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PROLOGUE

When Man expanded his horizons into space, he did so with more enthusiasm than common sense. The invention of hyperspace-drive signaled an explosion of emigration the likes of which had never been seen before in human history. But such rapid shifts brought vast problems.

Hyperspace, which acted for some peculiar reason like a viscous medium, allowed ships to travel between the stars in a few days or weeks. But, unfortunately, no faster way was found to send a message between stars than by putting a letter aboard a ship. This delay in communications meant that no interstellar government could hope to be truly effective. A few loose confederations of planets were attempted, but they rapidly fell apart amid distrust and misunderstanding.

In the midst of this interstellar anarchy rose a phenomenon known as Society. This clique was composed of the wealthiest families in human space—families whose founders had, for the most part, made their considerable fortunes in the early days of space travel, before the social lines became so stratified. At first the infighting was fierce, as members of this elite group vied with one another for the top financial position. But once it became obvious that more than enough money was spread among them, the members of Society turned their attention to ways of distinguishing themselves from the so-called common people.

They went to great lengths to do this. They developed a system of etiquette and behavior as convoluted as it was hypocritical. They staged elaborate parties for themselves all over the Galaxy. They had little concept of morality or legality. Why should they? With the lack of interstellar government, the members of Society, who could afford to

travel regularly between star systems, were beyond the reach of the mores and laws of any one planet.

But any group requires some method of satisfying its competitive urges. Society solved that problem by inventing a series of Games to occupy its members' time. Some of the Games were intellectual in nature, others were physical. Many were a combination of both. A good Gamesplayer ranked very highly in the artificial strata of Society.

Of all the Games Society played, the most important—held only once every 20 years—was the Scavenger Hunt.

CHAPTER ONE

The reporter stood on the hard ground of the Midway Spaceport, staring up at the monstrous ship towering over her. At 37 meters, the *Honey B* was by far the largest private space yacht ever constructed, matched in size only by the large commercial vessels that ferried cargo between the stars. Rumor had it that the inside of the ship was equally impressive, though few people were lucky enough to be invited to see it—as she was, right now.

Gulping down her nervousness, the reporter walked to the gravtube and pressed the button to activate its field. As she and her equipment were lifted up the gantry that paralleled the side of the ship, she resolved to be positive and dynamic during this interview. She didn't know why Bred deVrie had picked her for the assignment, since someone of his stature could have had any of a hundred more famous journalists, but she did know that she intended to make the most of her opportunity. She was only a junior reporter, more accustomed to covering crime and sports than Society, and she had been as surprised as anyone when Master deVrie had accepted her application to write his tale. This could be just the sort of story that would make her career, though, and she was damned if she'd miss it.

She reached the top and rang the bell beside the airlock door. There was an agonizing period of silence before a male voice came over the intercom. "Who's there?"

"This is Shino Kimatsan. I... I have an appointment to interview Master deVrie and his crew." Silently, she cursed herself for her momentary hesitation. That was hardly the style for an important, self-confident

journalist to affect.

With a faint sigh, the hatch door slid open and Shino peered inside. The ship's interior was dark compared to the bright daylight of the spaceport field, and it was impossible for her to see anything right away. That same male voice said, "Won't you please come in, Mistress Kimatsan?" Obediently, she entered.

Stepping through the large air lock, she entered the ship, set her holocorder down on the floor and realized she was standing upon carpeting. As her eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light she looked around the room and could not suppress a tiny gasp. She had not expected to find anything like this inside a spaceship.

The room was shaped like a wedge of a cylinder. Behind her stood a nine-meter-long outer wall and some distance ahead of her the inner wall stretched for a mere one and one half meters—and this mostly door. Four meters overhead was the ceiling. The floor was of inlaid marble, with several large oriental rugs scattered about. The walls were covered with velvet wallpaper in different shades of green; several large "family portraits" in ornate wooden frames were hung at intervals, while imitation gaslights on the walls provided the illumination.

The furniture consisted of a two-and-a-half-meter-long sofa ranged along one wall and six wildly over-padded chairs. A small spinet stood in one corner, a grandfather clock in another. The furniture all looked antique—the term "Victorian" came to her mind—though Shino guessed that it would only be simulated at best. Not that Bred deVrie couldn't afford genuine antiques—the deVrie family was one of the wealthiest in Society—but whatever was inside this ship would have to withstand several gravities of acceleration every time the ship landed or took off, and Shino doubted that the real thing could hold up under such stress. Still, it made an instant impression.

"I see you like my Drawing Room," the male voice continued. "It's simple, but it's homey."

The sound brought her attention back to the matter at hand. Standing in front of her was a man who could only be the famous—or should that be notorious?—Bred deVrie. In Society, where the people prided themselves on being different. Master deVrie had a reputation as being in a class by himself. Yet, at first glance, Shino wondered how that could possibly have

come about.

She had been prepared to meet a disreputable scoundrel, a giant or a dwarf, someone with a half-mad gleam in his eye. Instead, the man she faced was of a jovial mien, who would hardly stand out in a crowd of more than three. He was of medium height, and his body was pleasantly rounded without quite being fat. The corners of his mouth dimpled when he smiled, which he was doing now. His eyes glittered with the joy of living.

"You must be Bred deVrie," she blurted out.

The man shrugged. "We all must be somebody, I suppose."

It was only after staring at him for several seconds that Shino realized why Bred deVrie had gained such a reputation for eccentricity. He was almost the total antithesis of everything the Society male should be. Fashion called for men to shave a part at least three centimeters wide from front to back of their heads and have it tattooed in outrageous designs; Bred's natural brown hair was unparted, cut fairly short by contemporary standards, and tended to curl unexpectedly down onto his forehead. Small goatees were the rage, yet Bred's beard and mustache were full and of a reddish tinge. Society men were absolute peacocks, adorned in bright clothes and flashy jewelry; Bred wore no jewelry and was dressed in a spacer uniform of glossy black. And... he was wearing an odd appurtenance across his eyes and the front of his nose. It hooked behind his ears and seemed to change the whole nature of his face.

Bred caught her staring and smiled. "I'll bet you've never seen anything like these before," he said, removing the awkward contraption.

"I... I must admit I haven't. What is it?"

"They were called glasses or spectacles several centuries ago and were worn by people with defective vision. The glass was ground into lenses to compensate for natural inadequacies in the eyes. That was long before optical microsurgery could correct such things at birth."

"Is there something wrong with your eyes?" Shino asked, wondering at her own concern.

"Space, no. I just like them because they look so terribly decadent." He

grinned widely and donned the glasses again. They made his eyes appear very large indeed. "But you didn't really come here to talk about my glasses, did you?"

Shino felt rather foolish. Of course not. She had come to talk about the Scavenger Hunt; it was the only subject anyone was talking about these days. Especially on Midway, where all the contestants were stopping for the Midway Ball during the Hunt. It made absolutely no sense whatsoever to stop the Hunt right in the middle to have a party; but then, Society's events rarely made sense.

"No," she blushed, "I came to find out how you're doing in the Hunt."

"I'm going to lose, if that's what you mean."

His straightforward manner caught her by surprise. Granted, the Hunt was a difficult Game and few people ever really expected to win; but even so, Bred was a deVrie... and of the previous seven Hunts that had been run, deVries had won four. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm not competing any more," Bred said simply. "I'm dropping out as of Midway." Noting the surprised expression on her face, he added, "Don't look so stunned; it's perfectly legal, you know."

"But... but nobody just drops out. Even if you only go through the motions, you're supposed to play through to the end."

"Well, someone forgot to write that into the official Rules. Cheer up. Mistress Kimatsan. You'll have it as an exclusive story."

His last word brought her mind back to her reason for being here. She was supposed to get a story—*his* story. The Scavenger Hunt was so dramatic an event that the general public wanted to know everything about it and the contestants. She was here to write an article, and she had better concentrate on that fact.

All business now, she asked, "Would you care to tell me why you're dropping out?" She turned on her holocorder: it would make an audio-visual record of this event.

"Well, there are some personal reasons between my sister and myself that would take too much time to go into, and would serve no point.

Basically, I felt that the Hunt was a senseless risk of life and limb, and I decided not to go along with it any further. A guy could get killed out there."

"Then why did you start in the first place?"

Bred sighed and fidgeted with his glasses. "Again, personal reasons between my sister and myself. It was really for her, because a deVrie has always been in the Scavenger Hunt. She cares more about those things than I do. She'd have entered by herself if she could, but the Rules said male contestants only. I never could say no to her... until recently." He stared off into empty air for a moment, contemplating something that remained unspoken. His fingers stroked the wiry hair of his beard.

"Well, I'm sure my readers would be interested in everything that's happened to you so far. You did promise me that story, remember. And you also promised that I'd get to meet and talk to the rest of your crew. Where are they?"

Bred snapped out of his reverie as suddenly as he had gone into it. "Sorry. I meant to tell you that we've taken the liberty of fixing lunch. You haven't eaten yet, have you? Good, then you can meet and eat simultaneously. The crew is waiting for us in the Dining Room. Follow me." Shino picked up her equipment and let him lead her to the narrow end of the Drawing Room and out the door.

They found themselves standing on a narrow ledge in what appeared to be a circular well, two meters in diameter, running up and down the length of the ship. Handholds in the walls led to other levels. "This is the Core," Bred explained. "It's the main way to get from one level to another—our main artery, so to speak. It's easier to travel it in free-fall, of course. Fortunately, we don't have to do any climbing right now—the Dining Room's on this level." He walked around the ledge and through a doorway clearly labeled "Dining Room."

If Shino had thought the Drawing Room was impressive, she was left absolutely speechless by the Dining Room. Like the previous room it was wedge-shaped, but the floor was covered wall-to-wall with a Persian carpet in a red, blue and gold design. The ceiling was six and one half meters high and painted to resemble a vaulted sky with a bright blue surf shining down from directly overhead. Draperies, painted in the corners of the walls and resembling open tent flaps, revealed a *trompe l'oeil* scene of

an alien landscape with strange and beautiful creatures grazing on a plain and a river flowing peacefully by.

In the center of the room stood a large table shaped like an isosceles triangle. At first glance the tabletop appeared to be transparent, revealing the carpeting beneath it; but closer examination showed that the top was tiled in an identical pattern to the carpet. In the center of the table was a large epergne of blue crystal containing, in miniature, the same exact scene that was painted on the walls. The animals were carved from ivory and the river was made of emeralds.

The flatware on the table was golden, the goblets were crystal and the fine lonan china was rimmed with gold. The chairs around the table were of dark wood; their backs, arms and seats were padded and covered with heavy gold embroidery.

Shino gave a low whistle. "And you take all this into space with you?"

Bred gave her a bland little smile. "Well, if one must travel, one might as well do it as luxuriously as possible."

Several women were seated around the triangular table. All were wearing the spacer uniforms that were universal among spacefarers—one-piece jump suits covering the entire body from the neck down. They were tightened by elastic at wrists, waist and ankles to prevent ballooning, but otherwise were fairly loose to allow freedom of movement in free-fall. The uniforms fastened down the front with a single seam, and with the addition of helmet and air tanks, converted easily to spacesuits.

The crew, as Shino had been told to expect, was all female, apparently, it was rumored, for the purpose of catering to Bred deVrie's taste for decadence.

"Girls," Bred addressed his crew, "this is Shino Kimatsan. She's going to write up our story for the whole Galaxy to read. We're going to be famous."

A tall, angular black woman arose from the table to greet them. Her hair was cut in a short natural and her bearing was formal and erect. The black badge of captaincy and the black and silver deVrie coat of arms were prominently displayed above the left breast on her metallic gold uniform. "Welcome aboard the *Honey B*, Mistress Kimatsan," she said. "I am

Captain Luuj Kirre. Won't you please be seated?"

The captain escorted Shino to the short side, or "base," of the triangular table. "Thank you for your hospitality, Captain," the reporter answered, setting up her holocorder beside the chair. Luuj Kirre gave a formal nod and also took a seat. Bred came over and sat down between the two women.

"Meet the rest of my crewwomen. Astrogator Sora Benning, Engineer Nezla Lustik, Computer Dru Awa-om-anoth and Doctor Vini Curdyn who, incidentally, cooked this meal. Since she's about the best cook on board, I'm really looking forward to it. Shall we eat? We can talk while we're dining."

"Yeah," said the woman who'd been introduced as Nezla Lustik, "I'm starvin'. I could eat a whole herp-ox."

"Without even bothering to kill or skin it," came the soft comment from Sora Benning, who was seated beside the engineer. Nezla paid her no notice, but started heaping food onto her plate.

The food—an amazing assortment—had been brought to the table earlier and was preserved in keep-temp dishes. An "Electric Susan" rotated around the table, carrying the serving plates slowly past each diner once every five minutes. Shino soon had her plate filled with foods she couldn't have begun to identify.

After they had started eating, Bred turned to her. "All right, you came to hear our story. We obtained all three of the items we were supposed to in the first half of our Hunt; which would you like to hear about first?"

"Actually," Shino said around a large mouthful of food, "I understand something happened during the Grand Lift-off. Something about an android running up to your ship just before the event was underway."

Bred smiled at the memory. "Yes, that would be Johnathan R, the android who entered the Hunt. But he didn't come to see us; he came to see Tyla."

"Your sister? Oh, I see, it must have had something to do with the blowup the night before."

Vini Curdyn suddenly sat up and took notice. Shino turned to give the woman her attention. The doctor was of medium height and build, with strawberry blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. Her spacer uniform was pale blue, but had transparent strips that revealed interesting displays of bare skin. The red and white medical insignia was fastened above her left breast. "Do you know what happened at the Hunt Ball that night?" Vini asked, staring at the reporter intently.

"Why, yes. I thought it was common knowledge by this time."

"Well, it ain't common knowledge here, and it's something that's been itching my curiosity streak for some time. Would you care to enlighten me?"

"Uh, basically. Mistress deVrie was in the middle of a dance with Ambic Jusser and he must have done something to upset her. She walked away from him and went over to the android, asking it to dance. It caused a big stir, I'm told."

Bred snorted. "I'm not surprised, knowing those Society types as well as I do. They like to think they're better than other human beings, let alone androids. Tyla must have been really angry at Jusser to desert him for an android."

"It gets worse," Shino continued. "Apparently your sister said something to the android that hurt its feelings, because only a couple of minutes later it walked out on her."

Bred's jaw dropped. "Oh, poor Tyla. No wonder she acted so hurt. She has an awful lot of pride, you know. But she never told me. That would explain, though, why Johnathan came to apologize."

"Apologize?"

"Yes. He even brought her some flowers—real ones. She just threw them away. I don't know what happened to them."

"I have them," spoke up the quiet-looking young woman at the far end of the table. Shino searched her memory and recalled that her name was Dru something. She was a short, slightly dumpy-looking woman with a moon-shaped face and a perpetually sad expression. Her drab brown spacer uniform hung on her like a sack. "I've been trying to get them to

grow," she continued.

"Oh," Shino said. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your last name, Dru."

"It's Awa-om-anoth."

"That's a very unusual name."

"Dru's a very unusual person," Bred answered.

"That's right, you said she runs your computer, didn't you?"

"No." Bred shook his head and smiled. "She *is* our computer."

Shino wrinkled her brow in puzzlement. "I don't understand. How can you run a spaceship without an electronic computer?"

"Well, we do have a small computer that handles our automatic operations—temperature controls and whatnot—but Dru does all our astrogational calculations."

"But... but how can she do them fast enough?"

Bred settled back in his chair. "That, my dear, is a very long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I have to know everything about all of you if I'm going to write your story correctly."

"All right. But remember, you asked for it. The fact of the matter is that Dru isn't really human. Oh, physically she is, born of human parents and all that. But her parents' ship crashed on a then-uncharted planet named Nokre when she was just a baby. The Nokreans, although they didn't have space travel themselves, knew that it existed and that there were other intelligent beings in the universe..."

"How?"

Now Dru spoke up. "At one time on Nokre there was a race of large reptilians known as the Great Ones. They came from another planet and lifted the primitive beings they found on Nokre from savagery. They taught them everything. Then one day, they suddenly left. That was seven generations before I came, but I have seen pictures of them. After they

were gone, the Nokreans sank partly back to barbarism, and were only starting to rise again when I came. They took care of me and raised me as one of their own." She stopped as abruptly as she started.

"But you look perfectly normal."

Bred picked up the story again. "She is... in a sense. But there are parts of her mind that aren't human at all. For instance, she doesn't express emotions—not openly, at least. You see, on Nokre it's considered impolite to display emotions publicly. Instead, they store up their emotions during the day and sing their Songs at night."

"Songs?"

"Yes, they have a special Song for each particular feeling. Dru is always working on improving hers. She sings them in the privacy of her cabin, and none of us has ever heard them. Sharing one's Songs is, I'm told, the greatest possible intimacy for a Nokrean."

"But what does this have to do with her being your computer?" Shino persisted.

"Nothing, that I know of. But when Dru was found and taken to New Crete, they discovered that she had a talent for mathematics. She can perform the most complicated operations in her head and come up with the right answer every time—almost as fast as a machine, and infinitely more lovable. Sort of an *idiot savante*, except that Dru is no idiot: in every other respect her intelligence is perfectly normal. Have I left anything out?" Bred asked, looking down the table at Dru.

The computer shook her head. "That is probably more about me than Mistress Kimatsan wishes to know."

Shino shook her head. "No, as I said before, I want to know everything. All right, you've told me most of what happened before the Grand Lift-off. What happened next?"

"Johnathan got back to his ship just before the event began. Since Ambic Jusser won the last Hunt, he had the honor of taking off first; since our family has been so distinguished in previous Hunts, we were given the second position. Once all the ships were out in space, the little robot Umpire we had been given told us what the first item on our list was. Have

you ever heard of the planet Lethe?"

Shino shook her head.

"I wish I never had." Closing his eyes, Bred shivered involuntarily. "The Letheans were an old race that died out thousands of years ago. They never left the surface of their own world, but they developed all sorts of technology related to the mind. In particular, they left behind some machines called Dream Booths. They seem to induce a dream state so permanent that most people dream themselves to death. Only two persons were known to have previously survived it. Tyla and I entered a Dream Booth and, with Vini's help, managed to revive again in reasonable shape."

Shino noticed that his hand trembled ever-so-slightly as he spoke. "How did you do it, doctor?" she asked, turning to Vini.

"I injected them with some hallucinogens that gave them counterdreams so bad they woke themselves up. Actually it was mostly Sora's idea."

Shino gazed across the table at Sora Benning. The astrogator had eaten sparingly, and when finished, she had promptly leaned back in her chair and gone to sleep. She now looked dead to the world.

Looking back at Bred the reporter asked, "What were the dreams like?"

Bred took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. "I... I would prefer not to discuss it, if you don't mind. They were extremely personal." He put the glasses back on and blinked owlshly. "I'm not being much help, am I? I keep telling you that everything is personal. I'll try to do better, honest." And he flashed a smile that warmed Shino to the bottom of her soul. *I don't care what they all say about him; I think he's a nice man*, Shino decided.

"Anyway," Bred continued, "our next destination after that was a planet named Eclipsiascus, and the item we had to obtain was a special flower that grew along the coastline and blossomed only at certain times of the month. Unfortunately, what the Umpire failed to tell us was that, at the time, a war was going on between one intelligent race that lived in the oceans and one that lived on land. We were sort of caught in the crossfire."

"That sounds exciting."

The corners of Bred's mouth twitched in a sardonic smile. "I suppose so; I was too busy dodging arrows to notice. Several other contestants were there, too. Necor Danovich was killed by an arrow in the back, and Sora was nearly killed by an arrow in the arm."

"How can an arrow in the arm be fatal?" Shino asked.

The astrogator, who she could have sworn was asleep, opened one eye and stared at her. "Poison," said Sora, closing the eye and going right back to sleep.

"To make matters worse," Bred added, "when we got back to our ship we found that it was in the process of being hijacked. The sea creatures, who we thought were our friends, had sneaked aboard our ship and were trying to figure out how to use it as a weapon against their enemies." Bred stopped abruptly. He had been about to tell the reporter that Ambic Jusser's treachery had helped the aliens get aboard, but then thought better of it. There was nothing Shino could do about the situation except spread the story and besmirch Jusser's reputation a little—and, in the long run, what point would that serve?

"But your ship isn't armed," Shino said. "How could the aliens use it as a weapon?"

Sora Benning chose to speak again. "Backwash," she said, this time without bothering to open even one eye.

Noting the perplexed look on the reporter's face, Bred elaborated on the astrogator's explanation. "The electromagnetic field in a ship's wake is devastating. No machinery or living being has ever been known to survive in the backwash for long. The oceanic beings wanted to fly the ship low over their enemies' territory and kill them all that way. But they wouldn't have been able to do it; they probably would have crashed the ship if Nezla hadn't stopped them."

"Dambetcha," snorted the engineer, and Shino looked in her direction. Nezla Lustik was a short, chunky brunette with an ample—and decidedly mammalian—figure. Her spacer uniform was dark blue on the left side and bright green on the right, with a connecting design of blue and green running down the center front seam. She had spent the entire meal thus far eating as though this food were the last she would ever see; all her movements were quick and explosive.

"What did you do?" Shino asked the expected question.

"Well," Nezla began, gulping down a large mouthful, "Sora's my best friend and she needed to get to the Sick Bay. I couldn't let them drummin' *fish* take off with the ship. So I swam over to it while they were still tryin' to figure out the controls and went in through the Engineer's Exit in the tail. Once I was into the Storage and Drive Area I jury-rigged the gravity controls and turned everythin' up to four gees."

Shino gave a low whistle. "That must have been uncomfortable!"

