if the emanations didn't stop.

Fight it, I thought, Fight it, Trebar! And I could see that he heard me even though I had not spoken. *Be calm. There's nothing to be afraid of.*

He looked at me plaintively. I wondered desperately what I could do.

"Paul," I said, trying to sound calm. "Don't do it. Please don't take him in."

He looked at me like he thought I was losing my mind. "Gordon, don't you know what this thing is? This is the creature that killed Lockhart and Jessie. Why in the world were you tryin' to protect him from me? I trusted you." There was venom in his voice as he spoke those last three words, the hatred of the betrayed for his betrayer.

"You don't understand, Paul. He's not a vicious monster. He's intelligent and kind."

"The devil he is! You *are* crazy, Gordon. I never would have thought it."

I started to say something else, but just then Karen came rushing down the front steps, despite Jeanne's efforts to stop her, and threw herself into Trebar's arms.

"Get away from there!" Paul shouted. "Are you crazy, too, girl?"

He raised his gun and I realized he was trying to find some way to shoot Trebar without hitting Karen. She must have felt, through that strange psychic wavelength of hers, the weight of the cold metal pointing at her back, because at that moment she turned and faced Paul. Her beautiful face scrunched up into a classic grimace of terror and she screamed, at the top of her lungs. For a moment we all stood frozen.

And then Trebar moved. I have never seen a human being move as quickly as that incredible alien did, lashing out with almost supernatural speed and wrenching the pistol from Paul's hand. Paul tried to react, but

he never had the chance. His gun skittered away across the driveway, then Trebar struck him across the face. The young deputy's eyes opened wide, more in horror than in pain. He raised an arm to protect himself, but Trebar brushed it aside, with such ferocity that I thought for a moment he had broken it. He struck Paul again, this time in the stomach, and then in the chest, pummeling him with a long succession of devastatingly accurate blows. The stunned deputy fought back weakly, collapsing to his knees on the gravel. Blood streamed from a cut above one eye.

"Oh, my God," he whispered.

I should have done something then, but to tell the truth I was scared. I had seen Trebar frightened and I had seen him sad, but this was the first time that I had seen him truly angered. I saw then, on a gut level, what he had meant by the basic violence in all beings. It came rising up out of him like a hideous and unspeakable force, transforming this kind and gentle creature into a murderous machine of destruction. I watched in silence until the anger seemed to pass.

Trebar stepped back and looked away, raising a tentacle to his face and lowering his eyes to the ground. Paul lay quietly on the gravel, his chest rising and falling in a spastic rhythm. Jeanne came and knelt beside him, wiping the blood from his face with a small handkerchief. Finally Trebar turned to me, his entire body trembling, and spoke in barely controlled tones.

"Do you see now, Gordon? Do you understand now what I tried to tell you? We are no more than animals, violent beasts who must kill and kill again because that is our way. We are condemned, Gordon; condemned to yearn for the stars while our bellies cannot rise above the dust."

"No, Trebar. Don't say that."

"Don't face the truth, Gordon? Don't confront reality? Perhaps there is no God, my friend. If there were, would he have allowed such evil to live in our hearts? Would he have allowed my planet to die? God would not allow such a misunderstanding as we have here. Perhaps even the few shreds of hope that we hold in ourselves are not worth the trouble."

"We must always hope," I croaked, but my words came out as flat, unconvincing, even to me.

Paul had managed to struggle back to his knees and was staring up at Trebar with something akin to awe. The blood had stopped flowing now and was already beginning to darken and clot. A black welt had begun to form beneath his left eye. I thought for a moment that he was going to curse Trebar—or, at least, turn and flee—but instead he said: "What in the world, Gordon? Am I losin' my mind or what? That creature's talkin' English!"

"I tried to tell you before, Paul. Trebar is intelligent, just like you and me. He's not a monster."

"You weren't kiddin', were you? Sheezus!" He wiped a hand across his bruised face. "He really whaled the tar out of me. Why'd he go and do that?"

"You pointed the gun at Karen. He thought you were trying to hurt her."

He squinted his eyes tightly, as if concentrating on a difficult calculation. "He was tryin' to protect the girl?" Though it was the last thing I would have expected at that moment, there was a tone in Paul's voice that sounded almost like respect.