"Them fish didn't like it, either!" Nezla beamed back. "They were wearin' air suits to let 'em breathe out of the water, and it's hard for 'em to even move around in one gee. I had 'em paralyzed. All I had to do was climb up to the top of the ship and boot the motherdrummers out."

Shino stopped to consider that. The *Honey B* was about as high as a twelve-story building. "You climbed all the way up through the Core under four gees?"

"Wasn't easy," Nezla said, reaching for a roll that was floating past her on the Electric Susan.

"She was just about dead when she finished," Bred elaborated, "but she got our ship back. So Vini was able to find an antidote for the poison and save Sora."

"And then you took off for your third object," Shino prodded gently.

"Almost. We had another bit of rescue work to do first." Bred took a deep breath before continuing; again, he would be skirting the truth a little bit. "Johnathan R, the android, and Ambic Jusser were both after an Eclipse Rose, too. They took off at about the same time, and somehow Johnathan's ship caught a piece of Jusser's backwash." Actually, Jusser had deliberately swerved to destroy the android's ship, but Bred again decided to be diplomatic and not mention that fact. "Captain Kirre went out and managed to bring Johnathan back alive."

"But how can that be? You just finished telling me how deadly the backwash is..."

"It's his skin," Vini spoke up. "He spent a lot of time—too much, if you

ask me—telling me about it once. Androids are developed on the planet Hellfire, and they're all given a specially treated skin that's more resistant to heavy radiation and heat. That and the fact that they come from vats instead of wombs are the only differences between them and natural humans. Even Johnathan wouldn't have been able to stand more than a second or two in the backwash, but fortunately that was all he got. We pulled him through all right."

"But his ship was a total loss," Bred went on. "So we invited him to join our crew and come along with us—over Tyla's objections I might add. Actually, he proved quite handy when we got our third item: a heartstone from Ootyoce."

Even Shino knew about Ootyoce, the only planet in human-explored space where life had evolved from a silicon, rather than a carbon, base. Creatures called stoneyes, whose hearts were blood-red crystals prized as gems in Society, inhabited the planet. She'd heard the stoneyes were very hard to catch, making the heartstones all the more valuable.

"Tyla was chasing one of the stoneyes when it led her over a short cliff. She fell and broke her leg, but Johnathan found her. He went into a hole where the stoney had disappeared and managed to capture one, but he also found out something quite disturbing. The stoneyes aren't dumb creatures: they live underground in a purposefully constructed city. It put us in a pretty sticky position: we needed that heartstone to win, but we didn't want to kill a sentient creature and cut out its heart. Tyla and I had a big fight about it, which is one of the contributing causes to my walking out on the Hunt."

"It's a shame, too," said Sora Benning from over in her comfortable corner, "because we do have the heartstone. It's all neatly inside the stoney. The Rules didn't say we had to take it out."

Bred gave a wan smile "Sora thought of that, too. A very ingenious lady—I'm glad we had her along. It took some time to convince the Umpire of the legality, but we did. So we brought along the stoney as well as food for it, but now it looks like it was all for nothing.

Shino looked over at the astrogator again. Sora Benning was a tall, willowy redhead with almost no figure to speak of. Her spacer uniform, unlike most, was skin tight, and of a bright red color. A white stripe ran up either side from boot to shoulder, and circling her neck was a thin

white line that became a pair of arrows pointing from each side to the center front seam. Her casual green eyes and sharp nose highlighted an angular, yet strangely beautiful, face. When she chose to move, every motion was perfectly fluid and graceful.

"Now I know where I've heard your name before!" Shino exclaimed suddenly. "You were on the crew of the *Explorer*, weren't you?"

"And she never lets us forget it!" Nezla cracked before Sora could say a word.

The DSS *Explorer* was a legend in its own time, a privately funded ship whose sole mission was to explore the unknown aspects of the Galaxy. Her crew included only the top spacers and scientists; and the stories of their exploits were legion. Most were fictitious, but even the verified stories were unbelievable. To have been a crewmember aboard that ship, Sora Benning must have been very special indeed. What a story that would be!

"But why did you leave the *Explorer* to work here?" Shino asked.

"Thanks for the compliment," muttered Bred.

"Got offered a better deal here," Sora said casually. "Besides, I got out just in time." It was common knowledge that the *Explorer* was two years overdue from its last voyage, and many people were writing it off as lost.

"It seems a shame you won't be going on with the Hunt," Shino said, turning back to Bred. "You're one of only five contestants who've gotten all their objects so far. And after going through all those ordeals..." Her voice trailed off as she thought about the fantastic story this would make; it could be her big break in the journalistic field: "I'll need to know everything in a lot more detail, of course, before I can really convey the feel of it to the public."

"Of course." Bred had finished eating and pushed his chair away from the table. "I was just about to bore your ear off with details. But not here; I have a much better place for doing that." He stood up and began walking out of the room into the Core. Startled, Shino hastily gathered up her equipment and followed him, saying a quick goodbye to the crewwomen.

"How do you like my ship?" Bred asked as he climbed down the series of handholds to the next level in the huge vessel. "I daresay the *Honey B* is

the most hedonistic space yacht ever constructed."

"I don't know of any that could top it," Shino puffed as she clambered down after him, the holocorder bumping against her thigh. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"It's called the Sheik's Tent," Bred said, opening a door in the wall and gesturing for her to enter. "I think you'll like it."

The room was of the standard wedge shape that predominated aboard the ship. Nearly every square centimeter of floor was covered by a series of enormous throw pillows covered with satins and velvets. Diaphonous veils in pastel shades hung from the ceiling and walls, and perpetually burning incense sweetened the air. Against the outer wall, under a canopy of white draperies, stood an enormous circular bed, a full four meters in diameter.

"What kind of room is this?" Shino asked, her eyes fixed on the bed.

"One of my own design," Bred answered, stroking his beard proudly. "Do you like it?"

Suddenly Shino realized why Bred had agreed to let her do the interview rather than some other, more established, writer. She was probably the only woman who'd asked him! "You're trying to seduce me," she said, her eyes still fixed on the bed. She sniffed the air. "You've laced the atmosphere with aphrodisiacs!"

"Yes and no; yes to the first and no to the second. I don't believe in aphrodisiacs; they're unfair and unnecessary. The air does have some incense, but that's just to tickle your senses a little. You're free to leave if you like; any of my crewwomen can give you your story if you don't trust yourself alone with me."

"I don't believe in mixing sex with business."

Bred sat down and lay back on the enormous bed. "Neither do I," he said genially. "That's why I avoid business at all costs."

Shino felt very confused. In a way, she had been betrayed, yet there was something so ingenuous about the smile on Bred deVrie's face that it took the sting out of the betrayal. He would never resort to anything as vulgar as rape, and she knew she could resist the seduction if she wanted. But she

was beginning to feel a little flattered. Men who'd propositioned her before didn't possess half the charm of Bred deVrie.

Suddenly an insistent buzzing filled the air. Bred scowled and reached down to the side of the bed to push a button. "What is it?"

Vini's voice came over an intercom speaker. "Sorry to disturb you, Boss; you can fire me for it if you like, but an important message just came in that I think you ought to know about."

"Okay, what is it?"

"An invitation to a party."

"I don't go to parties."

"I'll lay odds you'll go to this one, Boss. It's an engagement party—Tyla's. She's going to marry Ambic Jusser."

CHAPTER TWO

DeVrie Shipping, one of the many facets in the jewel of DeVrie Enterprises, maintained a suite of offices comprising the top seven floors of one of the larger office buildings in Midway City. At present, the very top floor had been cleared of all office furniture and was jammed, instead, with a strange assortment of even stranger people.

Even so, Bred stood out in the fashionably dressed throng, for he had not bothered to change out of his spacer uniform. He felt no compulsion to indulge in the social niceties so common within his peer group. He nodded occasionally to acquaintances, but said no more than a few polite words to anyone. He was looking for his sister.

"Why Bred, darling, how nice to see you again," came a voice from his left. He turned and found himself facing his ex-wife, Barbanté Leonyn—more commonly known in Society circles as "The Barb." She was a very attractive brunette dressed, as usual, to kill. The clothing on the right side of her body was red and in one piece, starting with a glove that reached all the way up to her shoulder, covered her breast, went down her torso over her crotch, and then became a boot. Dozens of little bell-shaped sapphires, tinkling merrily, dangled from the fabric. The left side of her body was identically dressed, but in blue with ruby bells. The center of her

body, from neck down to the top of the pubic bone, was totally uncovered.

In spite of his concern for his sister, Bred could not help smiling. "It has been a while, hasn't it? What have you been doing with yourself these last few years?"

The Barb shrugged. "Oh, the usual. Partying, gaming, going here and there, marrying occasionally when the mood strikes. And you?"

"About the same, except for the marrying. Once seems to have cured me."

The Barb did not take that as an insult; she knew Bred too well. Instead, she changed the subject slightly. "Everyone was wondering whether it had cured your sister as well. After all, she went 33 years without a single marriage, just those bed-hopping affairs, one right after another. Now, without warning, she announces she's marrying Ambic Jusser, of all people. I can hardly get over it. What's gotten into her, do you suppose?"

"That," said Bred, "is what I intend to find out."

The razor edge to Bred's voice startled the Barb. She had never heard him quite so intense before, and it piqued her notorious curiosity. "I had thought she didn't get along well with him," she continued, closely observing his reactions. "Particularly after what happened at the Hunt Ball."

"She doesn't."

"Well, but then, who does? It's even hard to get one of his ex-wives to give him a compliment now and then."

Bred gave her a quizzical look. "You weren't ever married to him, were you?"

"Surely you credit me with more taste than that. You know that *ménages à trois* bore me, and that's what a marriage to him would be—me, him and him. I'd hate to come between that man and his mirror."

Bred frowned. That had always been Tyla's opinion of Jusser, too. So why had she suddenly done something like this? It made no sense at all.

"Have you seen Tyla around anywhere?"

"Over that way, showing off her wedding gown." The Barb pointed to the far end of the huge room. "Just look for the biggest mob; she'll be at the center of it, as usual."

Bred started off in the indicated direction and eventually caught sight of his sister's back. She was engaged in conversation with another young woman. Straining his memory, Bred recalled that she was Arrira Tens, a young Socialite from Hellfire. "Really, Tyla," Mistress Tens was saying as Bred approached, "I do so sympathize with your having to put up with an android aboard your ship, though I'm sure you were able to take advantage of it."

"Oh?" said Tyla. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, androids are reputed to be marvelously competent sex partners," Arrira replied in a whisper calculated to reach everyone within earshot. "Not that I would know from direct experience, of course."

Bred stopped once more, curiosity overcoming his concern. His sister was one of Society's top guns, and this relative newcomer was drawing against her, challenging her supremacy. The outcome of this match would be most interesting.

Everyone else in the room thought so, too, for conversations instantly became subdued to await the reply.

Tyla's voice remained level as she said, "I'm sure that's quite so, dear. I've been to bed with several of your ex-husbands, and they tell me you have little direct experience with *any* kind of sex."

Bred smiled, and the room picked up its buzzing. His sister had won again. Arrira Tens looked as though she wanted to sink through the floor, and she strove desperately for some quick way to extricate herself from this conversation.

It was Bred who came inadvertently to her rescue by stepping between them and putting a hand on his sister's shoulder. "Well, little sister, I never thought the day would come when I'd be having to give you away." Bred was exactly 16 minutes older than his twin, and it annoyed her when he reminded her of the fact. He did it whenever he wanted her attention.

Tyla turned to face him. She looked like Titania clad in moonbeams, a fairy tale come alive. A shimmering silver body stocking, nearly transparent, clung to the smooth curves of her body; a deep U neckline and set-in jewels—diamonds and pearls, and an occasional sapphire or emerald—emphasized the more erotic areas. Her feet were clad in silver sandals, with straps made of strings of pearls that wrapped around her calves to fasten at the knees. Over all this, she wore a long, flowing caftan of sheer, pearlescent fabric. The sleeves reached all the way to the floor, and were edged with more diamonds and pearls. Her normally brown hair, sculpted to resemble a spun-sugar cloud, was dyed pearl and scattered with diamonds. In the center of her forehead, held in place by a platinum chain around her head, was the largest pearl Bred had ever seen.

She's beautiful, a goddess, Bred thought. The idea of letting this vision of loveliness, his sister, marry Ambic Jusser made him physically ill. He couldn't let her throw herself away like that, whatever her reasons. The wedding would have to be stopped at any cost.

"I thought that was supposed to be your wedding gown," he said, "not the wedding-night negligee."

Tyla ignored his remark. Her voice was entirely too sweet as she said, "I'm glad you could make it, Bred. I know how busy you are."

"How could I possibly miss your first nuptials? I couldn't let such a momentous event pass." He leaned over to give her a brotherly kiss on the cheek and took that occasion to whisper in her ear, "I'd like to talk to you alone. Now."

Tyla nodded slightly to show she'd heard, then said aloud, "I have so much planning to do for the wedding tomorrow, Bred, I wish you'd help me with some of it. Come along. I'll show you what I have in mind."

Walking with a slight limp—the leg she had broken on Ootyoce was still mending—she led him into what was normally a private executive office. When they were both inside, she closed the door. "All right, we're alone."

Bred wasted no time with formalities. "What in Space has gotten into you?"

"Everybody's been telling me it's high time I got married so, since I'm not occupied with the Scavenger Hunt any longer, I thought I might as

well try it."

"You know I can't let you marry that creep Jusser."

"Your fraternal devotion is quite touching," Tyla said in a voice edged with steel, "but you don't have any say in the matter. I am old enough to make my own decisions."

Only physically, Bred thought. "Let's cut the pretenses, shall we, Tillie? I want to know why you're doing this."

To Bred's satisfaction, Tyla's nostrils flared at his use of that childhood nickname. He knew it could always get a rise out of her and was probably the best way to cut through her calm exterior.

"All right, *bruder mein*, I'll tell you. I intend to accompany the winner of the Scavenger Hunt. Since you refuse to carry on, I have to take what I can get."

"But Jusser...?"

"He won the last Hunt, didn't he? And he's promised to take me along in the *Hermes* if I marry him. It's as simple as that."

Oh no, it isn't, Bred thought. *With your scheming little mind, sister dear, nothing is ever quite as simple as that*. He knew her well enough to follow her devious machinations. Tyla hated Ambic Jusser at least as much as he did, probably more so. Jusser had won the last Hunt, the one that had killed their parents; and, they had just learned recently from Jusser's own lips, he had been there when it happened and had not helped them.

Tyla had no intention of marrying Jusser. She was only using that and Bred's concern for her as a wedge to pry loose what she wanted from him; namely, for him to get back into the Hunt. She had tried everything on the way from Ootyoce to Midway—yelling, pleading, whining, cajoling—to get him to change his mind. None of it had worked, and now she was forced to resort to different and more desperate tactics.

But I can't let her marry Jusser!

Bred wet his lips and removed his glasses, staring straight into his twin

sister's eyes. "I suppose if I changed my mind and continued with the Hunt, you'd give up this ridiculous scheme."

"Well, then I'd be too busy to get married, wouldn't I?"

She's maneuvering you, Bred told himself savagely. She's toying with you like one of those lap-alongs she has affairs with and leaves panting for more. She knows exactly which strings to pull to get you to move her way. But no matter how aware he was of the strings, he found himself powerless to resist.

I ought to let her go through with it. She'd deserve what she'd get. This whole Hunt business has brought out a very ugly side of her nature. But damn it, she is my sister, and I can't let her hurt herself that way, no matter how much she's earned it.

"All right, Tillie, you win—this time. But only under my conditions."

"Name them."

"I don't want any more temper tantrums about any of my crewmembers. I hire my own personnel. You can make all the decisions with regard to the Hunt—I don't really give a damn—but I have the final say over everything else. Agreed?"

Tyla shrugged. "I suppose that's the best I could do. Yes, agreed." She grinned and reached out a hand to touch his shoulder. "I'm glad you gave in, Bred, really I am. We're deVries, and there's always been a deVrie in the Scavenger Hunt. It just wouldn't have been right for us not to do it. Besides," she added with a mischievous gleam in her eye, "it'll be so much fun jilting Ambic Jusser."

* * *

Vini Curdyn paused to let her eyes become adjusted to the dim lighting in the bar. This was the seventh place she'd visited since the clerk at Johnathan R's hotel said he'd gone out to a bar somewhere. She was beginning to think she'd have no luck at all tonight, until she spotted his lanky form seated at a far table with another woman. Resolutely, Vini made her way to the pair.

The android spotted her as she approached and waved her on, standing

as she neared the table. Johnathan R was tall and gangly, a collection of ribs seemingly tossed together at random. His smooth-shaven face was boyish to an extreme, but not unattractive—not by a long shot.

"Johnny," Vini said as she came up to him, "I've been looking all over the city for you."

"I'm glad you found me," he replied solemnly. "By the way, this is Jasmine S, a friend of mine. Jasmine, this is Vini Curdyn, the doctor aboard the *Honey B*."

Jasmine S, obviously another android and a beautiful one at that, acknowledged Vini's existence with a curt nod of her head. Vini ignored the rudeness, said hello and sat down. "I've got some news for you," she said. "We're going to be completing the Hunt after all. Bred sent some of us out to look for you because he thought you might like to come along."

Johnathan's eyes lit up, but his companion's voice was cold as she said, "We thank you for the invitation, but I really don't know if he wants to go. This entire Hunt business has been a fiasco from the very first, and I don't think it's worth pursuing any further."

"Gee, Johnny, are you a ventriloquist or something? I could have sworn I spoke to you, but this wooden dummy answered."

Johnathan blushed and began to stammer out an apology. "Jasmine is my... well, the closest human term would be mother or stepmother, I suppose. 'Sponsor' might be just as accurate. She is partly responsible for my existence, and she's very protective."

Vini turned to Jasmine. "I thought you androids wanted Johnathan in the Hunt. You certainly put up enough money to enter him."

"Some of us in the Council were against it from the first," the female android said. Her voice had not melted at all. "I thought the project was extravagant and a total waste of our funds. But the rest of the Council overruled me; they thought it would be so spectacular if an android won the Hunt that people would start respecting us and would give us more than the bare minimum of rights. And look what happened: he was washed out after only two objects, a total failure."

"I couldn't help it if Jusser tried to kill me," Johnathan muttered.

"And he's not a total failure," Vini added, coming to his defense. "If it weren't for him we might never have gotten the heartstone we needed on Ootyoce. He's a valued member of our crew, and we'd like him along with us."

Jasmine S snorted. "I really don't think your ship is the best place for Johnathan. I've heard all about your squad of trained harlots."

At that particular moment, Vini wished one of the other crewwomen had found Johnathan. Sora would have been able to ignore these insults by the simple expedient of going to sleep and letting Jasmine's wind blow itself out. Nezla's method would have been more direct: she'd have beaten the woman to a bloody pulp. Vini could do neither.

"Did you also hear," she said slowly, "that we 'trained harlots' saved Johnny's life?"

"Please, don't fight," Johnathan interposed. He turned to his fellow android. "She's right. I do belong in the Hunt, if only in someone else's crew. In the three years since I came out of the vat that's all I've done—direct myself toward winning the Hunt. I was taught how to astrogate, how to run a ship, and almost everything about science that could be crammed into me. Unless I'm in the Hunt, my life has no direction. I should go with them."

"But there's no point..."

"There might be some recognition salvaged if an android is in the winning crew," Johnathan persisted. "And Bred has a better chance than anyone of beating Jusser. I must go. I must!" There was a look of near religious fervor in his eyes as he gazed at Jasmine S.

The other android scowled and looked away. "If you feel it's that necessary, by all means go ahead," she said. "I can't see what you'll accomplish, but you might as well try."

Vini rose from the table. "I can see I'm not wanted here any more," she said. "We'll be taking off at 0930 tomorrow, so be aboard by then. And don't worry," she added sweetly to Jasmine. "We'll return little Johnny all safe and sound."

* * *

The Control Sector of the *Honey B* was another marvel of technology. The ship's hull had no windows of course, but the entire inner surface of this particular chamber—located in the nose of the bullet-shaped ship—was one large trivid screen. Cameras set in the hull itself relayed pictures to the screen, creating the illusion that there was nothing at all between the occupants and the outside. In the depths of space, the effect was particularly impressive.

The four Flight Operations crewwomen sat in acceleration couches near the front of the room, before the control panel. At the extreme left, Sora and Dru were making the necessary calculations to put the ship into orbit around the planet Midway, the astrogator rapidly reading off a series of equations and parameters, and the computer giving back the answers just as quickly. On the right, Nezla monitored all the instruments to make sure the ship was functioning properly. In the center the captain coordinated data from both sides to make the final decision.

The five acceleration couches behind those first four were also occupied. Bred relaxed in the center one, as he watched his efficient crew going through their paces.

Vini, who had no function in the running of the ship, sat on his right, with Johnathan, dressed in his battered gray spacer uniform, to her right. On Bred's left was his sister. Tyla was clad in a spacer uniform too, but hers was a work of art—a Bracht original, to be precise. It was royal purple with thin silver curlicues all over the body and silver bands at the wrists, neck, waist and ankles to simulate jewelry. Her hair was back to its normal brown and was cut short to avoid problems in free-fall. To Tyla's left, seated on the couch but looking quite out of place, was a meter-high robot, the Umpire. This ovoid of polished durasteel was the official arbiter of the Hunt and the keeper of their list of objects. It would not tell them what their next object was until they were out in space and orbiting Midway.

There was no Grand Lift-off as there had been on Huntworld at the start of the contest. Participants were free to take off whenever they wished. Ambic Jusser had availed himself of that privilege quite early that morning.

"Your former fiancé left quite abruptly," Bred remarked to his sister.

"Jusser hates to lose," Tyla said quietly. "And he knows now he's lost all

chance of me for good. He probably decided to get back to the Hunt before he lost face as well." She studiously avoided looking in the direction of Johnathan R. She was not at all happy her brother had chosen to bring that thing along, but she had agreed to let him pick the crew. And the android *had* been useful on Ootyoce.

"Quiet!" came the stern reprimand from Luuj Kirre. "We're ready for lift-off now."

At the touch of a switch, all members of the party felt themselves pushed down into their couches. It was one of the major paradoxes of space travel that in order for the ship to build up the necessary antigravitational field outside, the gravitational field inside the ship had to be artificially intensified. As soon as the internal field reached two gees, Luuj flicked a second switch and the ship began to rise. On the screens around them the ground seemed to pull away and the sky turned from pale turquoise to a deep navy to black. When Sora's instruments showed that they had reached the desired altitude, the fields were turned off and the occupants of the cabin were suddenly weightless.

"Well, back on the trail again," Bred said with a lightheartedness he didn't quite feel. "Umpire, where do we go from here?"

The robot spouted a series of coordinates that Sora quickly jotted down. With those details out of the way, the Umpire continued, "The planet has been given the name Gondra. Your object is to obtain a dragon's egg"

Bred and Tyla shot each other startled glances. They had only recently learned that Gondra was the planet where their parents had died 20 years ago in the last Hunt, trying to obtain a dragon's egg. Was history doomed to repeat itself?

CHAPTER THREE

With the *Honey B* safely ensconced in hyperspace on route to Gondra, shipboard life returned to its usual routine. Johnathan volunteered to take his turn at watch duty in the Control Sector, reducing the burden on the four flight operations crewwomen, who normally rotated the job among them. The usual maintenance details performed by the crew—cooking, laundry, recycling and general upkeep—also had Johnathan's willing hand. And, during the copious free time that weighed on everyone, there were

the usual pastimes to occupy them—games in the Rec Room, microspools in the Library... and, of course, sex.

Johnathan's inclusion in the crew meant that there were now two males aboard, a fact that pleased the crewwomen no end. Vini was the first to renew the experiments she'd begun on Eclipsiascus concerning the sexual prowess of androids; Nezla and Sora joined the game soon after. These amatory successes bolstered Johnathan's self-confidence enough that he made the initial advances to Dru, who acceded with her customary passivity. Only the captain, among the crewwomen, held herself stiffly apart. Tyla, of course, would still have nothing to do with him.

Bred was not jealous of his crewwomen's interest in the android. He found that he rather liked Johnathan, for reasons that weren't perfectly clear to him. He took a brotherly interest in the android's problems and had frequent chats with him about various subjects.

It was a 25-day trip from Midway to Gondra, which allowed Tyla plenty of time—perhaps too much—to think. For the first five days she brooded in her cabin, not seeing anyone except at mealtimes. Finally, on the sixth day, she went in search of her brother.

As she swam awkwardly into the Rec Room she saw that Vini and Sora were engaged in a game of space billiards, with Bred watching and making wisecracks as they played. Dru was in her usual corner composing her songs. No one else was in evidence. Tyla swam over to her brother. "Bred, I'd like to talk to you in private!"

He looked up at her, and the expression behind his black-framed glasses was unreadable. "Okay. Shall we go arear somewhere?"

Tyla nodded. Bred excused himself, and he and his sister floated out into the Core and rearwards to Sector V. "How about the Aquarium?" he suggested, and Tyla nodded in agreement.

The Aquarium was composed of two concentric spheres, the outer one five meters in diameter and the inner one three meters. The latter was hollow and made of strong transparent plastic, its sole furnishing an intercom set. This sphere was supported precisely in the center of the larger one by six transparent pillars that held it in place even under gravitational conditions; one of these columns formed the entranceway they had come through.

The region between the inner and outer spheres was completely filled with water. Aquatic plants were anchored on the outer sphere and waved languidly in the gentle motions of the water. Fish swam by, thousands of them, selected from the waters of several exotic worlds. The lighting was a glow that diffused from the outer sphere, designed to show the different fish to best advantage.

The lighting was a restful, pale blue now as the twins floated in the center, surrounded by the calm of the water. "We're alone," Bred said. "What's on your mind?"

"Well, uh, first I wanted to apologize. It was a bitchy stunt I pulled to get you back into the Hunt, and I know it. But it was something I had to do. Please don't hate me for it."

"I don't hate you, though I admit I'm still a little angry. You had no right to do it. As I've told you before, this Hunt is doing strange things to you, things I don't like at all." He sighed and stroked his beard. "Still, I suppose it's part of my brotherly duties to keep you from hurting yourself."

He looked into her face, reading deeper troubles there. "Was there... anything else you wanted to say?"

Tyla looked at him, and her eyes were very wide and helpless. He couldn't recall having seen her looking so little-girlish since before their parents had died. "Bred, I'm scared."

He knew precisely what she was talking about. It was only a few months ago that they had learned of their parents' deaths on Gondra—and they'd learned it from Jusser's own mouth. He had been there, he had seen it happen but, according to him, he had been unable to prevent it. Thoughts of Gondra had also plagued Bred since he had first heard they were to go there. Now he stared silently at his sister, waiting for her to continue.

"I'm scared about Gondra and the dragons," she went on. "I've been reading about them these past few days. They're 15 meters tall; that's almost half the size of the *Honey B!* They're said to be vicious when anyone gets near their eggs. You heard what Jusser said—they tore Mom and Dad's ship apart."

Bred put his arm around her and the two of them spun gently in the air. He said nothing because there were no words he could have used.

After a moment, she put her own arms around him.

She sobbed a little before she could talk. "Mom and Dad died there. I... I've got a terrible feeling that we're going to die there, too. Everything's gone wrong with this Hunt from the beginning. It's all going to end here. It's... it's like Destiny or something. Our parents went to Gondra to die, and now we're going there."

"We could always go back," Bred suggested softly.

Tyla sniffled back some tears. In the free-fall, the tears were turning into tiny saline droplets that floated about them, more a nuisance than a vent for unhappiness. "No. No, we can't. I can't explain it, but there's a... a drive inside me that won't let me stop. Can't you feel it?"

"No."

"It's like a little motor in my brain, driving me on, repeating *win, win, win*, over and over again. I can't escape it; it won't let me relax. Or maybe it's the ghosts of Mom and Dad, I don't know. But something's pushing at me all the time as though I'm full of coiled springs that'll fly apart if I relax the pressure. I just know I can't give up. I have to win this Hunt."

"But if you're afraid..."

"That has nothing to do with it," she insisted. "Nothing can stop this feeling. I was afraid on Lethe when we had to go into the Dream Booth. I was afraid on the beach of Eclipsiascus with the arrows flying around me, and even more so when Necor died. I was scared back on Ootyoce when I was lying there all alone with a broken leg. But this... this *thing* won't let me go. I'm more afraid of Gondra than I've ever been of anything in my whole life, and I can't stop myself! Bred, what am I going to do?"

Bred wanted to answer with a lighthearted line about her just having caught a slight case of "Jusser's Syndrome," but he refrained; it would only make her feel worse. "I don't know," he said simply. "Try to win the Hunt, I suppose."

She looked straight into his eyes. "There's something I've wondered about. Why did you first agree to enter the Hunt for me if you don't feel the same urge I do?"

He thought for a long moment. "Because you asked me to."

"That can't be enough of a reason."

Their eyes met. In the cool blue light of the Aquarium, they saw a warm eternity within each other. "Can't it?" Bred whispered.

They drifted in the Aquarium for hours, clasped tightly together as though each were the only thing in the other's universe.

* * *

There was no question about where the *Honey B* should land. Except for a small volcanic island near the equator the entire surface of Gondra was covered with water. The island was 20 kilometers long and five across at its widest point. The backbone of the island was a sharp ridge of mountains that ran the entire length, gradually sloping off into the sea at either end. At orbital altitude, no signs of life could be seen.

Their landing spiral took them around to the other side of the planet, and the island disappeared. For ten minutes, they could see nothing but an expanse of blue ocean beneath. Then the dot of the island reappeared on the horizon, noticeably bigger this time. They fell toward it at a controlled rate, and soon bits of color could be seen—the yellow green of vegetation.

At an altitude of 5,000 meters, Nezla suddenly called out, "instruments register the presence of another ship."

Captain Kirre was too busy guiding the *Honey B* down to react to this news, but Tyla immediately called, "What?"

"A grav-drive spaceship just took off from the island," Nezla elaborated.

"Can you contact them and find out who they are?" Bred asked, seeing his sister's anxiety.

"I'll try," Nezla said. Without pausing in her landing duties, she activated a couple of other controls. "Hello," she said, "this is the *Honey B* trying to contact whoever's down there."

"This is the *Hermes*," came a familiar voice. Bred and Tyla exchanged

glances. Jusser again!

"How could he have gotten here so quickly?" Tyla wondered aloud. "He only left Midway a couple of hours before we did."

"His ship's a lot faster than ours," Johnathan answered. "The *Hermes* was built for speed, while ours is a pleasure yacht."

Jusser's even voice continued over the radio. "Do not attempt to land, repeat, do not attempt to land! I just managed to grab myself an egg and take off before the dragons reached me. If you land anywhere on the island they'll destroy your ship."

Luj reacted swiftly to this news. She was only too aware of the amount of damage a horde of 15-meter-tall dragons could do to the *Honey B*, and she had no desire to see that potential realized. She quickly barked a series of orders. "Engineer, prepare to reverse to upward thrusting. Astrogator and Computer, give me course coordinates from here back to a holding orbit."

Pandemonium broke out in the cabin. Nezla yelled, "I can't do that, not in mid-descent. It'll blow out the generators!"

"The entire ship will be torn apart if we land near those monsters. I want upward thrusting, and I want it within 15 seconds."

Tyla shrieked, "No, it's a trick. Jusser's furious with me for jilting him. He wants to delay us. Go down. Bred, make her take it down."

"As captain of this ship, I am responsible for its safety," Luj snapped. "And I do not follow orders from Mistress deVrie."

Sora and Dru, meanwhile, were attempting to work despite the confusion around them. Sora had books of equations in front of her and was reciting them to Dru at a steady pace, barely waiting for the answers before continuing. She logged into her console the parameters needed to cover every contingency she could think of.

The *Hermes* was visible on the trivid screens, though the Flight Operations crewwomen were too engrossed in their own problems to notice it. Johnathan, however, was watching it with fascination. The other ship seemed to be coming straight at the *Honey B*. Suddenly he realized

what was about to happen. "He's going to backwash us!" he shouted.

Action at the front console froze at this, as Luuj sized up the situation. Then she went into action. Her hands were a blur as they darted over the instruments in front of her. The ship responded to her commands: the drive and the internal artigrav cut out, and suddenly they were falling. An instant later the artigrav was back on and the drive cut in once more. The ship soared upward. The small side motors shuddered, and the ship lurched to the left. Then a free-fall drop again.

"The ship can't take this," Nezla said, but Luuj was not listening. Her eyes and attention were focused solely on the screen showing the position of the other ship with respect to her own. Her face was taut, lips pressed closely together.

The ship continued to buck. Frantic, the passengers could only watch the trivid screens as the *Hermes* approached. A sudden jolt shook the *Honey B*. Tyla closed her eyes; her fists were clenched so tightly that the nails broke the skin of her palms, leaving shallow, bleeding cuts. Her heart felt as if it would either speed up or stop completely; she didn't even notice the pain in her hands.

Then the *Hermes* had passed them, and they were still alive. They had missed the backwash, with its deadly radiation, and had survived another obstacle. Tyla let out the breath she'd been holding, opened her eyes and slowly unclenched her fists.

"Generator Two's ready to go," Nezla said. Simultaneously, the entire ship shook with the force of a small explosion. "There it goes," she continued matter-of-factly. "Power reduced by 30 percent."

Luuj absorbed the entire situation in one glance. They were still hanging in the sky, the island tempting them fewer than a 1,000 meters below. "Astrogator, do we go up or down?" she asked.

"Down," Sora said without a moment's hesitation. "We'd never make it up."

Luuj set herself grimly to the task. She took the figures Sora gave her and set her own instruments accordingly. They continued down. The altimeter read 500 meters, 400....

"Number Four generator critical," Nezla reported, her voice a tense monotone.

Three hundred meters. Two hundred.

Explosion. "Generator Four gone," Nezla said superfluously.

The ship listed. Its orderly descent became an orderly fall. Luuj flicked switches that refused to respond. The island disappeared from below them, and it looked as though they would fall in the water. Nezla worked her controls, returning power to the captain's console again. Another switch flicked, and this time the ship answered. The island reappeared, 60 meters below.

They barely had time to see the island before they hit it. The jagged side of a mountain came up at them and very nearly speared the ship. They somehow missed the sharp, volcanic edge, and there was a sickening screech as the *Honey B's* durasteel hull scraped down the rough-hewn basalt mountainside. Small bushes in the path of its slide were uprooted as the ship, no longer able to defy Gondra's gravity, tumbled helplessly downward.

The ship hit a bump and stopped. Luuj took the opportunity to switch off all power. Everything went dark around them. The room filled with silent prayers as the entire party hoped the nightmare was over. The ship teetered, canted slightly to the left, and then lay still.

When she was certain that their fall had ceased, Luuj yelled, "All right, everyone out immediately. Outside!"

"Is there any danger of explosion?" Bred asked.

"Not much, but we'd better not be caught here when those dragons come to investigate. We'll have more maneuverability outside."

The nightmare of the fall was nothing compared to the nightmare of the evacuation. One by one, with Tyla and Bred in the lead, they climbed down into the blackness of the Core. Tyla's right leg was still a trifle sore from the injury on Ootyoce, and it hampered their pace almost as much as the darkness. They judged position by feel alone, a step at a time into the blackness, trying to remember exactly where each handhold was and which door led to the Emergency Exit. Tyla finally found it, opened it, and

limped down the small corridor to the exit. The others were behind her. When they were all in the air lock, Bred opened the outer door and they faced the sunlight of Gondra—a dazzlingly bright morning sunlight from the blue star the planet circled.

Dropping the ropeladder, they clambered down to the rocky ground. When they were all safe, they looked back. The crash had left a violent scar down the mountainside and had done the ship quite a lot of damage as well. The *Honey B* was resting on the slope, tilted at a ten-degree angle from the vertical. One fin was loosely dangling, and sections of the wall near the tail were bent in. Nezla in particular eyed the ship critically. "Considerin' the circumstances," she said, "it ain't in bad shape."

"This is no time for appraisals," Luuj reprimanded. "We must get away from here."

They had run about 20 meters downhill when Tyla suddenly stopped. "The Umpire!" she cried. "It's still back in the ship."

Bred grabbed her shoulders. "We don't have time for that now."

"But without it, we can't continue the Hunt," Tyla protested.

"I'll get it," Johnathan said, and before anyone could stop him he had raced back toward the ship. For a moment the rest of the party could only watch, dumbfounded.

When Johnathan had run up the ladder and disappeared inside the ship, Luuj turned to the others and shouted, "All right, we'll wait for him, but let's take cover while we're doing so. I don't want us standing out in the open."

Yellow green bushes profusely covered the hillside around them and made good hiding places. Tyla was still in a state of semishock; Bred grabbed her and dragged her into the bushes beside himself and Luuj Kirre. "Do you know where we are on the island?" he asked the captain.

"There was no time for surveying on the way down," Luuj said humorlessly. "I hope we're at least several kilometers away from the main mountain where the dragons' lair is supposed to be, so that it'll take them some time to get here. They're certain to investigate something like this."

Tyla merely stared at the wrecked ship. Her lips moved silently, but no sounds escaped.

Five very anxious minutes passed before Johnathan reappeared at the Emergency Exit with the Umpire beside him. The Umpire extended a set of hands from its ovoid body and together the android and the robot descended the rope ladder. Nezla and Vini let out a loud cheer, but the captain quickly hushed them. Johnathan and the robot reached the ground and hurried to rejoin the group.

Now, though, other sounds became evident. They heard a low rumbling, felt a trembling in the ground like a mild earthquake, only much more prolonged. No one had to tell them what those sounds meant: the dragons were coming. Nor did Luuj have to yell, "Run!"; they would have done so in any event.

They scrambled down the hillside as fast as they could, sometimes tripping and bruising themselves on the hard, uneven ground, but never pausing to look back. Tyla's right leg was throbbing, but she ran as fast as the rest of them. Their sole concern was to be as far away from the ship as possible when the dragons, angry at having had their nests violated, reached the ship in a killing rage. Nobody particularly wanted to face 15 meters—and who knew how many kilos—of incensed monster.

The vegetation grew thicker as they went down the mountainside and eventually became what could be considered small trees, a little over two meters tall with flat tops and yellow green leaves. The trees formed a regular forest, and the people from the *Honey B* ran through it, grateful to be hidden from view.

At last the surge of panic left them and one by one they dropped to the ground to regain their breath. The trees not only hid them from the view of the dragons but kept them from seeing the reptilians as well. They could no longer even see the ship or hear the rumbling of the dragons. Drenched in perspiration, they lay stretched out on the ground in the shade of the trees. Tyla's leg seemed to hurt more than when she'd originally broken it.

"How far do you think we ran?" Bred asked between gasps.

"Maybe a kilometer, maybe two," answered Luuj.

"We'll have to get back to the ship soon," Tyla said. "Everything we have

is there."

"I turned the auxiliary power back on when I went in," Johnathan told them. "Enough so the food won't spoil and the Aquarium won't stagnate."

"Good thinkin'," Nezla said.

"The Rose and the stoney are back there," Tyla said between stabs of pain. "We've got to go back for the...."

"No!" Luuj snapped. "For once think about something besides your damned Hunt. We can't go back to the ship for at least a day, possibly more. The dragons are up there now. I don't know how great their intelligence is, but they might realize there are people connected with ships, and since they won't find any, they might suspect we're still on the loose. I'm assuming they'll keep an eye on the ship, at least for a while. We cannot go back there yet."

"Luuj is right," Bred told his sister more gently. "It wouldn't be too smart. The stoney and the Rose will be all right for the meantime, unless the dragons have actually torn the ship apart, in which case..." His voice trailed off awkwardly. He'd been about to say, "In which case, we'll never leave here anyway," but decided that that would do nothing to improve his sister's morale. Instead, he left the sentence dangling and turned to his captain. "You're in charge now. What do we do?"

"We need food, water and shelter," Luuj answered. "Not necessarily in that order. Water and shelter are the most immediate concerns. That sun is hot and we're near the equator, which means we'll be dehydrating; we'll need a good supply of fresh water. There ought to be some around, judging from the amount of vegetation. And we'll need a place where we can be safe from the dragons—perhaps a cave big enough for all of us but too small for the dragons to enter. Food can come later; if necessary, we can raid the ship for it. Right now, most important are water and shelter."

"Okay," Bred nodded, "that sounds good." He looked down at his sister, who was obviously still in pain. "Are you all right?"

Tyla hesitated. "I... I'm not sure."

Vini moved over quickly and probed the leg with deft fingers as Tyla winced. "Well, it didn't break again," she said. "It's probably just sore

from too much stress."

"Why don't you stay here with her?" Bred told the doctor. "The rest of us can split up into teams and look around. I'll go with Luuj, and Sora and Nezla can team up as usual. Let's see, that leaves Dru and Johnathan. We all split up and meet back here in three hours. Remember, we're looking for water and a cave, okay?"

* * *

Bred and Luuj walked to the right, paralleling the line of mountains because, as Luuj pointed out, their chances of finding a cave might diminish the farther down the hillside they went. The forest stretched ahead of them as far as they could see, but the island was relatively noiseless. Apart from their own footfalls, the only sounds they heard were the chirpings of beetles. Except for an abundance of insects, they saw no animal life at all.

They found nothing and eventually returned to the original site to find the others awaiting them with good news. Sora and Nezla had been successful in their search. They had gone off to the left and slightly uphill and found a brook within half an hour's walk. Tracing it farther uphill, they discovered that it spouted from an opening in the mountain. The opening had been just big enough for them to crawl through, which they did. Less than three meters from the entrance, the tunnel broadened out and became a full-sized cave, easily large enough for eight people and a robot to live in for as long as necessary.

The news gladdened everyone except Tyla, who had fallen into a state of apathy. But her leg was feeling well enough to walk on again, and the entire party followed the two successful explorers back to the site of the cave. The air inside the cave was marvelously cool, and they celebrated their new home by splashing the clear, fresh water on their faces.

With a base to operate from and their thirsts quenched, they began to feel the hunger that had been accumulating during their long, strenuous day. The sun was preparing to set, however, and Luuj forbade anyone to look for food, deciding that a night of hunger might be preferable to facing the potential dangers of the island in the dark. Their spacer uniforms would keep them warm if the night became cool, and they sat around on the ground outside the dark cave and talked in the dying sunlight.

Tyla finally voiced the question in all their minds. "How long are we going to be trapped here on Gondra?"

All eyes turned to Nezla who, as engineer, was the person responsible for the maintenance of the ship. "That depends on a lot of factors," she said slowly.

"You said the ship wasn't in too bad shape," Tyla prodded.

"I also said 'under the circumstances.' A couple of blown generators can be fixed. We always stock plenty of spare parts, so that's no problem. With me and the captain and Johnathan workin' on it, we could have them two generators fixed in a day. But the generators ain't the real problem. One fin is nearly ripped off, there are dents in the hull, and the ship's canted at a ten degree angle from the vertical. The dents in the hull may have caused leaks in the skin, or damage to some other equipment. Without that fin properly aligned, the ship won't fly straight and we couldn't control her. And the *Honey B* can't take off safely if it's tilted at an angle of more than five degrees."