"Listen to me," I said desperately. "The townspeople will be here soon and they're going to kill Trebar. They won't ask him any questions before they shoot him; they won't even give him the trial the most despicable of criminals would get. I've got to get him away from here so he'll have a chance."

Paul stared at me in disbelief. "But he killed Lockhart and Jessie!"

"Those were accidents. He has this way of radiating his own fear and terror. It must have been too much for their hearts. He didn't mean to do it. You have to believe that, Paul."

"What about Jake Peterson and Lea Abrams? He grabbed their car when they were in the woods, tried to smash in the hood. Don't tell me that was an accident."

"Those kids were parked up in the mountains, right on the edge of a cliff. Trebar told me that when Jake accidentally shifted his car into forward he came close to throwing himself off the side of the mountain.

Trebar saved those kids' lives."

Paul shook his head again. "I don't know, Gordon. I just don't know."

"You'd better think fast then. Mark Peterson'll have the entire town down on us in a few minutes."

"The Peterson kid!" He turned back toward his car. "Hey, boy! Where are you?"

But he was already gone.

CHAPTER 15

The wind whistled across my face as I whipped Paul's Mustang around the long curve that led to Highway 105.

"It's the old Indian Cave," Paul shouted, above the roar of the wind. "We used to play there when we were kids. It goes way back into the mountains. A man could hide there for years without bein' found."

I looked at Trebar in the rearview mirror, where he had slumped desolately into a corner of the back seat. He looked up for a moment and I tried to catch his eye, but he turned away. Finally I said: "You'll be safe where we're taking you, Trebar. The townspeople won't be looking for you there."

Without moving he said, "I appreciate your help, Gordon. I'm just not sure I deserve it."

"You deserve it, all right, Trebar. More than you know." I turned and looked at Paul's battered features, as he leaned gingerly against the right hand door. When he moved he did so slowly and cautiously. "I want to thank you, Paul," I said. "I'm glad you decided to come along."

He grimaced painfully and did not immediately reply. "I oughta have my head examined," he muttered finally.

"You're doing the right thing. Believe me."

I turned onto a narrow country lane and fought the wheel around tortuous curves as the road wound its way up into the hills. Dust billowed

behind us, mingling with our exhaust. The trees arched over our heads like a long green canopy and what sunlight managed to reach the ground was strangely dappled and subdued.

I brought the car to a halt behind a thick copse of trees. The cave was about a quarter mile from the road, through thick woods and up a gradually steepening grassy slope. The mouth of the cave was high atop a rocky cliff, hidden by a growth of scraggly green vegetation; it would have been impossible to find it if we hadn't already known where to look. The entrance was small, with a narrow ledge running along the front, but one by one we managed to squeeze inside. I gave Trebar a small lantern and he turned it on to dispel the darkness. He had a small bag with him, containing what little food we had been able to scrape together before we left.

"You'll be all right here, Trebar. I'll be back later with some food. Try not to be afraid."

He nodded. I placed a hand on his shoulder and we stared at each other for a moment, then Paul and I turned to go. We smoothed over the traces of our passage as we walked to the car; then we drove back.

When we pulled up at my house there were two trucks waiting in the drive. Jeanne was standing on the porch and Karen was at her side, crying. Jake Peterson jumped off the lead truck, shotgun in his hand.

"All right, Ames, where is it?"

"Trebar's not an *it*, Mr. Peterson."

He looked as ready to use the shotgun on me as on the alien. "My brother told me you was hidin' it here all the time, Ames—in your own house."

"*Reverend* Ames to you, Mr. Peterson. What's a minister for if not to protect the hurt and the persecuted?"

Peterson nearly choked and Simon Shurker and the others crowded up. Simon swung his rifle up and rested it on his left forearm. "I'd take it kindly if you'd tell me where it is, Reverend."

"No," I said. I never saw the gun butt coming. It hit me hard on the jaw

and I went down. I was surrounded by a forest of legs kicking in the dust, and from somewhere I heard Jeanne shouting angrily. I got to my feet slowly.

"Stand down, Reverend," someone said and before I knew it, I was clubbed from behind with a gun barrel and I hit the ground again.

Paul charged in. He took a swing at Jake Peterson, but Steve Stoner caught him from behind. The two grappled for a minute, then Josh appeared, pulling up in his squad car with a pistol in his hand. He fired two shots into the air. "Break it up," he shouted.