"In other words," Sora said, cutting to the heart of the matter, "we can't take off again."

Tyla gasped, and Nezla added sardonically, "Not unless we can find us a spaceport drydock, a team of experienced ship repairers, and a crane. I don't think it's too drummin' likely that we will, and I'm preparin' myself for a very long stay."

"But the lifeboats..." Tyla protested.

"The lifeboats ain't equipped with interstellar drive," Nezla explained, shaking her head sadly. "They can't go into hyperspace; they were made just for intrasystem travel. Of course, the *Honey B* was never designed as an exploratory ship, and the guys who built it never thought it would be visiting uninhabited systems. We could go to other planets in this system, but that's it."

"There are two other planets in this system," Sora volunteered. "The one closest is a ball of molten slag, even hotter than Hellfire. Even Johnathan couldn't live there. The other one is a gas giant. We're better off here. The nearest known inhabited system is more than two parsecs away. At top speed the lifeboats would take several generations to reach it,

even if they could hold enough food and air, which they can't."

"What about sending a radio message?" Tyla said, grasping at a faint hope.

"That could work," Nezla said. "If we aimed a beam at the nearest system, and if they just happened to have their most powerful radio telescope pointed precisely in our direction, they might be able to pick up a signal as weak as ours would be. And then, since radio waves travel at the speed of light, we'd be rescued in a mere seven years or so. Of course, if those people happened to miss our signal, the odds become increasin'ly less that people farther away would pick it up... and increasin'ly less than nothin' is drummin' small. Personally, I think the chances are much better that some ship'll find this place accidentally, but there's no tellin' when that could be."

"You're forgetting," Bred pointed out to his sister, "that there simply is no method of interstellar communication other than putting a message aboard an interstellar ship."

"And if we had an interstellar ship," Sora concluded, "we'd use it ourselves and we wouldn't need to send a message."

"I... I was just making a suggestion," Tyla said weakly. She curled up into herself and took no further part in the conversation.

"Well," Bred said, trying to be as lighthearted as possible, "if we're going to be stuck here indefinitely, we'd better make sure we know what we're doing. We've already settled the first two important questions: we've got a good supply of water and the cave to keep us safe. I suppose that brings us to food."

Luj nodded. "It's possible that some of the trees and bushes have edible fruits and berries; Doctor Curdyn will have to run tests on everything to be sure. As for meat, it's difficult to say. I haven't seen any animals so far. Has anyone else?"

"No," Nezla said. "Nothin' but them drummin' bugs."

Vini's eyes narrowed. "That's strange," she muttered to herself and withdrew into a pensive mood. She would not elaborate on her remark.

"Well," the captain continued, "there may be fish in the ocean that we can eat. And, of course, there's the food in the ship itself; but I'd like to use that as sparingly as possible because, as has been pointed out, we might be here for a very long time... perhaps the rest of our lives."

"There are other matters of importance that will have to be taken care of. Toilet facilities, for one. I'd like to see where this brook leads before we start using it as our wash; for tonight, at least, we can use the bushes. Our spacer uniforms are supposed to last a lifetime; we may end up testing their durability. As for preparing food, I see no alternative but to use open fires. There's a risk in this, of course, because the dragons might see the smoke and hunt us down, but unless we intend to eat our food raw it's a chance we'll have to take. As for the dragons themselves—"

"Why don't we talk about the dragons in the morning?" Bred interrupted. "We've done more than enough for today and I, for one, am bone-tired. I'm going into the cave to sleep."

That sentiment met with general agreement, despite Luuj's feeling that survival was something that should be discussed immediately. The crew of the *Honey B* had endured too much in the past ten hours and welcomed the chance to rest. After the necessities were taken care of, they all climbed into the cave and stretched out on the stone floor. Within minutes, nearly the entire party was asleep.

* * *

Johnathan awoke in the middle of the night. He felt disoriented before he remembered the events of the day. The inside of the cave was pitch dark, with only a meager light penetrating from the outside. Wondering what could have awakened him, he cocked his head to listen. After a moment, he heard it—a very faint sound of sobbing, scarcely audible over the collected breathings of the cave's inhabitants and the sound of the rushing brook. Moving quietly so as not to disturb the others, he made his way to the mouth of the cave to find out the cause of this noise.

Two of Gondra's three moons hung suspended above the horizon, and one of them was bright enough to give a modicum of illumination. In this cold moonlight, the hillside was a pale photograph of its daytime self. He tried to see where the sound had been coming from; it had stopped momentarily, and he thought he'd lost it, but then it picked up anew. He saw the back of Mistress deVrie. Some twenty meters away, where the

brook entered the forest, she was sitting on the ground, crying. He had a moment of indecision, then began walking slowly toward her.

She did not turn around at the sound of his approach but made an effort to stop her sobs. "Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me."

She recognized his voice. "Oh." Her tone was cold, but she did not attempt to drive him away. Silently, he sat down beside her. "I suppose you expect me to thank you for getting the Umpire out of the ship," she said woodenly.

"No, no thanks are necessary. I want to win this Hunt too, you know. My people are counting on me." He paused, wondering what to say next. When she didn't reply, he continued. "In fact, it's beginning to look as though you and I are the only ones who really do care about winning. Bred's just in this because you blackmailed him—"

"Bred wants to win, too!" Tyla insisted.

"Do you really think he cares about his family honor? You must know him better than I do; do you suppose he'd be grief-stricken if we lost? I doubt it. And the crew is just hired help. They're nice women, and smart, but they're in this for the payroll. Face it, this Hunt only matters to the two of us, so we might as well be friends."

Tyla remained silent, and Johnathan wet his lips.

"As one friend to another," he went on, "I was wondering why you were crying."

"I enjoy it," Tyla shot back. "It's fun. Sometimes I do it five or six times a day."

"It's about the Hunt, isn't it?"

"What Hunt?"

Johnathan strained to keep his temper. He had already become angry with Tyla once before back on Ootyoce and was determined not to do it again. "You know what Hunt. Do you really believe this is the end of

everything?"

"Yes! I... I tried to explain it to Bred, but he wouldn't listen. I had a feeling of doom the minute I learned we had to come here. This is where our parents died during the last Hunt, and this is where we're going to die. It's like Destiny or something, and there's no use fighting it. We're going to die here one way or another, and all this talk about surviving for years is only prolonging the agony. First Jusser tried to kill us..."

"He tried to kill me, too," Johnathan interrupted, "and I'm still around."

'... and then the crash nearly killed us," Tyla went on, ignoring his remark. "Then came the dragons and we barely escaped. Now, if we're lucky, we have the opportunity to die 'natural' deaths 70 years from now. And there's nothing we can do about it! Nothing!" She pounded the ground with her fist. "It's so unfair. I could have won; I should have won. But here we are, stuck here for the rest of our lives, and anything we do just prolongs the inevitable."

Johnathan put an arm tentatively around Tyla's shoulders, expecting to be rebuffed. To his surprise, she leaned back against him. "I think that's the wrong attitude," he said as gently as he could. "I'm not giving up on this adventure yet. I consider myself extremely lucky so far. I didn't get hit by any arrows on Eclipsiascus, Jusser tried twice to kill me with backwash, and I survived the crash here. Who knows? We may yet find a way off this planet."

Tyla sniffled some more. "You heard what Nezla said. The ship'll never take off again."

"Not the *Honey B*, no. But the Hunt is still going on, don't forget. A dragon's egg was on Jusser's list as well as ours. Maybe it'll be on someone else's, too. When they come, we'll be rescued. Either we can go with them as I went with you or we can send word through them that we're here and need rescuing. Either way we'll be saved."

"You're a hopeless idealist," she said, sniffing back the last of her tears. "Just like my brother."

"Perhaps. I'm not old enough to know any better." She felt so helpless and warm in his arms, so in need of comforting, that he leaned over and

kissed her forehead. Her eyes closed and her neck bent backward, and he suddenly found himself kissing her lips. They were unresisting and, as he tightened his arms around her slender body, her lips parted. Her own arms were twining gracefully around him, and she pressed her mouth more closely against his own.

He leaned backward against the ground, pulling her down on top of him. The movement startled her. He felt her body stiffen as she realized what she was doing. Her mouth struggled to pull away from his and, after a moment, succeeded. Using his chest she pushed herself back up into a sitting position. Her eyes were opened wide, now, and she was staring at him in horror.

"Tyla," he said, realizing as he did so that this was the first time he'd called her by her first name, "I..."

"Get away from me," she spat venomously. Her whole body was trembling. "Get away from me and stay away, you... you *thing!*"

"But I only...."

It was no use. Tyla rose up and ran away to the left. As he watched her disappear behind some bushes, his own emotions were in a turmoil. What had he been trying to do? Comfort her? That, certainly, but there was something more inside him and he didn't know precisely what it was. Living was such a complicated business, and he'd had so little experience at it. Every time he thought he knew what he was doing, something else would happen, and he ended up making a mistake. He had only been trying to make Tyla feel better and had wound up making her feel worse. No wonder she hated him so intensely.

He discovered, to his surprise and chagrin, that there were tears in his eyes. He supposed they were tears of self-pity. Labeling them, however, did little to alleviate what he felt, and that only made him angry at himself. With a heavy grunt, he picked himself off the ground and started walking alone down the hillside into the forest.

Up at the entrance to the cave, Bred crouched, watching the scene play itself out. The look on his face was something more than his normal expression of casual disinterest.

* * *

Johnathan had not returned to the cave by the time daylight peeped through the opening, awakening the party. Tyla had rejoined them and curled up in one corner; she awoke with the rest, as though nothing whatsoever had happened during the night. Bred made no mention of the scene he had witnessed and merely commented on Johnathan's absence. "I wonder where he went," Nezla said.

"Probably thought he could do better on his own and deserted us," Tyla answered cruelly. "I never did like the cheap little andie."

The other women looked at her, surprised at her vehemence. Nezla opened her mouth to make a nasty retort, but Bred intervened. "I suppose the first order of business this morning is to find some food," he said.

The mere mention of food was enough to remind them of their empty stomachs. They had eaten nothing since breakfast of the previous day, and their activities in the meantime had generated an intense hunger. Any thoughts of Johnathan were quickly put aside.

Luj took command again. "The best bet would be to do what we did yesterday—split up into groups to look for something edible. Don't eat anything yourself though, no matter how hungry you are. Just make a note of where it can be found and bring a sample back here for testing."

They went outside and were about to start searching when they caught sight of Johnathan. He was lower on the hill, climbing up to the cave. He waved cheerily when he saw them. Bred gave a quick glance at his sister. Tyla's fists were clenching and unclenching, and her mouth had an anxious look.

As Johnathan came closer, they noticed that he was carrying an armload of small objects, and when he reached them, they could see that the objects were various kinds of fruit. "Hi," he greeted them. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd do a little exploring on my own."

"Where did you find those?" Luj asked.

"Oh, all over. They grow on trees down by the shore. They're delicious."

"You ate some?" the captain questioned sharply.

"Yeah, well, someone had to. The only lab we have is back on the ship,

and we're not going there just yet I figured I was the most expendable one here, so I acted as guinea pig."

"How long ago did you eat them?" Vini asked.

"Four hours."

"All right," Vini declared. "Everyone keep their eyes on Johnny. If he goes into convulsions and dies, we know we've got four hours to get back to the ship and find some antidote. Other than that, I give my blessings to this meal."

Luuj had been about to add a cautionary note, but it was too late—everyone had already begun eating. The fruit had a hard skin, but the inside was soft and juicy. It tasted like a cross between an apple and a pear. The crew ate ravenously, their table manners no better than Nezla's. Afterward, they all agreed that while it was not the most elegant meal they'd ever had, it was certainly the most welcome.

When she'd eaten enough to appease her appetite, Vini turned to Johnathan. "Tell me, while you were out last night, did you happen to see any animals about?"

"No, none at all. Why?"

"Very strange," Vini muttered.

"You look like you're wrapped up in something," Bred told the doctor. "Would you care to explain it to the rest of us?"

"There's something very peculiar about this island," Vini elucidated. "The only animals that live here are the bugs and the dragons."

"So?"

"So what do the dragons eat?" She paused to let the idea sink in. "We're talking about enormous monsters 15 meters tall. It takes a lot of energy to run something like that. They must have appetites to match their size, but there's nothing around here for them to eat."

"Maybe they're planet-eaters," Nezla suggested.

"With teeth and claws? Remember, they tear ships apart. Sharp,

rending claws and fangs are not standard equipment on herbivores."

"Maybe they eat insects, then," Nezla said, revising her hypothesis.

"That's even less likely. For one thing, they wouldn't need the claws and fangs for that either, and for another they're too high off the ground. The dragons would have to crawl around to find their food. And even if they did, I doubt whether there's enough insects on this entire island to feed one dragon for a day, let alone a herd of them for an indefinite period."

"Maybe they eat fish," Sora suggested.

Vini sighed. "That was the only answer I could come up with, and I'm not happy with that either. From what I've heard about them, the dragons are too adapted to land to be totally dependent on the ocean for their food. And speaking of adaptation, that leads us directly into another question: where did the dragons come from?"

"From eggs, I presume," Bred wisecracked. Vini shot him a dirty glance and continued.

"Look at the situation we have here. The island is populated by tiny insects, maybe one and one half millimeters long, and then the next largest creature is ten thousand times that size. There are no intermediate steps, and I refuse to believe that the dragons evolved from the insects—evolution doesn't work in such large quantum jumps. They couldn't have just emerged from the sea one day, either; as I said, they're too well adapted to land. There would have to be something in between, which in turn would have branched out into several species, one of them, the dragons. But where are the others?"

"Maybe the dragons ate them all," Nezla suggested.

"Every single one? I can't buy that. If the dragons were eating their cousins into extinction, their own numbers would have decreased until the system balanced out. That's called ecology. And if the dragons were eating the other animals before, what are they eating now that all the others are gone? We're right back to the first question again."

She shook her head. "That's what has me running in circles. Everything I can remember from my biology classes tells me this situation is impossible. I mean, the stoneys were the largest animals on Ootyoce, but

there were plenty of others from them to have evolved from and lots of vegetation for them to eat. But the dragons simply do not logically fit into the pattern of this island."

"Master Benj, the Science Officer aboard the *Explorer*, was a halfbreed from Hephaestus," Sora commented. "As you know, they're big on logic there. I recall that Benj died a particularly gruesome death, and his very last words were, 'But that's not logical!' " She paused to let her words take effect. "Sometimes an illogical answer makes more sense. Maybe the dragons came from somewhere else."

Vini looked up sharply. "Yeah, that might be it. At least part of it. It would explain the evolutionary problem. But it still doesn't tell us what they eat, and it raises a million more questions. Who brought them here, from where, and why, when, how, and where are those 'bringers' now? It's questions like these that are driving me crazy."

"I know how we might find some answers," Johnathan said. "During my wandering last night, I found what I think are the dragons' main caves."

Everyone was instantly alert. "Where?" Luuj demanded.

"About three kilometers from here, at the north end of the island. I saw one enormous opening that must be the main one, and also some side tunnels. I didn't go in, since I thought this was something we should all discuss before any action is taken. But if we really want to know more about the dragons, we can investigate their caves."

"We have more important things to do," Luuj said. "There are millions of details to attend to if we are to survive here. And going right into the monsters' lair is a suicidal notion at best."

"Well, suicidal or not, Cap, I'm going in there," Vini said. "There are just too many things I have to know about these dragons. Think of it as research; the more we know about them, the easier it'll be to avoid them."

"I'm going too," Tyla spoke up suddenly. "We still need a dragon's egg."

"Don't tell me you still think we have a chance in the Hunt," Nezla said.

"We certainly won't if we don't get that egg," Tyla pointed out. "If

there's any chance at all, I'm willing to take it. And besides, what else have we got to do that's any better?"

Luuj was about to reply with a detailed list, but Bred cut her off. "I suppose that means I'll have to go with you," he said, "since I'm the official entrant. And the Umpire will have to come, too."

"You won't keep me out of the expedition," Nezla exclaimed, and Sora joined in with a "Me, too."

Bred turned to the captain. "Well, Luuj, I guess we're going to have a dragon-hunting expedition. You can stay here if you like and tend to some of the survival details. I suppose Dru will stay with you..."

Dru, normally quiet and withdrawn, spoke up. "I... I would like to go along."

Surprised, Bred looked at her. Dru was always such a homebody that he'd taken it for granted she would stay behind. And it was exceedingly unusual for her to speak without being directly addressed. "Why, Dru?" he asked.

"It's... I cannot explain it, I dare not hope... I would just like to come along, if I am welcome."

"Of course you're welcome," Bred said quickly. "You're as much a member of our group as anyone else."

Luuj fidgeted, annoyed. "Well, if everyone else is going, there's no point in my staying here alone. I might as well go, too."

"Fine," said Bred jovially. "We'll probably have a lot of time on this island—we can take care of the necessities tomorrow. Today, let's see what's happening."

Taking the Umpire with them, they set off jauntily through the forest. The morning sun quickly became hot and the air around them grew sticky. Johnathan led them along the hillside, moving north toward the main peak of the island. Bred noticed with relief that his sister was showing signs of emerging from her depression, although she stayed to the rear as far from Johnathan as possible. Perhaps it was the thought of obtaining the next item on the list that improved her spirits. *Anything*

that helps is good, of course, Bred thought. But I hope she isn't getting her hopes up too high.

After about an hour of walking, Johnathan called a halt. "We're almost there," he said. "From now on we have to be especially careful."

They advanced more slowly. The trees thinned out and eventually disappeared. In front of them stretched a broad beach reaching from the ocean to the face of a sheer cliff about 250 meters high. An enormous entranceway—100 meters high and 40 wide—was carved in the front of the cliff.

"It's perfectly rectangular!" Luuj gasped.

"You're right," Johnathan said. "Last night in the dark I couldn't make it out exactly; I just knew it was a big opening. But you're right, it is perfectly rectangular."

"Does... does that mean the dragons are intelligent?" Tyla asked.

"Maybe," Johnathan answered. "They're awfully big; they must have large brain capacities."

"But remember," Vini pointed out, "back on Earth the prehistoric *Tyrannosaurus rex* was as big as these dragons, but its brain was the size of a medium-grade ball bearing. Head size is not always an indication."

"It's still spooky," Nezla said, unable to take her eyes off the immense doorway.

"You mentioned side entrances," Luuj said to Johnathan.

"Yes. They're over this way." He led them cautiously toward the base of the cliff, then headed back in the direction they had come from. As they moved along the side of the cliff, the auxiliary openings came into view. Though less impressive than the main entrance, they were still large enough to accommodate the enormous bodies of the dragons. At 20 meters high and eight meters wide, they were also perfectly rectangular. There were two of them, 50 meters apart.

"I vote we go in through one of these," Nezla said. "They ain't exactly people-sized, but I'd feel like a drummin' bug crawlin' through that big

tunnel."

The rest of the party agreed. Now that Johnathan had shown them the way, Luuj took command and led them into the cavern. Inside, the walls were completely smooth, carved out of the natural rock and polished to perfection. Outside light penetrated to a certain degree, but the cavern would not have been dark even without it. Light suffused from somewhere, though the humans could see no sources of indirect lighting.

Their footsteps seemed to ring through the huge corridor like peals of thunder, no matter how quiet they tried to be. They felt a definite sense of trespass growing within them, and lump of knowledge settled in their stomachs—knowledge that these dragons could be no mere beasts Irving naturally on this island, that *someone* had carved these tunnels on this scale for the dragons' comfort, that at any moment their violation of this hallway would be discovered and they would be quickly dispatched for their impunity.

But nothing happened. Except for their presence, the corridor remained empty. The walls continued to loom around them, and the ceiling towered far above their heads. No one spoke; to have done so would have seemed like desecrating a tomb.

Seventy meters from the entrance, the corridor separated into two paths, both leading downward. Without hesitation, Luuj chose the one on the left; since they had no idea of where they were heading, one corridor was as good as another. As they descended, the artificial source of light grew stronger.

Ahead of them, the light became particularly intense. The corridor finally opened into a room, a large square chamber 60 meters on each side, with the ceiling still 20 meters high. Each wall was lined with rows of holes about a meter apart and extending from floor to ceiling. Across the room were two other doorways leading out.

And still no dragons appeared. The crew stepped into the chamber and immediately became aware of an increase in temperature. It was as though they had walked through an invisible gateway into an oven. The temperature in the corridor had been the same as outside—possibly 30 Celsius. Inside this room, it was more like 45.

"Whew!" Nezla whispered. "This must be their sauna bath."

"Or their hatchery," Sora said. "I'll bet there are eggs in those holes."

At the mention of eggs, Tyla suddenly came to life. She walked swiftly over to the nearest hole and peered inside. "It's empty," she said, disappointed.

Johnathan came over and checked the next hole. "This one's empty, too," he said. The two of them moved quickly down the wall, checking all the holes in the first row. Their search yielded nothing, but they did not give up. They continued checking the second row, then the third. Finally, near the far end of the third row, Tyla gave a little squeal. "I've got one," she said excitedly.

She reached into the hole and tried to pull her discovery out, but it was too awkward for her to manage by herself. Johnathan came over to help, and she was too excited to do anything but accept his aid. Together, they were able to reach inside and pull out the dragon's egg.

It was big, as befitted creatures the size of the dragons. The egg was ovoid, about 120 centimeters on its major axis and 75 on its minor axis. The shell was leathery but firm, tan mottled with yellow. It was surprisingly light for something that size, only about 15 kilos. Johnathan cradled it awkwardly in his arms.

"Okay, now we can go," Tyla started to say, but she was interrupted by a loud roar. The entire group, whose eyes had been riveted on the egg, looked up in terror.

Across the large room, a dragon had emerged from one of the other doors and had spotted them. With enormous strides, it crossed the open floor.

Their initial impressions were jumbled by panic. To talk about a 15-meter-tall creature is one thing, but to confront one is quite another. It was like being charged by an angry five-story building. Decidedly reptilian, with scaled, tough skin of a greenish brown, it walked erect on two thick legs, with a long tail for balance. A crested ridge ran the length of its back. Two long, almost snakelike arms ending in huge claws, dexterous and sharp, extended from massive shoulders. The face was flattened and bore enormous saucer eyes, but the most outstanding facial feature was the teeth. A single glance revealed that those were not the teeth of a herbivore. Monstrous rows of gleaming white fangs proved that

the dragons were unquestionably carnivorous.

The crew of the *Honey B* froze. There was nothing else they could do. Flight would have been impossible from something that size—its long strides could cover distance at a far greater speed than they could. As the dragon advanced, their fear congealed into certain knowledge that they were about to die, and that there was nothing they could do to avoid their fate.

Suddenly, Dru Awa-om-anoth stepped forward. She was hopelessly dwarfed by the oncoming creature, but she held her ground firmly. She threw back her head and yelled out something in a language that none of the other humans understood.

Then, to everyone's surprise, the dragon checked its advance. Hesitating, it seemed to waver in its tracks. It looked down at the tiny figure before it, the rage in its face replaced by uncertainty. From deep within its throat came a low rumble like an avalanche in an echo chamber. When it finished, Dru spoke again, still incomprehensible to her fellows. Her speech was long and involved this time, and there was even a trace of emotion on her face as she spoke. When she had finished, the dragon rumbled something in reply and then, to the astonishment of all present, turned around and left the room.

Dru turned to the perplexed humans. "There is no danger any more," she said simply. "They will not hurt us."

"How did you do it?" Bred exclaimed.

"It was not hard." Dru's face was positively beaming. These so-called dragons are the Great Ones of Nokre."

* * *

Their relief was so great that the crew of the *Honey B* was overcome with laughter. The sudden threat of death and the equally sudden reprieve had created emotion so great that it had to be expressed. Hysterical laughter was the result. Dru was obviously annoyed but Bred, wiping the tears from his eyes when he was able to speak again, managed to mollify her somewhat with an explanation of their behavior.

Another dragon—or perhaps it was the same one, for it was difficult for

the humans to distinguish between individuals in a species that large—came to meet them and, after a short talk with Dru, started leading them down a tunnel. Dru told Johnathan to replace the egg in its creche and began explaining as they followed the dragon.

"You all know," she said, "that the Nokreans who raised me had been brought up from the level of savagery to that of an agricultural economy inside of just a few generations by a spacefaring race they called the Great Ones. They revere the Great Ones, these dragons, as their moral and intellectual teachers. The Great Ones left Nokre suddenly and without explanation, but the Nokreans still adore them and hope they will someday return. The Nokrean holy language, in which all Songs are sung, is the same language spoken by the Great Ones. That is how I can communicate with them.

"I had seen pictures, drawings, of what the Great Ones looked like, even though they left Nokre several centuries before my time. Every Nokrean child is taught about the goodness of the Great Ones. When I heard descriptions of these dragons I thought they sounded very familiar, but I was unwilling to believe that they might actually be the Great Ones themselves. You must understand the strain I was under. From my earliest recollections, I knew the Great Ones were almost as gods, and I have hoped continually for their return. I did not ever think I would be lucky enough to meet them, but the hope was there, suppressed. Then we came here, and the things I heard about the dragons only made my longings worse. I did not dare believe that I would find them here. But I have." She went into what could only be described as rapture and would speak no more. Bred and the others, not knowing what to say under the circumstances, remained silent as they walked.

The path gently sloped deeper and deeper. Bred noticed the dragon's odor for the first time—it smelled of damp seaweed, conjuring images of lonely beaches under alien suns. Though strong throughout the corridor, the odor was not totally unpleasant.

At about 70 meters below sea level, the tunnel opened into an enormous cavern, bigger than anything the party had ever seen. It stretched for so many kilometers into the distance, they could not-see its other end.

The natural rock that had been cut away to hollow out the cavern had not been entirely wasted. Most of it had been converted into material for a

city of enormous buildings stretching almost to the ceiling of the cave. Bustling about everywhere were dragons, thousands of them, all looking purposeful and energetic. The immense scale of the city made the humans feel insignificant, and in fear of being trampled, they kept close behind the dragon who was guiding them.

They were led into a building and told to wait. As they did so, they admired their surroundings. The exteriors of the buildings had been nothing but bare stone, but inside was a different matter. The walls were painted lavishly in rich swirls of pastel colors. Though the designs did not appear to have a pattern, their overall effect was to make the room seem more spacious than it actually was. Furniture was scattered about, too big for the humans to use even if they could have fitted into the unusual shapes designed for the dragons' comfort. Doorways led to other rooms, but the humans knew this was no time for exploration.

After a short while, another dragon entered. He stared at them a moment before rumbling out a short speech. Dru answered him and turned to the rest of her party. "He says he is a leader among his race and he bids us welcome. He will answer any questions we have, but first he would like to know who we are and what we're doing here. Do I have permission to explain?"

Bred nodded, and Dru began to talk to the dragon. She spoke in a singsong voice, using the other's language without hesitation. Occasionally the dragon would interrupt with a question, and Dru would answer as best she could, before going on with her explanation. When she'd finished, she turned to Bred once more. "Now, are there any questions you would like to ask him?"

Bred thought for a moment, and Tyla took advantage of the silence to jump into the breach. "You said they were a spacefaring race. Do they have the facilities to repair the *Honey B*?"

The answer came back in a minute via Dru. "Yes, they have a complete drydock. Their own ships are many times larger than ours, so our repairs are comparatively minor to them. That was the reason they came over to the ship after we crashed—they wanted to see if we were all right."

The glow of life was returning to Tyla's face. "How soon can they have their repair work done?"

"He says one day," Dru answered. "Maybe two."

A whoop of delight went up among the crew members. They would not be doomed to spend the rest of their lives here, after all. Tyla was positively beaming at the thought of being able to continue with the Scavenger Hunt, and a slight look of greed played about her face that Bred was not entirely sure he liked. He also noticed Dru's expression. It had lost the earlier fire and rapture he had briefly seen; if anything, it now had a look of despondency to it, though because of her rigorous training she was trying hard to mask the emotion. He made a note to question her about it at the earliest opportunity.

"Tell him how greatly we would appreciate their repairing the ship for us," Bred said.

Dru relayed the message, then replied, "He says they would be happy to. He will ask some of his people to take the ship to their facilities at once. He points out, however, that they can't do any internal repairs that might be needed."

"That's all right," Nezla said. "Captain Kirre and Johnathan have enough technical training to help me get her back in shape. We can be workin' on the inside while they're workin' on the outside."

"I'd like to know whether this is their home planet," Vini said. "I don't see how it could be. And, for Space's sake, what do they eat?"

After questioning the dragon, Dru replied, "No this is not where they originally came from, though the entire race lives here now. They prepare their own food synthetically."

Vini gave an I-thought-so nod, then asked, "If this isn't their original home, then why are they all here? There are plenty of planets where they'd have more room to spread out."

"He says that that is a very long story, and in order to explain it properly there is something that we must see. If we're really interested, he says he'll take us there."

"I'm game," Vini said, and the rest of the company agreed. Dru relayed their sentiments to the dragon, and he led them out of the building into the city once more.

The first time they had seen the city, its size had impressed them. But now, knowing what they knew, they saw it with different eyes. As an underground colony, this cavern would be considered huge. But the dragon had said that this was the home of the entire race of dragons, that all the members of the race were living here. Taken in that perspective, the city shrank until it seemed terribly small. There could not have been more than several thousand inhabitants. Several thousand constituting an entire race? The number was pitiful. In answer to a question, Dru replied that the dragons were quite long-lived by human standards, their average lifespan being more than 1,000 terrestrial years. Their numbers did not need replenishing very often. Even so, the population was small for a race that had expanded into space.

As they walked, Bred was thinking. Somewhere in this situation, something was not quite right. An irritating detail jangled against his nerves, only he couldn't figure out precisely what it was. The facts as they were being presented now did not jibe with the facts as he had known them before, and the discrepancy was making him uneasy. Tyla was lost in the glow of the return to the Hunt, and the rest of the party seemed more interested in what they were about to see. Only Bred worried.

They traveled a short distance through the city and into another gently sloping corridor. As they strode down this, the dragon spoke to them and Dru translated. "You have wondered why my people are so few in number," the dragon said. "Up until a few centuries ago, we numbered several million. Most of them stayed at home, while a few thousand of us chose to roam the Galaxy, exploring and helping others where we could. The Nokreans were one of the races we helped. We had conquered our own aggressive drives long ago and had turned to science and philosophy for our challenges.

"Then a catastrophe happened. Our home planet was... invaded... by a force." Here, Dru paused in her translation. "The words 'invasion' and 'force' are not quite accurate," she explained. "The terms he is using are intentionally vague, and it is hard to translate that vagueness into Galingua. Anyway, this 'invasion' was not a material sort of thing, nor was it even from a known region. It came, if I understand correctly, from another universe.

"The invasion killed nearly everyone on the planet, but it took time. Weapons were finally devised to fight it, and the 'force' was pushed back

into the universe it had come from. But the Great Ones had been nearly wiped out. They decided to regroup and study the problem. The scattered members were summoned from wherever they happened to be—including Nokre—and they all decided to fight back against this menace. The only reason their race had survived was because it was so highly advanced; other races might not be so fortunate. And once this force gained a foothold in our Universe, it might not be so easy to dislodge.

"They searched and found several nexus points between our universe and the other. They shut down the one that existed on their own world, and have traveled here to shut this one down, too."

The end of the corridor opened into a dark cavern. All other chambers in this underground complex had been well-lit, but there was no artificial lighting ahead of them now. They walked forward with trepidation.

They found themselves standing on the lip of a chasm. The cleft in the earth was so wide that they could barely make out the other side, and below them...

Below them was nothing. Not the nothingness of space, where stars beam comforting messages of matter beyond one's present location. Not the nothingness of mere black, the absence of light. This was a nothingness that was the total absence of anything—no blackness, no light, no matter, no energy, no vacuum. A solid mass of insubstantiality. It burned at their brains like fire, pulled at them like gravity, repelled them like death itself. It was nullity in its complete essence.

The dragon rumbled, and Dru translated again. "This is a Gateway to the other universe, a universe beyond comprehension. Occasionally, the 'force' emerges from it and must be contained. This is what must be closed down. They've been working at it for almost two centuries, now, though how far they are from the completion of their work isn't known."

Sora had been standing next to Bred at the edge of the abyss. As Bred looked up, he saw that the astrogator's face had gone white and held an expression of fear he would have thought totally alien to her. Her whole body was trembling as if from intense cold. He was stunned. This was Sora, who usually slept through all but the most crucial of moments, who remained cool and aloof in her tower of self-confidence. The nullity they were witnessing was having a profound effect on them all, but for some reason Sora was on the brink of hysteria.

"Sora?" he said softly.

"No!" she shrieked suddenly. "No, no, no!" She broke away from the group and ran back into the corridor that they had come from.

The rest of the group was as surprised as Bred and could only stand around gaping. "Nezla, what's the matter with her?" Bred asked. As Sora's best friend, Nezla was the logical person to ask.

"I don't know," the engineer admitted. "I've never seen her act that way before."

Their guide rumbled down an inquiry as to whether their fellow was all right. "I don't know," Bred said, shaking his head. "Let's go see."

They walked back into the corridor. Sora was there, 15 meters from the entrance. She was standing with her body pressed tightly against the wall, as though she wanted to melt into it. Her fists clenched and unclenched against the smooth surface, and her body still trembled. Her breathing was in short, deep gasps.

"Sora," Bred said gently, "is something the matter?"

"It's... it's n-nothing," the astrogator said, bringing her breathing back under control. "I'll be all right."

"What happened?" Nezla asked.

"I said I'll be all right." Sora snapped. The action was so uncharacteristic that Nezla involuntarily jumped back a few steps. Sora noted her friend's reaction and toned her voice down. "Please, just leave me alone, I'll be fine. It... just startled me, that's all. I wasn't ready for it." Her breathing had returned to normal and she had almost stopped trembling, but her face was still ashen.

"I think we've seen enough of that Gateway," Bred relayed to the dragon. "Let's go back to the city."

Along the route back, Bred's worries grew. Everyone was falling into a bad emotional state. Dru had gone from rapture at the discovery of the dragons, to despondency at the thought of leaving. Luuj was still displeased at having her desire to keep the group back at the cave

overruled, even though the end results had been good. And now Sora's hysterical reaction to the sight of the inter-universal Gateway, totally unexplained—and, from the way she was behaving now, it would stay that way. She hadn't fully recovered from the shock—her walk was not the confident, flowing gait she usually affected. The only one who seemed to have definitely improved was Tyla, now that she thought she could continue with her precious Scavenger Hunt...

And that thought crystallized the problem gnawing at the base of his mind since they had come to the underground city. He now realized what the discrepancy was, and it was a major one. He simply could not reconcile these gentle, intelligent dragons with the ravaging monsters that supposedly had destroyed his parents.

"Dru," he said slowly, "ask the dragon if he remembers the Hunt 20 years ago—particularly any humans who died."

Dru did as she was told, and the answer was back in a minute. "Yes, he remembers it well. Twenty years is not a very long time for them. It was a terrible tragedy all around. Two groups of humans had come, and each had managed to steal an egg. Then, with the dragons in pursuit, both ships had taken off..."

"Both?" Bred asked quickly. Jusser had said that the deVries' ship hadn't gotten aloft when the dragons attacked. Tyla was watching Dru now with fascination.

"Yes, both. Then one ship had cut in front of the other, catching it in its backwash. The victim ship crashed. The dragons tried to save the crew, but they were unfamiliar with the alien physiology and couldn't do anything. The humans died."

"Bred," Tyla said in a voice that would have frozen hydrogen, "did you hear that? *He* did it, not the dragons. Ambic Jusser murdered Mom and Dad!"

* * *

They had dinner back in the ship, which several dragon workers had brought to the caverns. Considering the force of the crash, very little damage had been done to the *Honey B's* interior. Johnathan's act of turning on the auxiliary power had kept all the food fresh, and even the

delicate structure of the Aquarium had emerged unscathed. The stoney was still alive in the storeroom where they'd locked it up, but was famished from not having been fed in more than a day. Sora took care of feeding it while Nezla, Luuj and Johnathan worked on reconstructing the blown-out generators.

Back upstairs in the Rec Room, Bred wandered over and sat down next to Dru. "You've had a rather busy day, what with all this translating," he began.

"Yes, my throat is quite sore. I must ask Vini for some medicine "

"Yes, please do that. With a voice as tiny as yours, you've got to keep shouting to make yourself heard." He paused, wondering how to continue, then decided that the direct way was best. "You're unhappy, aren't you?"

"I shall be singing my Song of Unhappiness this evening, yes."

"Why? Is it about the dragons?"

Dru nodded. "Yes. I do not think you can understand how important this discovery is to me: For as long as I can remember, I have thought of them as the salvation of the Nokreans, and I, like all the others, have lived for the day when I would see them. And this is that day, possibly the most important in my life. And now that I am here, we are to leave almost immediately."

"Do you mean you'd like to stay?" Bred asked.

There were tears in Dru's eyes; she could not hold the emotion back. "Yes. I feel I belong with them, helping them in whatever way I can. I want to stay here."

"You'd be dreadfully alone," Bred pointed out. "The only one of your kind."

"I have been the only one of my kind all my life, wherever I have gone," Dru replied. "If that is going to be the case, then I might as well be the only one of my kind where I am most happy."

"I've tried to treat you well," Bred said, adjusting his glasses. He was torn between wanting to keep her on board and wanting her to be as

happy as possible.

"I know you have. This ship has been the happiest of my three worlds so far, and hardly an evening goes by that I do not sing my Songs of Gratitude and Love for you. But now something is pulling me, and I must bend with it. Here with the Great Ones is where I belong, and here I want to stay."

"Have you discussed your decision with the dragons yet?" he asked. "They might not be able to provide for you."

"No, I have not yet mentioned it to anyone but you. I wanted to have your permission."

"If this is what you really want, you have it," Bred told her. "It will make things difficult for us, of course, but your life is your own and always has been. I can't hold you back if you want to leave."

They both knew the difficulties the *Honey B* would face if Dru left. The ship had no computers for calculations, only small ones for maintaining the ship and storing information. They had always relied on Dru's fantastic mathematical abilities to perform the calculations necessary for astrogation. Without Dru, they would have to be done longhand, and might take hours or days. The ship would still fly, but the Hunt effort would be slowed down considerably.

"I will discuss this with the Great Ones," Dru said, "and I will think about it further. I shall let you know well before the ship takes off whether or not I will be coming with you."

"Fine," Bred said, rising. "That's all I can expect."

Their eyes met. "And I shall sing my Song of Love for you tonight," Dru added.

Bred found his lower lip quivering annoyingly. "Thank you," he said. "I love you, too." He turned quickly and left her to her thoughts.

He suddenly felt very old. He went across the Core to the Drawing Room, thinking to sit there alone for a while and restore his mental juices, but he found the room already occupied. Tyla was sitting with her legs crossed in one of the plush, padded armchairs, her upper leg bobbing

rapidly up and down, and her face contorted with barely contained fury. With a small mental sigh, Bred shifted gears and his mask went back into place. "Hello," he said. "Have you seen my sister anywhere? Pretty, cheerful, easygoing..."

"You're making jokes at a time like this?" Tyla asked icily.

"What better time is there? You need jokes most when you're most upset; you can do without them more easily when you're happy."

"Mom and Dad were murdered," Tyla said slowly. "Not killed accidentally by some dumb beasts, but deliberately murdered by a man who hasn't got a scruple to his name. And I nearly married the bastard! I can't see anything humorous in that."

Bred sat in a chair across from her. "I admit it's hard, Tillie, but you musn't let it get to you and warp your brain."

"It's already gotten to me. I can't let Jusser get away with it."

"It's something that happened 20 years ago. It's dead, buried. I loved Mom and Dad too, but 20 years is too long to cry. I've always disliked Jusser, for no better reason than that he's a pompous ass. Now I've got a better reason, and the dislike has turned to downright hatred. But what else is there for us to do?"

"We can accuse him of murder," Tyla said, a hard, bright glint in her eyes.

"Where? In what court? And with what evidence?" Bred shifted his position in the chair and took off his glasses to add emphasis to his words. "I seem to recall that recently, back on Ootyoce when you wanted to kill the stoney, you were arguing that there is no law in interstellar space away from human-occupied planets. You were right, you know. Human law can't touch Jusser for that, because he was entirely outside its jurisdiction. The only law here on Gondra is what the dragons impose, and they're not about to leave that Gateway to hunt down an alien murderer."

"I can take it to planetary courts," Tyla said stubbornly. "As deVries, we have enough power to force them to act."

"All right, suppose you do. What evidence do you have? The word of the

dragons, who may or may not come into court to testify. Jusser can always say it was an accident, that he didn't know the other ship was beneath him."

"Accidents seem to happen rather frequently around him," Tyla said bitterly.

"Granted. First Mom and Dad, then Johnathan, then us. And who knows how many other people he's pulled it on? But he can always say it was accidental, and no one can deny that for certain. And don't forget, Jusser may be *nouveau riche* instead of old aristocracy like us, but he can still muster a good deal of influence. I think you'd be wasting your time."

Tyla thought for a second. "I can try attacking him through Society. I can start telling people the real story. Maybe we can get him ostracized..."

Bred shook his head sadly. "Little sibling, I'm surprised at you. You know the workings of Society inside and out. You know they'd never do anything like that. Remember, Jusser didn't simply go up to Mom and Dad and stab them in the back. This was during the Scavenger Hunt—anything goes. All anyone cares about is who won, not how they did it. If Jusser had raped his great-grandmother to win, it would still have been all right. If you told people the real story, we'd both receive a lot of sympathetic clucking about what a shame it was that our parents happened to be in his way. Period. That's it and you know it. No action whatsoever would be taken against Jusser."

"But we've got to do something!" Tyla pleaded.

"The worst punishment for a man like that," mused Bred, "is humiliation. If we could beat him at the Scavenger Hunt..."

Tyla's eyes lit up. "You mean you'll finally stop obstructing me and help me win?"

"Well, I would like to see Jusser lose," Bred admitted. "I object to your term 'obstructing,' though."

Tyla wasn't listening. Her face seemed transformed by a malicious light that, to her brother, was positively frightening. "Fate," she said. "Destiny. Remember before we arrived here, I was telling you I had this feeling of Destiny about the Hunt? The feeling was right, but it was in the wrong

direction. We're not destined to die in this Hunt, we're destined to win it."

"You can't be serious," Bred said.

"Don't you think we can win?"

Bred shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't say that. But I don't think it's preordained or anything."

"Look at the facts. Everywhere we've gone, no matter what's gone wrong, something has helped us out and kept us going. We survived the Dreams, which only a couple of other persons ever have. When we got the Rose, Sora was shot, but she recovered. Nezla foiled Jusser's treachery and recaptured the ship. We were forced to take Johnathan aboard, but then he helped us get the stoney when my leg was broken. Then when our ship crashes here and it looks like we're marooned for life, Dru and the dragons save us. At every turn, something happens. No matter how bad our situation, circumstance always comes to our rescue."

Bred put his glasses back on and stroked his beard. "The only real coincidence was finding that these dragons were Dru's Great Ones. I think you're undervaluing the skills and efforts of my crew."