"Now you hold on, Josh." Peterson pointed at him uneasily. "Wait till we finish our business."

Josh pushed his way through the mob. He stared Peterson down and scattered the mob like the children that they were, shooing them away red-faced into their trucks. He squatted beside me and examined the bruise that covered half my face, shaking his head. "Well, your jaw ain't broken, Reverend. You'll still be able to preach next Sunday."

Jeanne knelt beside me with a tearful Karen clinging to her side. "Jeanne," I asked her. "Are you all right?"

"Don't worry about me. They're just satisfied with beating up their minister." She looked angrily at what they had done to my face.

"They're frightened," I said, "and frightened people will do almost anything."

"Yeah," Josh agreed. "So a smart person will stay away from the mountains tomorrow and let his friends do the talking for him."

Josh and Paul helped me to my feet and passed me over to Jeanne. "You keep it in mind about being smart now," said Josh. "You too, Mr. Mullins."

I made it halfway across the porch before the floor started spinning underneath me. I fell heavily, dragging Jeanne down with me.

When I woke up I was on the living room sofa with Karen sitting beside me. "Daddy's up, mommy!" Karen shouted. She turned back to me. "It's a

good thing, too. We're almost out of ice." She put the ice wrapped in a hand towel against the side of my face. "Your face is all swollen."

Jeanne came in then, wringing her hands nervously in her apron. "Doc Lucas says you ought to stay in bed for at least a day. That's not Josh's prognosis. Josh thinks you should stay in bed for a week."

I pushed Karen's hand away and struggled to sit up. "I have to leave right now. To warn Trebar."

"If you had any common sense, you'd stay here with Karen and me."

"Honey, I promised Trebar. I have to go."

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't," Jeanne smiled. "I fixed a bag of food for you and Trebar." I looked up at her in astonishment as she kissed me on my good cheek.

* * *

After hiding my car in thick vegetation, I walked the quarter mile to the cave. Trebar was waiting on the ledge when I got there, fully exposed.

"Trebar!" I shouted. "You shouldn't leave yourself out in the open like that. What if someone sees you there?"

"Gordon," he said. "It is good that you have returned. I wish to speak with you further."

I rushed up the path and Trebar met me halfway to the top. I pushed him gently ahead of me, but he resisted.

"Please," I said. "You have to get back inside."

"No, Gordon. It's dark and suffocating in there. I find it so much nicer out here, where I can see the sky, the trees. I feel confined in there. And I don't think I can stand to be alone with myself any longer."

I placed a comforting arm around his waist. "I understand, I think. All right, Trebar, we'll go someplace else. Come on back to the car."

"No. I want to talk with you now. We'll stay here and sit on the ledge."

I shrugged helplessly. "Whatever you say. But you'll come with me later, okay?"

"We shall see, Gordon. We shall see." He looked at my swollen face silently.

He led me to the top of the path and settled down on the ledge by the mouth of the cave, his feet and legs dangling over the edge. He looked almost like a playful child, though no one would have mistaken him for any child born of Earth. I sat beside him and waited for him to speak.

"I've come to a decision of sorts," he said at last. "I can no longer allow you to help me. I fear I have made you a stranger among your own kind. You will lose your friends, all that is dear to you, because of what I have done."

"That's not true. If I'm losing anything because of you, then it isn't worth keeping. You're more important to me than my so-called friends."

"Gordon," he said, his eyes focusing on distant clouds. "You have far too much respect for me, for my intelligence, for my right to exist."

"Nonsense!"

"I'm serious. What good am I to anyone? I have been the instrument of my own race's destruction. I have caused much trouble on this world. I am a being with no other purpose in life than to wreak havoc." He sighed. "And I thought, at one time, that I was destined for so much more."

"You're important to *me*, Trebar. You can be of incredible value to the scientists of my world, to all people of intelligence and understanding. We're not all ignorant bumpkins here."

"No, Gordon," he said, waving my words away with a raised extensor. "I have nothing to offer. What my race once possessed is now detritus and cosmic debris. I would be a curiosity to your scientists, nothing more." He looked into my eyes. "What hurts most is what I've done to you."

"To me, Trebar? What have you done to me?"

"I have embittered you toward your own race. I can see that. And I have moved you far from any hope of reviving your failing religious beliefs."

Perhaps," he smiled, "I am an instrument of the being you call Satan."

"No, Trebar. You've helped in demolishing the ramshackle ruin of my faith—that much is true. But you've shown me that I'm a seeker, as you are. That's a foundation on which I can build a new, stronger faith. Perhaps... perhaps we can build it together."

"No, Gordon. I've had my fill of seeking. All I desire is peaceful oblivion."

I started to say something more, but from somewhere below there came the sharp click of a rifle being cocked. I looked down and saw Josh staring up at us, the twin barrels of his shotgun pointed at Trebar's chest. My blood turned to ice.

"Move away from him, Reverend," he shouted. "Start on down the path, real quiet like, and let me have a clean shot at him."

I stared down at him, dumbly, and wondered suddenly why my arms and legs refused to respond. I saw him as if in a photograph: thin, brown hair blowing lightly in an easterly breeze, sweat beading on his forehead, sunglasses perched almost nonchalantly on the bridge of his nose. His barrel chest rose and fell with his labored breathing and I thought that I could make out the hint of a light, asthmatic wheeze. His gun hand trembled.

He had followed me up here, I realized, and I felt like seven kinds of fool for having led him to Trebar.

"I said get away, Reverend. You're gonna get yourself hurt and I don't want to be the one to do it. Stand up and start walking. I'll give you five seconds, that's all."

Somehow I found a voice, though it sounded like a croak from the very pits of hell. "You can't shoot Trebar, Josh. I won't let you."

"Don't be a fool. That monster's killed two people already—and don't think I don't know what he did to my deputy earlier today. Now are you coming down or do I have to take a chance on putting a bullet through you too?"

"I guess you will, Josh. I'm not leaving Trebar's side."

I leaned as close to Trebar as I could. The alien sat transfixed; I felt neither fear nor astonishment radiating from him, but a kind of calm acceptance of what was happening.

"Trebar," I whispered. "The mouth of the cave is right behind you. I'll throw myself in front of you and you can make a run for it. I don't think Josh will shoot me."

"All right, Reverend!" shouted Josh. "I'm sorry I have to do this." I saw his fingers tightening around the trigger, but Trebar refused to move. Without thinking, I threw myself against him and shoved him backward into the entrance. Josh's rifle discharged and rocks and dirt exploded above my head. Flying debris stung my cheek.

I grabbed Trebar by the shoulders and shoved him through the cave mouth into the darkness beyond. He fell unresistingly to the cold earth inside, but did not move. Outside I heard the click of Josh cocking the rifle for another shot.

"Come on," I shouted. "You've got to move. He'll be up the path in a minute."

"It's no use," Trebar replied. "I told you before that I have made your life miserable long enough. I can fight them no longer."

I grabbed him by the wrist and tried to pull him to a standing position. "*You can't say that, Trebar!* Your life means more to me than my friends or my career—or even my own life." Through the entranceway I heard the crisp sound of Josh's heels clicking up the winding path.

"No, Gordon. I cannot."

"Do it for my sake, Trebar. Not for your own. When Josh gets up here I may have to give my life for yours and I don't want that to happen any more than you do."

He stared at me for a moment, even though we could barely make out one another's features in the darkness. "All right," he said. "If it means that much to you I will try to escape."

He grabbed my hand and I pulled him to his feet. Grabbing the unlit lantern from the cave floor, I plunged blindly ahead with Trebar in front of

me.

There was no time to light the lantern. We ran forward into the pitch blackness, down the twisted passageway. There was another entrance, I'd been told, on the far side of the mountain, but it was about three quarters of a mile ahead of us.

"Reverend!" Josh's voice echoed along the passageway behind us. It sounded very close, but I doubted Josh would have thought to bring a flashlight with him, which meant that as long as we were in darkness the advantage would be ours. He also wouldn't take the chance of allowing us to escape while he returned to town for a search party. I walked as silently as possible, but the crunching of the gravel underneath my feet was like the firing of cannon in the narrow confines of the tunnel. We moved quickly and for a moment I lifted my hand from the wall. Suddenly my face struck a slab of solid rock and I fell back to the floor with a crash.

A gunshot rang out in the darkness. I heard the whistling of the bullet as it passed above my head and imagined I could feel the breeze of its passage. I got up and grabbed Trebar's hand, and we dived wildly forward into the inky depths of the cavern.