It was Tyla's turn to shake her head. "Don't you see, it's retribution. Jusser won last time by killing our parents. This time, we're going to beat him. It's our Destiny, and nothing's going to stop us. Nothing!" She brought her knees up to her chin and hugged them.

"Well, I wouldn't care to stake my life on that," Bred said. But his sister wasn't listening. She was too wrapped up in her dreams of glory to pay any attention to the real world. After a moment of silence, Bred decided to leave her to her fantasies. He got up and left the Drawing Room, wondering whether he could find Vini and interest her in some more intimate endeavors to relieve the tensions of the day.

* * *

The next morning the dragons began work on the exterior of the ship while Nezla, Luuj and Johnathan continued repairing the insides. Bred and the others went to talk to the chief dragon again. But they were in for a bit of a shock when they asked if they could have one of the eggs that were in the hatchery.

"Absolutely not," the dragon replied.

"Why not?" Tyla demanded. Her concept of Destiny would not allow itself to be thwarted by so trivial a thing as a 15-meter dragon.

"Our very survival depends on those eggs," was the answer. "As you have noticed, our race is not very numerous, nor are we extremely prolific. To add to our problems, a subtle form of radiation is being emitted by the Gateway. Its short-term effects are negligible, but in the long run it has a tendency to reduce fertility. There was a time when all those creches in the hatchery would have been filled; at present, less than 25 percent are occupied. That is why the hatchery is up near the surface instead of down here with us where we could guard it better; we wanted to keep the eggs as far away from the Gateway as we reasonably could. Each egg is vital to the survival of our species, and each is precious to us. We cannot allow them to be taken."

"We promise to take extra good care of it and to return it as soon as the Hunt is over," Bred said.

"Even so," said the dragon, "we cannot take that risk. The future of our race is at stake, and we dare not fail in our duty or else our Galaxy—perhaps our entire Universe—will be threatened by whatever lies on the other side of the Gateway."

Tyla was fuming. "They can't stop us," she said. "We're going to get one of those eggs, sooner or later."

"How?" Bred asked. "We're their guests, and it would be criminal for us to take one without their permission—especially after their help in repairing our ship. And besides, they know we want one; they'll be extra alert to make sure we don't steal it."

"I'm not going to let them stop us," Tyla repeated ominously.

"You don't have to," came Sora's voice. While Bred had been talking to the dragon, she slipped away from the group unnoticed and was now returning from the direction of the ship.

"What's that in your hand?" Bred asked her.

"An egg from the ship's stores. It's all we need."

"But it's a hen's egg, not a dragon's egg," Tyla protested.

"It will be," Sora said mysteriously. She turned to the little metal robot at Bred's side. "Umpire, I want you to be official witness to a ceremony."

"All right," agreed the Umpire.

Sora walked over to the dragon. "Dru, translate this for me. I, Sora Benning, as a representative of the human race, do hereby present to this dragon the gift of one egg as a token of eternal friendship. Afterwards and forevermore, this egg is to be the sole property of this dragon. Now, Dru, tell the dragon to let me place this on his palm."

At Dru's instruction, the dragon lowered one enormous "hand," and Sora placed the egg squarely in the center. The small, white ovoid was almost lost in the expanse of greenish brown, scaled skin. "Now Bred," she said, "just take it back and you will have a dragon's egg."

Bred did so and showed the egg to the Umpire. "Have I now fulfilled the condition of the Hunt?" he asked.

"That is not a dragon's egg," the Umpire stated flatly.

"Sure it is," Bred said. "You just witnessed the ceremony where title to the egg was given to the dragon. This belongs to the dragon and is therefore a dragon's egg."

"The original intent," argued the Umpire, "was that you obtain an egg laid by a dragon."

"But that's not what you said," Tyla joined in. "You said, and I quote, 'a dragon's egg.' And we've done that."

"You are attempting to take advantage of an ambiguity in the language," the Umpire protested.

"You bet your sweet metal ass we are," Vini drawled.

Bred fidgeted with his glasses. "We did not create the ambiguity. If you meant an egg laid by a dragon, then that's what you should have said."

"Then I say it now. The object you are to obtain is an egg laid by a dragon."

"You can't do that," Tyla objected. "It's against the Rules of the Hunt to alter the list of objects in any way—and particularly after one has been successfully obtained."

The Umpire whirred softly. "You are treading on very dangerous ground," it said. "Twice, now, you have obtained objects that do not abide by the original intent of the planners."

"Do you agree that this egg fulfills the requirements *as stated by you earlier?*" Bred asked firmly.

The Umpire whirred some more. Clearly, the little bit of personality it was endowed with did not want to allow this mockery of the Hunt Rules to succeed. Nevertheless, those very same Rules constrained its behavior. "Yes," it finally said. "I agree."

Everybody let out deep breaths. The expression on Tyla's face was triumphant. She looked at Bred and silently mouthed the word "Destiny." Bred frowned. Obviously, this incident only reinforced his sister's belief that some force had ordained them to win the Hunt. *Oh well, let her believe it, he thought. If it makes her feel better, then I guess it's all right.*

He went over to Dru to talk with her privately. "Have you made up your mind yet what you're going to do?"

"Yes," she said "I have talked with the dragons and thought very hard. They tell me that they will be able to make room for me here."

Bred did not even try to hide the disappointment he felt:

"However," Dru continued, "my love and gratitude for you will not let me desert you when you are in such a desperate situation. I have decided that I will go with you for the rest of the Scavenger Hunt if you will promise to bring me back here when it is over."

Bred picked her up in his arms and gave the startled Dru a passionate kiss. "Of course I'll promise," he laughed. And to himself he added, *Maybe there's something to this Destiny bit, after all.*

CHAPTER FOUR

Once more, the *Honey B* was back out in space, in an orbit circling

Gondra. The repairs had been completed quickly. The dragons, working on what was to them a scale model ship, finished the exterior work in just less than a day. In that time, Nezla, Luuj and Johnathan had jury-rigged the generators so that the ship was in flyable condition. Any further repairs could be easily done once the vessel was under way.

When Bred had asked the dragons if there was any favor he could do for them in return for their help, they had told him that they would like to get back the egg that Jusser had stolen. If it had not been too badly created, it still had a chance of hatching. Bred promised to ask Jusser as soon as the Hunt was over and warned the dragons that other contestants might be stopping by to steal eggs.

Now that they were back in the Hunt and safely in space, they turned to the Umpire to learn what their next item would be. Sora had a stylus ready in her hand to record the coordinates of their new destination. "AH right," she told the Umpire, "where do we go?"

"Minus 1,211; minus 0.1336; 0.7862; 4; 0.9138; 1.7096; current epoch," the Umpire intoned.

Sora had started scribbling down the numbers as the robot spoke them, but after the fourth one she suddenly froze. The stylus drifted from her limp fingers in the weightless environment of the cabin. Her face went white, and showed the same expression of terror it had in the dragons' cavern as she had stared into the Gateway. Her body began trembling uncontrollably, and she hugged herself tightly with her arms.

"Did you get all those numbers?" Luuj asked.

Sora was beyond hearing. Her eyes were wide, staring at some private horror that no one but she could see. Her head shook in a small gesture of denial and her lips moved silently. Then, without a word, she unstrapped herself from the couch and bolted from the Control Sector.

"Astrogator Benning, report back to your post at once!" Luuj called after her, but Bred soothed his captain.

"Take it easy on her. I don't know what's gotten into her, but she hasn't been quite the same since that experience on Gondra. Let's leave her alone for a while."

"But the astrogation must be done before I can set the course," Luuj pointed out.

"I'll do it," Johnathan said. "I'm not as fast as Sora, but I've had the training." He unstrapped himself from his seat in the passenger portion of the cabin and floated forward in the dark, starry void of the Control Sector to the Astrogation console. He stared at it for a moment, familiarizing himself with the layout of the controls, then he reached for Sora's book of formulae. He had the Umpire repeat the coordinates, which he jotted down before turning and working slowly with Dru.

"Umpire," Bred asked, "where is this place and what do we have to get there?"

"Colloquially, the location is known as the Vortex," the robot answered. "You must obtain a piece of flotsam from among the wreckage scattered through it. In view of your previous unorthodox procedures, I must add that the definition of flotsam is a piece of free-floating wreckage that existed within the Vortex's field before your ship arrived there."

"Bred, do you think there could be anything about the Vortex that would cause Sora to act that way?" Vini asked.

Bred nodded his head. "It's possible. She's behaving the same way she did on Gondra when she saw that Gateway. I wonder if there's any connection."

Within fifteen minutes, Johnathan and Dru had established the necessary course and notified everyone that the journey to the Vortex would take two weeks. Luuj set the ship's controls and the *Honey B* slipped securely into hyperspace on its way to the next destination.

* * *

A star such as Sol, with an average mass of about two trillion quadrillion kilograms, begins its life as an enormous cloud of diffuse gases; then gravitational forces condense it to the more compact shape of a star. It spends most of its life that way, in the main sequence, blissfully converting its hydrogen to helium. After a certain point, however, senescence begins to creep in; the star runs low on hydrogen and starts burning helium instead. Its temperature rises and its diameter expands—in other words, it bloats. It develops a small, hot core of helium

surrounded by a very large envelope of cooler gas, and is once again stable. But even this state of affairs cannot last forever, because as the burning of helium only makes the core of the star hotter, temperature and pressure gradually build up until an explosion inevitably results. The star blows off its outer shell of gas and contracts as tightly as possible. At this stage it is called a white dwarf star. Most of its mass has remained intact, but it is all packed into a sphere about the size of Earth. Needless to say, the density of the material is extremely high. In this, the twilight of its existence, the star will radiate feebly for billions of years, spending its remaining energy slowly until it finally decays into a worthless lump of matter known as a black dwarf.

That is the life history of a star with the mass of Sol. Earth's sun is typical as the Universe goes, and the vast majority of stars have similar masses. But there are some that do not.

A star with an initial mass of, perhaps, one and a half times that of Sol will burn more brightly and squander its energy at a much faster rate. It will evolve more quickly and die more quickly. After the last hurrah of its explosion, it will contract as did the average star, but because its mass is significantly higher, its own gravitational energy will pull it even more tightly together. The end result will be a ball perhaps 30 kilometers in diameter, with a mass half again as great as Sol's. With a density like this, matter cannot exist in its normal state and becomes degenerate. There is no room for electrons to circle their nuclei; instead, they are crushed together with protons to form neutrons. The end result is an object known as a neutron star. This does not happen very often, but often enough to make the phenomenon well-documented. Neutron stars are considered oddities of space.

Increasing the scale even more, a star with an initial mass of more than twice that of Earth's sun is uncommon, but still exists. When it dies, the explosion is truly cataclysmic. Then the bulk of the star begins the inevitable collapse. It shrinks right through white dwarf size without slowing down. It reaches the size of a neutron star and continues to diminish. Its tremendous mass pulls it in unmercifully; its gravity squeezes and squeezes the atoms that are by now neutrons until the crisis point is reached, beyond which matter and the Universe cannot tolerate each other.

Subatomic particles, while small, do have a finite size. In normal

matter, electrical forces exist that keep them well separated from one another. Even in neutron stars, the individual neutrons can only be packed together so tightly; tighter than this is impossible. The Universe is not equipped to handle it. Yet the gravitational force of the matter in a star this size is so strong that something has to give. What usually gives is the Universe.

For demonstration purposes, a universe may be visualized in two dimensions as a thin sheet of rubber stretched taut. If you placed on it a massive object representing a star—say, a pellet of lead—the rubber will indent around it, simulating the effects of gravity on any other object on the sheet. A more massive "star" will cause a bigger dent and have a greater effect on other objects. But if enough mass is concentrated in a small enough area, it will tear right through the sheet, leaving a tiny hole and striations around the hole's perimeter.

This is exactly what happens to one of these super-massive stars when it collapses. The remnant is called a "black hole." In this case the force has been so tremendous that it has torn through the fabric of space itself. The superdense matter has vanished completely, squirted out by its own gravity. This violation of Nature means that not only does matter not exist in that spot, but that space doesn't exist there either. The black hole becomes a point of singularity in an otherwise continuous universe.

One such black hole exists in human space. In fact, its location is in the path of the main shipping route between two well-settled planets. The effects of this singularity are felt not only in normal space, but in hyperspace as well—with the result that ships chancing to pass near it are caught in the insane maelstrom of impossibilities that exist for some distance around the hole. Before the hole was recognized for what it was and its effects were accurately charted, dozens of ships were destroyed. The region of the hole became known as the Vortex, and to this day wreckage of previous misfortunes drifts peacefully in orbit around the violent center of this cosmic catastrophe.

* * *

"I've got it!" Nezla exclaimed as she swam energetically into the Drawing Room.

Bred looked up blandly. "Well, see Vini about it before it spreads. These things can be serious."

Nezla glared reproachfully at her employer. "I mean I've found the answer to Sora's behavior, you drummin' nit."

They were five days out from Gondra, and Sora was still very much of a mystery aboard the ship. Since fleeing the Control Sector, she had not left her sleeping cabin and had opened the door only once a day for food. No one had heard a sound from her, despite several attempts by Bred, Nezla, Vini and Dru to start a conversation. Her closed cabin door was an enigma that caused much speculation among her friends.

"Let's hear it, then," Bred said.

"Well, I was doin' some research in the Library to find out all I could about the Vortex, since I'm goin' to be the one to rig up the specialized stuff we'll need. Anyhow, I found some historical stuff about it. The Vortex was a major astrogational hazard up until about 12 years ago, when it was finally charted in detail. Guess what ship did the mappin'."

Bred just shook his head, and Nezla continued impatiently, "The DSS *Explorer*. It was part of their program to investigate unknown things in the Galaxy. Anyway, accordin' to the book there was an accident while the *Explorer* was busy with this job—one of the lifeboats that had been specially modified to work in the Vortex exploded somehow, and the people inside it were thrown out. Most of them were picked up immediately, but one person drifted toward the center and almost fell into the hole. She was eventually picked up, but the book says she was in shock for a month after the ordeal."

"Sora?"

"It didn't say; all it said was a junior officer in the Astrogation section. But the timing would've been right; that was just about when Sora began workin' aboard the *Explorer*."

Bred considered. Nezla's findings would explain Sora's behavior. The drift into the Vortex, possibly with not much hope of rescue, would certainly have been a traumatic experience. Having taken a month to recover from the shock, Sora would have an understandable dread of the place. No wonder she'd run away when the Umpire started giving her the coordinates of the Vortex.

And her past unhappy experience might also explain the fear she had

shown at the Gateway on Gondra. Though apparently artificial rather than natural, it, too, was a hole in the Universe that led elsewhere. It might have looked similar to the black hole she'd almost drifted into, and hence brought back her painful memories and her panicked flight.

"Hm, I think you're right, that does explain it. She's got a phobia about the place."

"But what can we do about it?"

"Nothing." Bred shook his head. "You can't cure a phobia from the outside; only the person who has it can overcome it. She has to have a pretty strong reason for wanting to face it; failing that, the best method is to keep her away from what she fears. We can't do either. We have to go to the Vortex in order to get the object we need. All we can do is try to keep Sora's exposure to it at a minimum. We'll get the piece of flotsam and get out of there as quickly as possible. Maybe once we've left the Vortex, she'll snap out of it and return to normal."

"I feel so frustrated." Nezla said. "I want to do somethin' to help her..."

"You can. Help us finish the job as fast as possible. What needs to be done?"

"Everything. We can't take the *Honey B* in there, or I'd have to remodel the whole drummin' ship. I'll work on two of the lifeboats—they'll have to do. We'll use them for workin' inside the Vortex, leavin' the *Honey B* itself parked outside.

"You, as official contestant, will have to be in the lifeboat that does the work, and the Umpire'll have to be in there with you. And you'll need someone who knows how to pilot it—Captain Kirre, Johnathan, Sora and I all know how; Sora, of course, is ruled out.

"The way I'm goin' to work it is to disconnect all the external sensory apparatus aboard the lifeboat. The Vortex drums up normal gravitational and electromagnetic fields. In most engineerin' applications you can ignore boundary conditions, but the Vortex is nothin' *but* boundary conditions. You'll have to go in blind; the only systems you can have are internal lightin' and drive, and I'll have to insulate them circuits pretty heavy to make sure that nothin' happens to them. You'll coast into the Vortex and try to find some piece of wreckage that'll suit our metal

friend—oh, I just hope his drummin' circuits are well enough insulated; he won't let me touch him.

"Anyhow, when you get the piece you want, try to blast out of there again. I'm not sure what'll happen then. The drive may work, it may not. It all depends on where you are in the Vortex at the time."

"What happens if the drive doesn't work? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"If it don't work, we'll have to send someone in to get you out. That's why I'm modifyin' two lifeboats. The second one will wait at the outskirts of the field. If your lifeboat fails, someone from the second boat'll come out and attach a line to yours and start pullin'. That should do it."

"What about the person in the spacesuit who comes down to our ship? Won't the Vortex grab them?"

"Shouldn't, in so short a distance. And the space-suits don't have to be modified because they're real basic, systems-wise. Only the radio won't work. In fact, if it wasn't easier for you to get out of there in one of the lifeboats, I'd recommend the whole thing be done just in suits."

Bred nodded and gave Nezla a verbal pat on the head, before sending her back to work. The modifications on the lifeboats would have to be done in the next nine days. Then would come the test of Nezla's jury-rigged systems, and maybe some more of the *Destiny Tyla* kept talking about. Going into the Vortex would be a tricky business, but no more dangerous than the feats they'd already accomplished so far on this Hunt. But though his mind wanted to think about the future, it kept wandering back to Sora, alone in her cabin, sweating out her personal nightmare as the ship sped on to the site of her former near-tragedy.

* * *

Nine days later, the *Honey B* was parked at the outer edges of the Vortex. Sora still had not emerged from her cabin; the rest of the crew ignored her absence and carried on without her as best they could.

Two of the lifeboats, *Queen* and *Drone*, had been prepared by Nezla for the conditions they would face in the Vortex. Bred asked Luuj—the best pilot—and Nezla to stay aboard *Drone*, which would be the second ship and available for a rescue attempt if needed. That left Johnathan, the

Umpire and himself aboard *Queen*, the boat that would do the actual work. At the last moment, Tyla demanded to go with them, and was put aboard *Queen* also. Each lifeboat was built to accommodate only three people, but the Umpire was small and took up little room.

"Now remember," Nezla was briefing them, "I've got the whole thing figured out. Start in slowly and use the drive as little as possible. Drift whenever you can. Take your time and go all the way around the Vortex at one level before tryin' to move closer in. The farther from the center you can find a suitable object, the more chance you'll have of gettin' out. Radio won't work in the Vortex, so you'll be on your own. The Captain and I will be watchin' you all the way, and if we see anythin' at all go wrong, I'll swim out and attach a line and we'll pull you in. Any questions?"

"Yes," Bred said. "How did I ever get myself into this mess to begin with?"

"Don't ask me, I only work here," Nezla grinned.

Queen started out. It edged slowly away from the parent ship, into the chaotic whirl that was the Vortex. Johnathan handled the controls delicately, as though he were building a house of cards; the acceleration from the drive was barely perceptible. Despite the fact that the hatch was closed, the three inside the vessel had their space suits in operation since the oxygen pumping system had been turned off. The fewer systems that were working, the fewer that could go wrong.

Johnathan had a copy of charts showing the fields within the Vortex and their distances from the center. He stopped the boat's inward motion when it was just slightly inside the outer limit, allowing it to float under the gravitational pull of the Vortex. They were in an outer orbit now, and Bred opened the hatch to watch space slide by.

He was surrounded by blackness sprinkled with billions of sharp points of light. He was used to that when traveling in the *Honey B*; the same view was visible from the Control Sector, where he had spent many hours gazing at the immensity of the Universe. It was a familiar grandeur he looked at now; calm, peaceful, reassuring.

He became aware of the Umpire beside him, watching him closely to make sure that he didn't cheat, and was reminded of his duty. He had to salvage a piece of flotsam from within this deceptively quiet holocaust. He

knew that there were plenty of pieces of wreckage scattered about—the Vortex extended its reach through hyperspace as well as normal space, and unsuspecting ships that had passed nearby had had their insides torn by explosions as the twisted electromagnetic fields of the Vortex wrought havoc with their equipment. With generators no longer able to keep them in the unnatural environment of hyperspace, the wrecks of the ships had popped out, leaving debris strewn all around the Vortex.

But locating this debris was an entirely different matter. The hole itself was "below" him, and the body of the lifeboat shielded it from his view. No light existed here except for the unblinking stars, nothing that might reflect off of a piece of polished metal or plastic into his eye. He didn't even have a flashlight—Nezla had forbidden even that simple a device. Any flotsam that might happen past would be dark, and would make its presence known only by blotting out the stars behind it. He would have to look for only this subtle clue, and that would demand his full concentration.

Several times he saw black shapes drift across his field of view. But perspective was impossible under the circumstances; with no point of reference, he couldn't tell whether the shape he saw was a small, nearby object or a large faraway one. Nezla had provided him with a waldo, a meter-long pole with a grasping device at the end. He used it to try reaching for the shapes from his position in the hatchway of *Queen*, but the objects were out of his range, Nezla had told him that under no circumstances was he to leave the boat; it would be next to impossible to find his way back again in the darkness of space—or for that matter, for anyone else to recover him. So his fishing was confined to what was within range of the boat's hatch.

After half an hour of fruitless drifting, Bred decided that they should move to another location. He went back inside and told Johnathan to creep a little farther into the Vortex. The nearer the center they were, the better their chances would be of finding a piece of wreckage within their grasp. Obediently, Johnathan touched the drive switch and nudged them out of their present orbit. Slowly, *Queen* spiralled inward a few meters at a time until they reached a new orbit with a semimajor axis 15 meters shorter than before. Once this pattern was fixed, Bred returned to the hatchway to search some more.