Josh's footsteps sounded loudly in pursuit. I struck another wall and almost lost my balance, but somehow I managed to regain my footing. I stumbled into the other side of the passage and suddenly Trebar was pulling me along.

My heart pounded raucously. It seemed for a moment that Josh was just behind us, the barrel of his gun brushing practically against my back. Suddenly the ground opened beneath my feet. I fell forward, arms flailing for some kind of support, but all I found was air. Trebar grabbed my shoulders, but I continued falling, until the palms of my hands slapped against the floor of the cave. My feet dangled into thin air.

"Gordon!" Trebar began to shout.

"Shhhh!" I hissed, remembering even then that Josh was somewhere close behind us. Trebar's hands tightened around my wrists and I grasped him desperately to keep from plummeting into that unseen pit beneath me.

I remembered, then, all the stories about how unsafe the mountain

caverns were, of how explorers had frequently lost their lives when they had plunged through floors that had been undermined by millenia of erosion and into vast, unsuspected chambers.

When I had fallen I heard Josh's rifle discharge again, but that time it was more distant than before. Now I hung tightly to the edge of that underground cliff and prayed that Josh would pass us by.

In the distance I heard footsteps. I listened to them slowly approach us, but they were almost drowned out by the pulsing of the blood in my ears. Then they passed somewhere nearby and receded into the distance.

Trebar grabbed me by the shoulder. Straining against the dirt-encrusted rock I fought to pull myself back to safety; then Trebar's superhuman strength took over and lifted me onto solid ground once more.

I lay there without thinking, waiting for the adrenalin to filter back out of my blood. Then, still trembling, I rose to a sitting position and leaned against a wall.

"Thank you, Trebar," I gasped.

I reached out in the dark and found that the lantern had somehow contrived not to fall into that hole when I had. I picked it up and struck a match. The tiny lantern wick sputtered, then flared to life, until the passage we were in was illuminated by a dull, orange glow. Trebar stared back at me across the tunnel, his face empty of any expression. I realized that my hand was trembling.

I held the lantern out over the chasm into which I had almost fallen. Leaning over the edge as far as I dared I could still make out no sign of a bottom; only deep shadows. It was a miracle I was still alive.

Trebar held out a hand to me. "Come, Gordon," he said. "I think that we should go now."

Holding the lantern out in front of me I tried to retrace our path along the corridor, but a few yards beyond where we had been the path forked off into two equally forbidding tunnels. I chose the left one and we followed it for what must have been nearly a quarter of a mile, but it went nowhere that I recognized. Finally we turned back. But there was no sign

of the other fork that we had not taken, or of the rift into which I had nearly plunged.

I turned to Trebar and saw from the expression on his face that he was already aware of what I had to tell him.

We were lost.

CHAPTER 16

We decided not to face the problem immediately. Instead, I opened the small packet of food that Jeanne had sent for Trebar, and together we ate a quiet meal in the flickering light of the lantern.

At last Trebar said, "I am consigned, Gordon."

"Consigned?" I asked. "To what?"

"To my fate. I will never meet with your scientists. And the strange thing is that it doesn't really matter. Your friends will destroy me. I will fight, because that will be what my instincts tell me to do, but they are many and I am one. In a way, I suppose that I should be thankful for them."

"And bitter toward me for keeping you alive?"

"No, Gordon. I am merely talking. You are motivated by your love. *They* are motivated by blind hate and ignorance. And yet, perhaps they are motivated by something more cosmic than that. Your ancient myths, the ones I read of in your books, tell of elemental spirits that pursued those who have committed heinous sins."

"The Furies?"

"Yes. Is it possible that these spirits have possessed those who seek my destruction?"

"Hardly. There *are* no furies, except the kind that seemed to have possessed you. You'd have more peace if you'd let them go, if you could forgive yourself. You *must* realize it wasn't your fault that your planet was destroyed, realize that you are still a creature with significance for others. You carry in you the seeds of your culture's knowledge. You have much to

offer and in turn my race will give you haven—if we can get away from here."

"No, that's impossible. My whole system of values is gone, my entire society, my wife, my child..."

He stood and turned away from me, the flesh of his back visibly trembling—or, perhaps, that was only the wavering of the flame.

I gathered the remains of my dinner and placed them in a small bag, which I left in a corner by the wall of the cave. It seemed a pity to desecrate the ancient purity of that cavern with a piece of such worldly trash, but I didn't want to be burdened with it on our way out.

I had read once that you could find your way out of a cave by lighting a match and following the direction of the flame as the wind currents wafted it to the nearest exit. So I struck another match and held it before me, but the nickering of the tiny flame seemed almost random to me. Together, however, we decided which direction it was trying to lead us. We walked for a time and eventually the air currents grew stronger and we followed the flame with renewed confidence.

My watch read six o'clock by the time we first saw a sign of light down the tunnel. I think it was morning by then, though I wasn't entirely sure. We had been wandering for hours and my muscles screamed with fatigue. And then we found the tiny, circular hole in the roof and through it had our first glimpse of sunshine and clouds. The exit was atop a shelf of slanting rock and with Trebar's help I fought my way to its edge.

I found myself looking back toward the town, from somewhere about halfway up the eastern face of the mountain. The fresh valley air was cool on my face; the sun was just edging its way over the eastern horizon.

I pulled myself all the way up through the tiny exit and hauled Trebar up after me. The mountainside below us was steep, but not so much so that we couldn't work our way gradually down to the woods below. We had just started down when I heard the clanking of heavily laden trucks in the distance. From somewhere on the other side of the mountain there was the quick chopping-sobbing of helicopter blades.

I stopped climbing and stared off toward the horizon. No more than two miles away I could see a long green snake that may have been the

National Guard, uncoiling from the town and disappearing in the thick woods.

A shudder passed through me as I realized how close we had come to delivering ourselves directly into their hands. If we had come out of the cave as little as an hour later...

When we reached the woods we turned west, since the guard probably would not have reached that side of the mountain yet. I didn't try to go back to my car; if Josh had gotten out of the cave, as I was sure he had, the car would be the first place he would have looked. Instead, I led us out toward the road.

There were no cars in sight when we reached the highway, but neither had the soldiers gotten there yet. I heard the distant grinding of an automobile engine somewhere up ahead. As it pulled into sight I stood boldly in the center of the road. The driver swerved wildly out of my way, then stopped. He took one look at Trebar and ran screaming toward the mountains.

I took the car and drove it away from town, toward Wolverton. But I had reckoned without Josh's ingenuity. While the army marched outward from town, he had set road blocks farther along the highway.

There were two squad cars parked across the road, with a pair of police barriers between them. I stepped on the accelerator and rammed through them, but they had been prepared. A truck, apparently waiting for someone to do exactly what I had done, pulled in front of me and I struck it a glancing blow across the cab.

I was thrown forward against the dashboard. I suspect that was the moment my nose was broken, though I had no time to think about it. The car skidded to a halt on the shoulder and I grabbed Trebar by the arm, pulling him unresistingly out of the door.

And suddenly there was Fred Borden, standing there with a rifle in his arms. He stooped to his knees to aim it and I threw myself in front of Trebar, praying as I did so that Fred would not have the heart to shoot his own minister, though I feared deep inside that he would.

But he did not. He crouched there, his lips trembling without speech, his eyes wide with surprise and disbelief. "R-reverend," he whimpered, as

if he were not quite sure what to do. "Y-you better move. I'm gonna put a bullet through that creature. You c-can't stop me."

I stood as steadfast as an armed tank, the barrels of that rifle pointed directly at my heart. I'd like to think the fear I experienced in that moment did not show, because on the inside I was trembling almost uncontrollably. Then, suddenly, the others appeared, their guns in their hands and a look of searing hatred in their eyes.

"Get the hell out of the way, Reverend!" shouted Jake Peterson, waving his rifle threateningly. He came toward me, but I prepared to stand my ground.

Then, unexpectedly, Trebar pushed me aside with a sudden swing of his arm, whispering, "This is my fight, Gordon!" I fell to my knees as Trebar descended on Jake Peterson. Before Jake could raise his gun, Trebar had whipped it from his hand. He brought his stiffened "fingers" up into the pit of Peterson's stomach, then, with a quick swipe, slammed him across the left side of his face. Peterson fell noiselessly to the ground. Then Trebar turned to the others.

And stopped. His spine seemed to lock rigidly and he stared straight into the faces of the men. From his throat came a challenging cry. He spread his legs and extensors as if he were not merely accepting his fate, but embracing it.