They tried this procedure four more times without success. The air in

their tanks was starting to get low; they could not do much more searching without going back to the ship for resupply. But on the fifth time, luck was with them. A shadow moved across the stars and without much hope, Bred reached for it. Much to his surprise, he felt the waldo tighten around it. Light-heartedly, he pulled the object in to examine it.

It was just a small piece of plastic, a few dozen grams in mass. It looked to be a shard of a cylinder, but its edges were broken giving it an irregular shape. At this particular moment, however, it was the loveliest thing Bred had ever seen. He held it in front of the Umpire and leaned over to touch his helmet to its earpiece. "Does this satisfy the conditions of the Hunt?" he asked.

The Umpire took the shard from him and examined it carefully. "Yes," it admitted finally. "I judge that this object has been successfully obtained "

Bred allowed himself a tight smile and backed down into the boat. In the light inside, he held up the shard triumphantly. Tyla and Johnathan both smiled along with him, and Johnathan reached over and shook Bred's hand.

Now came the moment of decision. They had gone fairly deeply into the warped field of the Vortex. They now had to activate their drive and pull themselves out, and the question was prominent in all their minds—had they gone too far in to be able to get out again? Getting the piece of flotsam was only half the battle; to make it count they had to return to the *Honey B*.

Johnathan fiddled with the dials that controlled the power and finally flicked the switch. Immediately, they felt the small but steady acceleration that meant the drive was working. They all relaxed silently within the cabin. Tyla hugged her brother and, in a fit of exuberance, hugged Johnathan as well. They were one step nearer to winning, and she was too happy to care that Johnathan was an android.

Halfway out of the Vortex, *Queen* ran into a moderately large piece of wreckage. There had been little chance of this occurring while the lifeboat was orbiting freely around the Vortex, because it was sharing a common velocity vector with its surroundings. But now its velocity vector was perpendicular to the piece of debris it struck. Under normal circumstances, the lifeboat had meteor deflector screens that would have

averted such a mishap, but these had been turned off: first, because Nezla had wanted to simplify the systems; second, because they had *wanted* objects within range so that Bred could grab one. This combination of circumstances had now produced dire results.

Inside the lifeboat, the impact of the collision was barely felt, since the occupants were not firmly connected to the walls. They became aware of it, though, in other ways. A section of hull ripped away, opening the ship to space and letting in starlight. The small acceleration they had been experiencing vanished instantly along with the lighting. They found themselves plunged into almost total darkness.

This disaster, so unexpected in their moment of triumph, sent them into a panic. Tyla reached out, grabbed hold of Johnathan and gripped him as tightly as she could. The android reciprocated. Bred snatched at a small projection on the wall and clung to it. When his first wave of panic was over he noticed the other two in the faint starlight that filtered in. Though the immediate danger was past, they showed no signs of relaxing their holds on one another. As they clung tightly for mutual safety and assurance, a part of Bred's mind thought that they resembled a couple very much in love. Meanwhile, he could do nothing about the situation at present; he just hung on to the wall hoping Nezla and Luuj had seen the accident and would shortly be coming to rescue them.

* * *

Back aboard *Drone*, time had dragged by with agonizing slowness. The ship faced the Vortex, and the women took turns keeping *Queen* under telescopic observation at all times. Like Bred, they could only judge the lifeboat's position by the fact that it would be blocking out the background stars. The hole itself, only a kilometer or so in diameter, was barely visible as a fuzzy spot of indistinct nothingness. Nezla and Luuj took turns at the telescope watching Bred's lifeboat. Occasionally they could see it minutely change its course, but those few moments were the only spots of interest in an otherwise dreary duty.

"I wish there were some way of contacting them while they're in there," Luuj said as she watched.

"It's impossible. We might just be able to send a radio beam, but there's too much interference for their equipment to receive it. And, of course, they'd never be able to send anythin' out." Nezla eyed the

chronometer at the wrist of her suit. "They'll have to be comin' out soon, though. Their air supply'll be startin' to run low."

A few minutes later, Luuj exclaimed, "They're coming out. The boat is accelerating faster than it has before. But do you suppose that means they've found what they were after or just that they're coming back for more oxygen?"

"We'll find out when they get here," Nezla said. "This is the danger time, so keep an eye on them very carefully."

More silence, as the captain tracked the lifeboat. Then she said, "I think something's gone wrong."

"How can you tell?"

"I'm not sure. I saw a flash just for an instant, and the ship doesn't seem to be accelerating any more, just holding the same course. And... and it's spinning, I think. It's blotting out the stars in a funny pattern."

"Let me see." Nezla took over the position at the telescope. After a moment, she found the dark spot in the field of view and watched it. "You're right, they are spinnin'. I wonder if they hit somethin'; there couldn't be any other reason for it."

Luuj did not need further encouragement. *Drone* crept silently into the Vortex to meet its disabled mate. With all the external sensors disconnected, she, like Johnathan, was flying blind in this cosmic storm. But she knew the direction to take and would be able to intersect *Queen's* course closely enough for Nezla to reach it with a line. Neither woman spoke as they headed for the damaged lifeboat.

As they pulled to within 20 meters of *Queen*, Luuj nodded to Nezla. The engineer took a line that was attached to *Drone's* side and started out. Once in space, her target was easily seen as it blocked out a large section of the sky. She pushed herself off from *Drone* and floated to the other boat. The blackness of space did not bother her; she thought only about the three trapped inside the other lifeboat. Behind her, Luuj watched her progress through the telescope.

When Nezla reached *Queen*, she breathed considerably easier. A hole was apparent in the front of the boat, but it was not terribly large. The

ship was spinning slowly about an axis near its tail. Nezla went down as close to the axis as she could and found a handhold, to which she tied the other end of the line. She banged several times on the wall of the lifeboat, hoping that the vibrations would carry to the people inside to let them know they were being rescued. Then she floated away and waved to Luuj, indicating that her mission had been accomplished.

She was about to start back toward *Drone* when the ships jumped out from under her. Luuj, apparently thinking that Nezla would take sanctuary inside *Queen*, had begun pulling the disabled ship out of the Vortex. Nezla had intended to go back to *Drone* before they left, but had not discussed this procedure with Luuj. And suddenly the ships were moving away, leaving Nezla dangling in open space.

She moved quickly. Activating the small gas hand-jets that were part of her equipment, she tried to reach *Queen* and grab hold before it got out of range. But the motors on *Drone* were more powerful than her little handjets, and the ships moved away from her faster than she could catch up. Stretching as far as possible, she managed to scrape the metal of the boat with her glove, but she could find no handhold. A moment later, the lifeboat was beyond her reach and receding faster with every second.

Nezla stopped struggling and considered her situation. She was out here alone in the Vortex. The three individuals in *Queen* wouldn't know that, since they weren't watching her. Presumably, Luuj Kirre was busy at the controls of *Drone*, believing Nezla to be secure inside *Queen*. No one would notice her absence until they returned to the *Honey B*, and only then would they realize their mistake. They would go back and look for her. But how would they locate her? They could probably find the approximate spot where she had disappeared, but by then she wouldn't be there.

The slight use of her handjets had changed her position and velocity, and she was in an orbit around the center of the Vortex. If she moved only a few dozen meters away, she would become as hard to find as any other object. They would never be able to locate her. In about an hour and a half, her oxygen would give out, and then her lifeless body would orbit the Vortex for the rest of eternity.

"To Space with that!" Nezla decided. "I ain't sittin' here and waitin'!"

She pointed herself in the direction of the *Honey B* and fired her

handjets off behind her back.

* * *

Vini and Dru floated in the Control Sector watching the events play out. The trivid screens had a magnification control that could expand any particular area; it was seldom used because it broke the impression of reality, but it was being employed now. The two women watched for several hours as the lifeboats drifted in the Vortex.

After a while they became aware of a third presence in the cabin with them. Sora had emerged from her quarters and entered the Control Sector so quietly that they hadn't noticed her at first. She stayed toward the back and did not intrude on the other women's concentration. Vini glanced at her once, and what she could see of the astrogator's face in the darkness of the cabin was white and taut. Her lips were stretched tightly over her teeth, and she appeared to be biting them. It was obviously difficult for her to be here, but some perverse fascination must have drawn her to the scene. She was an unwilling witness to the drama being enacted in the Vortex.

They watched in horror as *Queen* was struck by the floating piece of debris. The rescue followed much to their relief. Vini looked again at Sora's face, now covered with tiny beads of perspiration. Then, as they continued to watch the screen, they saw a tiny black shadow that did not move forward with the rest of the shadows. For several seconds, the occupants of the Control Sector were stunned and silent. Quietly, Vini said, "That'll be Nezla, in her spacesuit."

Fascinated, they watched the small piece of blackness pick up speed slightly. Vini turned her gaze back to Sora.

The astrogator was trembling. "Using her handjets, the drumhead," she said in a barely audible whisper. "They don't have enough power to get her out."

As if to confirm Sora's judgment, the shadow's rate of acceleration suddenly stopped, and the shadow coasted along at a constant speed. "All she did was change her orbit," Sora continued to mutter. "Now she's in a long ellipse."

"Why doesn't the captain stop and go back for her?" Vini asked angrily.

"She doesn't know she's missing," Sora spoke up. "Nobody knows but us."

"Then what can we do about it?"

Sora shook her head. "Nothing. There's nothing we can do. She'll run out of air soon, and then she'll drift down into nothing and be gone. Nothing, nothing, nothing, noth—"

Vini slapped her. "I will not have you withdraw into your own private phobia, not now," she said harshly. "Sure, you were out there once, and you know what it's all about. But somebody saved you, remember? There must be something that can be done."

"Nothing," Sora echoed hollowly.

"Damn it, girl, that's your friend out there!" Vini yelled. "She climbed the entire length of this ship under four gees just to save your drumming life. Are you telling me you aren't going to lift a single finger to save her?"

Sora's trembling intensified under the barrage of Vini's anger. "No, stop it, stop it!" she screamed. She curled her body tightly into a ball and, suspended in midair, began spinning crazily out of control. Vini was taken aback by the effects of her own vehemence and was about to apologize when Sora suddenly came out of her shell. Her body slowly uncurled, which decreased the rate of spin. The trembling had stopped completely. Her face, though still pale, was back to its usual expression of quiet self-confidence. When she spoke, her voice was even and assured. "All right, she's in an elliptical orbit. We know her starting position. Knowing her, she probably opened the handjets to maximum, which means they would have burned for 20 seconds. We know the thrust those jets have, so we can calculate the velocity vector at burnout. Given the gravitational force of the hole, we can determine her new orbit and find an intersecting position."

As she spoke, she reached under the astrogator's console and brought out her books of equations. "Dru, I need answers fast. Are you ready?"

"Ready," Dru said.

Sora spouted a quick series of numbers and equations, and Dru shot the answers back immediately. The mathematics were completely beyond

Vini, but she was satisfied that something was being done. She was pleasantly startled that her outburst had had this effect, and she stayed silently in the background, afraid to interfere. She knew Sora's brilliance, and that when Sora took action it was usually effective.

Sora now had the answer to the last equation. She looked up, translating the numbers Dru had given her into a position in the sky ahead of her. Then she bolted quickly out of the room. Vini followed, leaving Dru to stand watch behind them.

"What are you going to do?" the doctor asked.

"I'm going out after her." Sora swam so rapidly that she was back to the Emergency Exit in Sector III in almost a single stroke.

"The third lifeboat wasn't modified," Vini said as she caught up.

"I wouldn't take it anyhow," Sora said briskly. She had already strapped some oxygen tanks onto her back and was connecting them to her uniform. "It's too complicated; too many things can go wrong. A space-suit makes a perfect projectile, and almost nothing can happen to it." She pulled a helmet over her head. Several spare oxygen tanks were in cubbyholes in the wall; Sora reached for these and hooked her arm through the straps. Then, without so much as a gesture of farewell, she moved into the Emergency Air lock shutting the door behind her.

Vini floated, speechless for a moment. "Well, nothing more I can do," she muttered. "I hope she knows what she's doing "

* * *

Sora knew precisely what she was doing. The instant she was outside the ship, she took a sighting on the spot that she and Dru had calculated. She activated her own small jets allowing them to burn for fifteen seconds before she shut them off. This left her enough gas for minor maneuvering once she'd reached her destination. She was now traveling along an arc that would intersect Nezla's orbit at a point roughly halfway between the ship and the Vortex.

Until she reached the engineer in forty-five minutes, there was nothing more to do. She had committed herself to a course of action, and the natural laws of the Universe would take over from here. She tried to relax,

to free her mind of all the anxieties passing through its back alleys. She was not entirely successful.

* * *

"Position?" Science Officer Benj called out.

"Radius vector 2,350 meters," replied Sora Benning, the third line astrogator of the Explorer. "Direction cosines-0.67 3,0.211."

"Marked," Benj noted. "Field strengths?"

Junior engineer Lexand Erin consulted his instruments. "Gravitational, 0.989; electromagnetic seems to peak at 0.0076 Angstroms with a strength of 0.343."

The atmosphere was close. Four people were crowded into the small longboat: Sora to read positions; Erin to read field strengths; Benj to coordinate the two; and Katei to pilot them through the storm. They had oxygen tanks strapped to their backs, and each kept a helmet under one arm; since they had to be able to communicate between themselves, and radio communications could not be relied on within the Vortex, they were still in open air environment.

If any tension existed, Benj's aura of implacably cool logic kept it to a minimum. Inside the longboat, everything was strictly businesslike. Sora wondered briefly if things were as calm aboard the other five boats that were investigating the Vortex...

* * *

She found herself shaking again, and willed her body to be calm. The chronometer on her wrist showed that there were still 33 minutes to go before her rendezvous with Nezla. In an effort to avoid being haunted by long-dead memories, she gazed at the stars around her, trying to pick out the familiar ones. Over there was Rigel, a beacon from almost any point in this Galactic hemisphere. And there, on her other side, was Capella, equally bright. She even thought she could make out the unnamed blue white star that gave light to the planet Hellfire and wondered if Johnathan would appreciate the sight.

The thought of Johnathan made her wonder about the lifeboats. She

looked back in the direction of the ship. It took several minutes for her to make out the boats against the starry background of space. From their apparent size she was able to determine both how far away they were and their position relative to the ship. They were on a course that would bring them home safely—a foregone conclusion with Luuj at the controls. Captain Kirre was the ablest pilot Sora had ever known.

* * *

"Move in closer," Master Benj said.

"But sir," Sora protested, "we're already at 1900 meters now."

"I am well aware of that," Benj said coldly.

"The ship might not be able to hold up much closer. At the rate the field strengths have been increasing..."

"Are you an engineer, Mistress Benning?"

"No, but I know enough math to know that those fields are increasing at an exponential rate. We can already hear the generators struggling..."

"We have been asked to determine the field strengths as a function of position throughout the Vortex. That means up to and including critical strengths. However, in view of the danger, I recommend that we all put on our helmets and communicate via helmet-touching from this point onward. Fifty meters farther in, Master Katei."

Sora pointedly watched her instrument panel. Benj knew she was not an engineer and could not give an educated estimate of potential danger; but he also knew that her intuitive powers were far greater than his own—and perhaps somewhere down in the depths of his supposedly unemotional mind lurked a trace of jealousy.

With the helmets on the radio circuits cut off, everything was in dead silence. The digital instruments changed inexorably in front of her. She felt, rather than heard, the explosion...

* * *

Sora opened her eyes with a start. She hadn't even been aware that

they'd been closed. She glanced at her wrist. Twenty more minutes. Scanning the sky in front and to the side of her, she saw nothing she could positively identify as Nezla. She returned to her stargazing. Towards the center of the Galaxy the stars melted into a cloudlike formation and were totally inseparable. She couldn't find the Magellanic Clouds—they were somewhere on the other side of the Milky Way itself. Her own home star lay near the outskirts of the Galaxy, a quarter of the way around the sky from her present position. It was an undistinguished star, and even if it could be visible to the naked eye from this distance, it still could not be told apart from its neighbors. The same held true for Sol, mankind's original star. Sora was adrift in the Universe that she had traveled in so widely and yet seen so little of. The sheer size defeated anyone who tried to know it, though Sora had done better than most. But now she was cut off from everything but space, isolated, alone.

Alone.

Isolated.

Cut off.

Adrift.

These were the first thoughts that rippled through her mind as consciousness returned. She wasted no time wondering where she was: she knew from that first moment what had happened. The longboat had gotten too close to the center of the Vortex. The warping of space and the violation of most sensible laws of Nature had proven too much for the electronic equipment aboard the vessel. The generators had exploded, along with most of the ship. She and the rest of the crew had been flung out into the maelstrom.

She looked around, her mind still clear and far from panic. The Explorer had its hull decked out with lights so that the longboats could spot it immediately and know their relative positions. It looked awfully small, and Sora estimated that it was several kilometers away. But if it was that far...

She turned and looked behind her. For the first time, she looked directly into the "black hole." It was not so much black as neutral, an absence of form and substance. It was a lack of existence that somehow existed, supported by the perversity of the Universe. It was only a kilometer in diameter, but it seemed to envelop all time and space.

She could not tear her eyes away from the hole that held her attention

with a deadly fascination. It seemed to tug at her head, commanding her to look only at it, and helpless, she obeyed. The rest of the Universe vanished; there was only herself and the hole rushing toward one another, soon to be one.

It was growing, now, this pore in space, this vacuity that was infinitely more tenuous than vacuum. It seemed to pulse and throb, this yawning mouth of nothingness. It was an opening to nullity, a hole of unreality, and its gravitational force was dragging her in as irresistibly as a siren's song.

She screamed and screamed again, but the only ears that registered the sounds were her own. Her radio was off, and no one from the ship would be able to hear her. She was alone, dreadfully alone, with only this unnatural, gaping hole for company. And it was getting closer. She could almost feel it breathing on her, it was so close. She screamed once more and curled herself into a foetal ball...

* * *

The sound of her own screaming brought her out of the nightmare. She found, to her chagrin, that she had curled herself into a ball, just as she had done that other time. She was very glad no one else could see or hear her. Slowly, she unfolded her trembling limbs and looked at the chronometer. Only two more minutes to rendezvous. She scanned the sky in the direction where she expected Nezla to appear. After a minute, she saw the chunky shape of the engineer drifting toward her. Nezla had obviously given up struggling after her attempt with the handjets. The orbit she had been thrust into was a long, narrow ellipse; she had already passed the apastron point and now was heading helplessly back toward the hole. Although she had probably resigned herself to her fate, Sora was sure that the engineer was cursing a blue streak about it.

Sora estimated that she and Nezla would miss each other by 15 meters, so she expended some more of the gas in her handjets to bring them together. Nezla saw her coming; the red and white design on Sora's space-suit was not visible, but her lanky form was instantly recognizable. They touched helmets as soon as they came together.

"What took you so drummin' long?" Nezla demanded immediately—but her voice was relieved rather than angry. "I've been waitin' here for three drummin' hours!"

"One hour and six minutes," Sora corrected her. She held out one of the spare oxygen tanks she had brought along. "I thought you might be needing this."

"I was gettin' a bit low, yeah," Nezla admitted. She took the new tank and hooked it onto her back, taking off the old one and jettisoning it into space.

"How much do you mass?" Sora asked.

"Seventy-one kilos, last time I checked. Why?"

"That's about what I thought. I allowed for 75."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?" Nezla retorted. Sora didn't answer. She was busy getting the other oxygen tanks into a more maneuverable position.

"Hold onto me," she instructed. "We're about to take off."

"Hey, you've got the direction wrong," Nezla objected. "The ship's that way." She pointed in the direction that Sora had aimed the tanks. "Shouldn't these be pointed the other way?"

"Nope. Firing in the direction opposite to our velocity vector would only slow our speed and circularize our orbit around the hole. We've got to speed up to slow down and slow down to speed up: that's the prime paradox of celestial mechanics." With Nezla holding her tightly, she opened the tanks. Both women felt the acceleration as the escaping gas pushed them ever more rapidly in the direction of the hole. When the tanks were emptied, Sora jettisoned them; they were valuable, but in approaching the hole the less complicated their formation, the better. Although she felt no sense of speed, Sora knew that they were traveling considerably faster than before.

"But *toward* the hole?" Nezla continued. "That's the thing we want to stay away from."

"We have to get closer if we want to get away from it. I've been this route before."

Nezla was about to say more, but remembered Sora's sensitivity on the

subject of the hole. The fact that she was out here at all meant she had had to overcome her fear of the place. Nezla didn't want to make her task any more difficult.

"Curl up into a ball," Sora said suddenly.

"Huh? Why?"

"With practically a point source of gravity this strong, the differential could tear you apart. And keep your eyes away from the hole itself."

Nezla did as she was told. She realized what Sora meant about the differential of the field. Gravity is a force inversely proportional to the square of the distance; as you move away from the source, the force falls off rapidly. Gravitationally, the hole acted like a sphere 1,000 meters in diameter and twice as massive as Sol; being this close to a field that strong, even small distances could make a difference. If her head was pointed at the hole and her feet the other way, her head would be closer to the source of the gravitational field and hence be more strongly attracted; her feet would be less attracted. The head would be trying to move faster than the feet. But, unfortunately, the two ends were connected by the rest of her body, which was comparatively rigid. At best, the difference in the gravitational field at the two extremes would send her body spinning about a central axis; at worst, it would snap her in two depending on various factors. Curling up into a compact ball would minimize this effect.