Until then the others had remained frozen, as I had, paralyzed by the harsh spectacle of Trebar's anger. But the sound of his voice seemingly broke the spell. As one, the men raised their rifles to firing positions—and unleashed a roaring hail of metal on Trebar's unprotected form. The first shot struck him in the neck; I saw bluish-green blood erupt from his veins in a bright fountain. He seemed to dance for a moment in the grip of that hellish onslaught; then his body deflated like a balloon and collapsed lifelessly to the earth.

The wind sang lightly through the grass, through the wrinkled fabric of my shirt and pants. The others stood quietly, as if in silent homage to the power that they were now aware they held. Then they turned and walked back to the road, the deed done, the act committed. I walked to Trebar's side and knelt beside his mangled corpse. It seemed very small then, as if something very large had passed out of it and only a flimsy shell had been left behind.

And then his voice burst to life inside my head, weak but recognizable.

"It is over, Gordon," he said.

"No, Trebar," I said, my voice choking on unformed tears. "My race will know of you. I promise. They will know of you through my words."

I rested my hand against his chest. His clothing was damp with blood.

"Trebar," I choked. "Can I... can I pray for you?"

"To whom, Gordon?" he asked, his words filled-with bitterness. "To whom?"

And tears streamed down my cheeks, because I did not know.

When Josh arrived in the squad car Trebar was gone. Only a mutilated hulk remained. I stood, slowly, and watched Josh open the door and stand in front of me. Jeanne and Karen were in the back seat, their faces drawn and pale.

"It's all up, Reverend," he said.

"He'll be buried with all due respect," I snapped.

"I'm afraid not," said a young officer to his right. "The scientists at the university want to have his body as a specimen."

"A specimen!" I cried. I think I would have hit him had he not turned and walked away then. Two more of them came and carried Trebar's body away. I screamed after them, but the words I spoke are best left unrecorded.

"You'll treat his body with respect," I said, finally.

"Think of your family, Reverend," Josh said, "if not of yourself." Karen came up to me and held me tightly about the waist. I stroked her hair and felt her tremble against me. "Don't cry yet, honey. Don't give them that satisfaction." Karen nodded dumbly.

Jeanne came up to me more slowly. "Jeanne, I'm sorry," I said to her.

"They're the ones who ought to be sorry," she replied, her eyes flashing

with righteous indignation.

I looked at the car I had stolen and I almost smiled a shameful smile. And yet I wasn't really ashamed of what I had done; not in the slightest. From behind me Josh said, "When you break the law, Reverend, you really go whole hog."

I turned to him with tears in my eyes and did not speak. Finally he said, "I'm sorry, Gordon. I really am."

"I believe you, Josh," I said.

The sheriff made a fist and hit the side of the squad car, staring at me in frustration. "I wish I knew why it's so all-fired important to me that you don't think poorly of us."

I don't think to this day Josh realized what he was asking me. I looked past his shoulder and into the hostile faces of the townspeople and realized then why Trebar had to die. He was right. None of them had really known him. He had only been a kind of mirror, reflecting their own distorted images of themselves. In their ignorance, their shameful ignorance and hatred, they hadn't really known what it was that they were doing. All the angry words and curses, all the dire predictions and thoughts, left me.

"No," I said. "After Trebar I can't think poorly of anyone, human or otherwise, again." I climbed into the back of the squad car and put my arms around Jeanne and Karen. The truck with Trebar's body on it had already left. I watched the skies and waited for a burst of sunshine to break through the clouds, but none came.

Nonetheless I forgave them, all of them, in Trebar's name. The squad car bumped forward, toward Middlefield and what was left of my previous life.

* * *

It took us only a week to make arrangements to sell our house and move to Dayton, where an acquaintance had offered me the assistant managership of a grocery store; but long before the end of that week, Josh came and asked me personally to stay on as pastor in Middlefield. The townspeople got up a petition asking us not to leave and at the head of the list were the signatures of Fred Borden and Simon Shurker and even Jake

Peterson.

But my mind wasn't changed. I wanted to get away from the town as soon as possible. I had already made arrangements to tell Trebar's story to the press, and the money I would make from that would help us to set up our new lives. The thought of lingering any longer in surroundings that reminded me of what had happened to Trebar did not appeal to me.

We were to leave on Monday. I agreed to head one final Sunday morning service. I saw it as a chance to explain myself, to give my reasons for moving. As it turned out, the occasion was a memorable one. We didn't sing hymns. We offered no prayers. Incredibly enough, no collection was taken. At eleven o'clock I ascended to my familiar position at the podium and looked out over a packed church—an unusual sight indeed.

I told them about Trebar. I told them of the difficulties I had experienced with my faith. To the best of my ability I told them the truth.

When I finished I stood before a silent audience. There were tears in my eyes. During the last moments of the sermon my voice had shaken with emotion.

As I stood there, three people moved into the aisle. I recognized them immediately: Jerry Baker and two of the girls from the commune. They walked to the pulpit and one of the girls extended her hand toward me. Clutched in her fingers was a rose. She handed it to me, her eyes glowing fiercely with emotion. She said, "Thank you." Then they turned and walked away.

I was profoundly moved. Suddenly I understood the people of the commune; I understood their search. They too were seekers, just as I was, just as Trebar had been.

Trebar had never found the object of his search. He had settled for the peace of death. But his arrival on Earth, the mere existence of his quest, had changed my life. I determined, as I held that rose in my hand, that Trebar's death would have meaning, that I would carry on his search. His story would change others as it had changed me. His life would have more meaning than he ever thought it could.

The congregation applauded as I stepped down from the podium and went with my wife and daughter toward our new life. They helped us move

and when we arrived in Dayton we received a letter that represented the wish of the entire town of Middlefield: if I ever desired it, I could come back and serve as their pastor again.

I never took the job my friend offered. Instead I travelled across the country to tell people of Trebar. As I write these words, I am in the middle of a conference of astronomers, attempting to give them as much information about the stars as I had gleaned from Trebar's short stay in our household. I wish I could tell them more.

But I have had time to think, to ponder, to re-evaluate my own position in the world. Perhaps, when my usefulness to the world at large comes to an end, I might go back to Middlefield. I just might.

The stars are very beautiful these nights.

EPILOG

Perlin took the message from Kopl, the door dancer, read it carefully, then crumpled it and dropped it into a waiting receptacle.

"Well, gentlebeings," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Our friend Trebar has... escaped."

Eylok wiped an extensor across his tightly knit brow. "So, all our work has been for naught. Our starships are lost and our captains with them."

"It would seem that way. The *Suntreader* has fled, most likely into netherspace. We've lost all contact with the *Skyhope*."

Lorpik frowned. "It's a pity. I had hopes for Trebar. I think you did too, Perlin. He had great potential. Such a pity that he fell in with the wrong thinkers. He could have been a very great public figure someday."

Ynox laughed. "Oh, come now, Lorpik. Why waste tears on a traitor to the state? I doubt young Trebar deserves your fond remembrances; he certainly shall not have mine."

Perlin walked to the balcony, opening the stiff, glass doors that looked out upon the serrated skyline of Malinqa City. It was a sight that warmed him, normally, but now he saw it as if at a distance. Strange,

unaccustomed emotions warred within him.

Poor Trebar, he thought. So young, so promising; how sad that he should come to such a bad end. Was it heretical, he wondered, to hope that Trebar's fate would not be a tragic one? Perlin had had a son once; how many years ago had it been? He had been about Trebar's age the last time Perlin had seen him, just before he had left for the Wars of Exclusion as an officer in the Sky Force. He had never returned. Perlin remembered how proud he had been when he had first seen him in his flight officer's uniform, the sunburst emblem almost radiant on his lapel. How fine it had been to have a son, a young, handsome image of himself, newborn to the world with all of life before him.

And then to have him taken away.

He looked at the sky and thought of the stars that lay invisible behind the soft clouds of afternoon. How many worlds were there out there, he wondered? Thousands? Millions? How many of them were capable of supporting life? And how many of them already did? Would Trebar be welcome there, among the ancient and settled races of the galaxy, or would he be forced to find his own world and settle it himself, as rugged pioneers had once settled the land on which Judiciary Hall now stood? It would be rough, but Trebar was young and he had his family with him. How bad, really, could it be?

Perlin sighed. He turned back to the doorway and had touched the smooth edge of the glass with a weary extensor when something caught his eye. It seemed, for a moment, that the daylight had changed, as if someone had turned up a rheostat somewhere and the light had grown harsher, more intense.

He looked up, but long before he realized what had occurred he was blind; and the tender synapses of his brain had sizzled away.