She pulled her knees up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her shins. Then she held tight. As she had been instructed, she did not look at the hole she was hurtling toward. But she could tell that she was getting close—the very fabric of space seemed to be twisting. The points of light that were stars appeared closer together, melting into one another in a bright ball of luminescence. Sora and Nezla were approaching a universal sink, where all light from the Universe gradually slid into the nothingness beyond the hole. The brightness increased until Nezla thought she'd go blind. All the starlight in the Universe shone on her face. She closed her eyes tightly, but the light around her was still dazzling, penetrating her eyelids. It became painful; she whimpered involuntarily and was glad, for a change, that no one could hear her.

There was no precise moment that Nezla could say was the turning point, but after a while she realized that the light was diminishing. A moment later, she even dared to open her eyes a trifle. The stars were still

streaked and blurry but not all jumbled together as they had been. The Universe, she noted, was spinning about her; she knew it was actually she herself that was spinning. Even though she was curled up so tightly, the gravitational differential had had some effect on her. But she had gone past the hole and survived.

She uncurled herself and the spinning slowed. She looked around and, after a moment, spotted Sora still in a ball and spinning next to her. She reached over and touched her friend. There was no reaction. Worried, she grabbed harder and tried shaking her as best she could under free-fall conditions. "Sora," she called, forgetting that their radios weren't working here in the Vortex.

Finally, Sora responded. Very, very slowly her limbs uncurled until she was stretched out normally again. Her face through the helmet looked shaken, but otherwise she was all right. Relieved, Nezla pulled her over and touched helmets. "We made it!" she exclaimed.

"Of course we did," Sora replied, a bit of her old self-confidence returning. "You didn't think I was in the mood for suicide, did you?"

"I wasn't sure, after you pointed us in the wrong direction."

"It was the *only* direction. Celestial mechanics works in conic sections; when first set adrift you had a certain orbital velocity around the center of the Vortex. You were in free-fall. Since you were nearby *Queen*, which was in a circular orbit, yours was approximately circular, too."

"Then you changed that orbit—you tried to make it to the ship with your handjets. But you didn't have enough power to do that; all it did was put you into an elliptical orbit. In celestial mechanics, a change in the velocity vector produces a change in the orbit. Your apastron point—the farthest from the hole—wasn't far enough out to reach the *Honey B* but, at the same time, your periastron point—closest to the hole—was also reduced. I was able to calculate approximately what that orbit was and devise a course that would intersect it.

"But by the time I could intersect it, we were already fairly close to the hole and approaching it faster each second. If we had shot off that gas near the hole, counter to our direction of motion, it would have counteracted some, perhaps all, of our velocity. But then we'd have found ourselves in a tight little circular orbit around the hole. We'd have had no

more reaction mass to enable us to leave, and no one from the ship would have been able to come all the way in to rescue us.

"Instead, I chose to do what happened to me accidentally the first time. We didn't have enough reaction mass with us to get back to the ship, so we had to let the hole do the work for us. Like the action of a comet, we played crack the whip around it. By increasing our velocity in the direction of motion, we altered our orbit from elliptical to hyperbolic. It's as though the hole gave us a push as we went by. We're now moving away from the hole so rapidly that it will never be able to pull us back again."

"But we're also headin' away from the ship," Nezla pointed out. "It's over there. They won't even see us."

"In a little over an hour and a half, by my calculations, we'll be far enough away from the center of the Vortex that its field will be negligible. Once we're outside, you can turn on the radio again and call for help. The captain will come out in *Worker* and pick us up.

"In the meantime," Sora went on, "I would appreciate your being quiet. I missed a lot of sleep during these past two weeks and I'd like to catch up on it, if you don't mind."

CHAPTER FIVE

At the same time Sora and Nezla were whipping around the black hole, the crews of *Queen* and *Drone* returned to the *Honey B*. Vini and Dru had been watching the progress of the two spacesuited figures but, not knowing Sora's exact plans, had been unable to inform the captain of them. All anyone could do was watch the trivid screens and hope.

The two bodies seemed to orbit with agonizing slowness—and then the watchers lost sight of them in the dark, starry void as they passed behind the hole. "I think," Luuj said slowly, "that Sora was trying to establish an escape orbit around the hole. If she managed it, we should hear from them as soon as they leave the Vortex's influence. We'll just have to wait, that's all."

They waited. Two, four, six hours passed and still no word from the two crewwomen. "They can't last too much longer," Luuj commented. "On only one tank apiece, their air will be running out soon."

"Sora did take extra tanks," Vini pointed out.

"Yes, but they would have been for reaction mass. Something must have gone terribly amiss in Sora's calculations."

No one could find a reply to that; all they could do was wait.

Now, ten hours had passed. "I don't think we'll ever hear from them," Luuj said sadly. "Their air would have been used up a long time ago. They must be dead."

Her statement was met with a stunned silence.

Finally, Tyla asked, "What kind of shape does that leave us in?"

"You mean without our astrogator and engineer?" Luuj answered solemnly. "Johnathan and I can double up on both functions, I suppose, but we'll be badly crippled."

"Let's wait," Bred said. "A couple more hours one way or another won't hurt us. We have to be sure."

Two more hours passed. Even Bred was about to give up hope when suddenly the radio crackled to life. "Hey there, *Honey B*. Come on out and pick us up."

The sound of Nezla's voice ripped through the room like an electric current. Bred grabbed the microphone. "Are you all right?"

"All right?" Sora's voice answered. "I'm damn near perfect."

Now it was Luuj's turn to speak. Taking the microphone away from Bred, she asked, "How did you do it? How did you stay alive better than twelve hours out there on one tank of oxygen apiece?"

"Are you crazy, captain?" Nezla asked. "It's only been about three hours since Sora brought me a new tank."

"Have your watch checked, engineer. I have a roomful of witnesses who can swear..."

Suddenly a laughing sound filled the air—Sora's laugh. "Well, maybe I'm not so perfect after all."

"What do you mean by that?" Luuj asked.

"I forgot all about relativity and time dilation. Come and get us, Captain, and we'll compare our chronometers. You should be able to see us on the radar screens by now." Luuj, as requested, swam around to the Lifeboat Dock and went out in *Worker* to pick up the pair.

Meanwhile, Bred turned to Johnathan. "Do you know what she's talking about? What's time dilation?"

"I think I can figure it out a little. You've heard about the clock paradox in relativistic problems, where time appears to slow down as you near the speed of light?"

"Yes, vaguely. But Sora and Nezla weren't going nearly that fast."

"It's not just speed that will do it. A large enough mass will warp space itself—and space and time are different aspects of the same thing. Traveling so close to an object as massive as the hole would warp their time relative to ours. What was to them only three hours was twelve to us."

"I don't begin to understand," Bred said, shaking his head, "but I'll take your word for it. As long as Sora and Nezla are safe, that's all that matters to me."

It didn't take long for the captain to make the pickup and return to the ship. When she, Sora and Nezla walked through the door from the Lifeboat Dock, the scene became pandemonium in free-fall. Everyone was kissing and hugging everyone else. Bred kissed the two returnees, and Vini threw her arms around them in an uncharacteristic display of sentiment. Then the two girls kissed Johnathan. Even Dru managed to loosen up and embrace her two friends. And, Bred noticed, Johnathan kissed Tyla, who did not object in the slightest.

"If everyone has finished," Luuj said, "I believe we still have work to do. Umpire, do I understand correctly that there is still at least one more item on our list?"

"You do," the robot said. It spewed out a list of coordinates, then continued, "The planet has been given the popular name of Pompeii. In particular, one portion of the planet is known as the Flame Pits. You must

obtain an artifact from these Flame Pits. To further clarify, an artifact is defined as an object produced artificially by intelligent creatures and must have existed in the Flame Pits before your arrival there." The Umpire was still concerned that Bred would get off the hook on another technicality.

"That's not very far away from here," Sora commented. "Only about five days' drive."

Tyla looked at her brother. "You see, it's all falling into place. Nothing can stop us, not even a black hole."

"I'll still reserve judgment on Destiny until I see who wins," Bred said. "I can't help thinking that it was Sora who saved Nezla, not Fate."

"Whoever gets the credit," interrupted the captain, "it won't do us any good unless we get moving again." She herded them all forwards into the Control Sector so that they could prepare for this next leg of their journey.

* * *

Two hours later they were firmly ensconced in hyperspace and the crew was preparing for five more days of relative inactivity. Vini fixed a quick meal, and the banter at the table was joyful and lively. Bred, however, did not join in the conversation; he seemed engrossed in some private contemplation. He could not help but notice that Tyla was seated next to Johnathan and that, whenever the android made a funny comment, she joined in the laughter with everyone else. *She certainly has changed*, he mused—and, without knowing why, the thought disquieted him.

After the meal, Bred approached Johnathan. "Could I have a talk with you in private?" he asked.

"Sure. Right here, or do you want to go somewhere else?"

"Oh, how about the Sauna?" Bred suggested. "I haven't been there in a while."

The two left the Dining Room together and floated rearward along the Core to Sector V. Outside the door to the Sauna they stripped, then entered. Inside, the heat was dry but intense, and they began sweating almost at once. Johnathan drifted around to face Bred. "All right, what did you want to talk about?"

Bred didn't answer at once. The words would not come easily, and he was at a loss to know where to begin. Finally he blurted out, "How do you feel about my sister?"

He saw instantly by Johnathan's reaction that he had phrased the question badly. The android was suddenly defensive and uncomfortable. "How do you mean?"

This is going to be difficult for both of us, Bred thought. "Well, for instance, what do you think of her as a person?"

"She's very beautiful," Johnathan said. He wasn't sure what Bred was driving at and he was choosing his words with care. "She's intelligent and she's certainly not lacking in courage. Why do you ask?"

"Because she happens to be falling in love with you, and I wanted to know whether or not you felt the same way about her." Bred surprised himself with his own bluntness.

But if Bred was surprised, Johnathan was stunned. "She... loves me?" Bred nodded. "But how? I... I mean, she's always acted as if she hated me..."

"Love and hate can be two sides of the same coin," Bred pointed out.

"Has she told you this?"

Bred shook his head. "No, she doesn't have to. I'm her twin brother, we were raised together and I know her well enough to decipher the pattern for myself. She is definitely falling in love with you."

The two men drifted silently in the heated atmosphere of the Sauna. "But she's always been so hostile," Johnathan repeated after a while.

"She was fighting it. I didn't understand it myself, at first, but she must have found you attractive right from the start. Her social upbringing wouldn't let her accept the attraction, so she tried to deny it by hating you. If you hadn't been forced into constant contact with her after Jusser's attempted murder on Eclipsiascus, she might have been able to get over it. But hating requires full-time preoccupation; knowledge will gradually corrode it. Living in the same ship with you day after day for the past few weeks wore down her animosity. She herself probably doesn't know she's

in love with you yet, but she's progressively getting there. On Ootyoce, she started calling you a 'he' instead of an 'it.' I saw you together that first night on Gondra, and I can imagine approximately what took place. She at least tolerated you as an equal, before she finally reminded herself that she was supposed to be hating you. Just now in the Vortex, when the boat was hit, she clung to you for help, rather than me as she normally would have. She kissed you a little while ago and was talking to you at dinner as though you were an old friend. Slowly but surely, her resistance to you is eroding. She's still afraid to admit it to herself..."

"Why?"

"Figure it out. For one thing, she's always fancied herself an independent woman, not needing anyone else to lean on. Love would weaken that position—she thinks—by showing her that she actually does need someone else. That's why she's never married, despite the fact that most people our age in Society circles have been married at least two or three times. Tyla's always been the one to call the shots in her affairs, and her men have been perfectly willing to let her. Now, when she has to admit that she needs someone, it's a very hard fact to face.

"Then, too, you're an android. I don't mean to sound like a snob, but the fact remains that there is a social difference between you."

"I know," Johnathan said bitterly.

"To Tyla, social position is everything. She's a member of the old wealth, with the deVrie family name and all the heritage that implies. If she were even to marry outside of Society, there would be scandal; for her to love an android would be unthinkable."

"Then, with all that going against me, how did she fall in love with me?"

Bred paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his right forearm. "Because you're a lot like me," he said at last, "and she's always been in love with me." Another long pause followed as Johnathan digested that bit of information. He avoided looking at Bred's eyes, for which Bred was grateful.

"What she needs," he went on, "is someone who isn't too dazzled by the myth of Tyla deVrie to see the woman underneath it. And, occasionally, she needs someone to say 'no' to her. And someone she thinks needs her,

yet is strong enough for her to lean against. So far, I've been able to fulfill all these. Tyla is constantly fussing over me and 'helping' me, telling me I can't ever do anything right without her. But I'm also the first person she comes to whenever she has any problems.

"Now you come along, young and awkward and gawky. You look so terribly helpless—I know you aren't, but you look it—that it probably appeals to the same instincts. She wants desperately to run your life, but you're strong enough not to let her. And while I've noticed that you do stand in awe of her, at least you're not falling over backward. You're very much the sort of guy I think she's secretly been waiting for all this time."

Johnathan listened soberly and pondered what Bred had told him. Finally he said, "You've mentioned how Tyla feels, particularly about my being an android. But you must have some feelings about this business. Your name is deVrie, too, and you have the same heritage. How do you feel about an android becoming involved with your sister?"

Bred's insides knotted up at that question, though the reason had nothing to do with Johnathan's origins. He forced himself to remain lighthearted. "It doesn't matter to me. I can't think of anyone who'd make a better brother-in-law—and you're certainly better than Ambic Jusser! If you're acceptable to Tyla, you're acceptable to me.

"But," he went on more gravely, "she is my sister, and I have to watch out for her. Sooner or later, she's going to realize that she's in love with you, and the shock will be considerable. Both of us will have to be prepared to deal with that situation. That's why I was asking you how you felt about her; I have to know if you love her, too."

Johnathan was silent for a long time. "I don't know," he said at last. "I'm only three years old, and emotions are something that I haven't completely understood or mastered so far. I'm not really sure I know what love is."

"If you'd said you did, I'd say you were either a fool or a liar," Bred smiled at him. "Love is what you make of it. What feelings does Tyla arouse in you?"

"It's so changeable. Sometimes I can see she's so tense or worried or excited that I want to help calm her down. But other times when she snarls at me or does something silly about the Hunt, I want to punch her

in the mouth and beat some sense into her. I want to protect her and teach her and hit her all at the same time. Does all that come under the heading of love?"

"Sometimes," Bred admitted. "But along with the wanting to hit her, there's usually a patience that keeps you from doing it. What about sex?"

"Huh?"

"Do you find her physically attractive?"

"Oh. I wasn't sure you'd appreciate my discussing that."

"In case you hadn't noticed, I am not a great believer in platonic affairs—they're an invention of impotent minds. Whenever two people of opposite gender meet, there's always a sexual interchange occurring at some level. And where an emotional attachment is this deep, the sexual factor must be strong. If it isn't, then I know one of two things—either something is wrong with you or you don't love her. From what the girls have told me, there's absolutely nothing wrong with your sexual performance. So I'm asking how you feel about Tyla physically."

Johnathan was blushing, and not just from the Sauna's heat. "I am definitely attracted to her, yes. When I'm with one of the other girls, I... I sometimes fantasize that she's her. Don't tell them that, though. I hesitated to bring the subject up because I was afraid that talking about me, an android, having relations with your sister might be offensive."

"After about her fiftieth lover, my protectiveness in that direction began to wane," Bred said sardonically. "But we're not just talking about you being in her bed for a couple of hours, now. This is a good part of her life, an emotional investment, and I would like to be as careful for her as possible. Do you love her?"

"I... I'm not sure about anything. I've been attracted to her from the first moment I saw her, but she acted so hostile that I was afraid to let my feelings develop. I'd have to think about it some more."

"Well, we've got plenty of time. I suspect you are in love, but you'll have to decide that for yourself. I just hope your mind is made up before she realizes she's in love with you. In the meantime, do you mind if I assume that you are and give you some advice accordingly?"

"Not at all."

"This is all gleaned from 33 years of experience in dealing with her. If you want to keep her love, don't ever let her push you around. That doesn't mean you have to disregard her or lord over her—that's Jusser's approach, and she won't stand for that, either. But she can't love or respect an inferior; keep on an equal level with her at all times. And for Space's sake, don't let her change the essential personality that is you. She'll try, believe me. Remember, this is the you she fell in love with; as long as she's still the same person, she'll still love the same person. The ultimate aim, of course, is for both of you to grow in the same direction at the same rate."

"Thank you," Johnathan said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go afore to my cabin now and think about this a while."

"Oh, sure," Bred agreed. They both floated over to the door. "Oh, and one more word of advice. If ever she becomes too unmanageable, call her 'Tillie'."

"Tillie?"

"Yes, it's a private childhood nickname, and only she and I know it. It makes her furious, and when she gets mad she can hardly see straight. It'll keep her in line."

"I'll try to remember that," Johnathan agreed solemnly as he opened the door and left.

When the door had closed again, Bred's whole demeanor changed. With Johnathan, he had been half-earnest and half his usually jocular self; but alone, the magnitude of what he had done overwhelmed him. Without warning, he found himself sobbing so violently that his whole body was jerking in reaction.

Tyla was gone, now, lost to him forever. Though he had spoken to Johnathan about Tyla's needing himself, he realized that the reverse was also true—he needed Tyla. And soon she would belong to Johnathan. He had just severed ties that had lasted since both of them had shared their mother's womb; now the shock was overtaking him.

When he had brought himself somewhat under control, he went over and pressed the intercom button. "Dru!" he called. "I want you in the

Sheik's Tent right away."

Not even bothering to dress, he swam across the Core to the entrance of the designated room. Once inside it, he felt the steadying sensation of weight—the Sheik's Tent was permanently artigravved. He pushed aside the gauzy draperies and petulantly flung himself across the huge circular bed. Two minutes later, Dru entered the room. Closing the door behind her she looked at her employer. "What did you wish?" she asked quietly.

"I wish to drum you, that's what I wish. Come over here!"

Dru hesitated, perhaps wondering what had caused this uncharacteristic outburst. "I cannot," she said.

"Why in Space not? I pay your drumming salary, don't I?"

"It is my period," she explained.

Bred rolled over onto his stomach and slammed a fist into the mattress. "Damn! Damn, damn, damn! Nothing is going right today." His body resumed the shuddering it had undergone in the Sauna minutes ago.

Dru moved quietly nearer to sit beside him on the bed. Her arms went around his shoulders. "What is the matter?"

"None of your business," Bred managed to say.

"Yes it is my business. I have sung my Song of Love for you, and that makes it my business."

Her tone was gentle and soothing on Bred's raw ego. His sobs stopped, and he rolled over again and looked up at her. "I've just given half my life away," he said miserably.

Dru's face continued expressionless.

"Tyla and Johnathan are in love with each other, though neither of them is quite sure of that yet. I just had a talk with Johnathan, explaining it to him. They're going to end up together, and then she'll leave me. I need her, Dru. She's all I've had since our parents died, just as I've been all she's had. I can't give her up."

"And yet you told Johnathan about her love for him?"

The corners of Bred's mouth twisted in a wry grin. "Yeah. I think some of his idealism must have rubbed off on me. Damn it, I know she can't go through the rest of her life clinging to me. It's not good for her. She needs to grow, and Johnathan is the perfect person for her to grow with. But that's intellectual knowledge, and no matter how I act I can't fool my emotions. I don't want to let her go. It'll kill me."

"I do not think so." She lifted his head up until it rested on her tiny bosom. "You have us, the crew. We all love you."

"It's not the same. I know the crew's feelings, and I'm sure they know I love them too. But this is something different. I can't explain it. I need Tyla's dependency on me, and now that she's going to be dependent on Johnathan there's going to be a... a hollow spot in my psyche."

Dru was silent for a long time. Absently her hands smoothed his hair, but her mind seemed to be parsecs away. Through his own tear-misted eyes, he looked up at her face and saw an expression as deep and unfathomable as space itself. It was a mixture of all emotions in a jumble of indecision. It tickled at his memory for a moment, and then he recalled the only other time he had seen it. It had been on her face the first time he had taken her to bed. She had been virgin and totally apathetic after the cruel treatment given her by an equally apathetic human race. The yielding of that one last barricade had put such an expression on her face. Even with all his present misery, he still found room to wonder what had caused the expression to return.

Finally, Dru spoke. "Thou hast said that Tyla had to grow away from thee. Could it not also be true that thou needest grow away from her?" Her voice was subdued, barely audible.

"What's with this 'thou' and 'thee' stuff?" Bred asked. Dru did not answer. Instead, she threw her head back so that she was staring at an upper corner of the room and, without further prelude, began singing. She started off slowly, unsure of herself, but gradually gained confidence. Her singing voice was surprisingly good; Bred had never thought such a rich contralto would be hidden within that admittedly dumpy body. For a moment, he was puzzled as to what was happening, but then, startled, he realized what she was doing.

Dru was sharing her Songs with him.

He had thought virginity was the last barricade Dru had had, but he'd been mistaken. Even after her body had been given to him, her emotions had still been held in reserve. Raised as she had been, her Songs were the last bastion of her intimate self. The Songs *were* Dru and had been kept within her, hidden from the ears of a possibly hostile universe. But now his emotional outburst had triggered one of her own. Physical intimacy had given way to emotional.

Written in Nokrean, the words to the Songs were unintelligible to him, but the meanings were inescapably etched in her voice as she sang. Her face bent to his again, and he could see emotion after emotion play across it, where usually only passive resignation existed. The Songs were joyous and sad, bitter and hopeful, angry and tender. Mirroring the changes in the Songs themselves, her face was fluid for the first time in Bred's memory. This woman was warm and alive and decidedly real, unlike the shadow-woman he had known throughout all their previous acquaintance.

He leaned his head against her and wept, openly and unashamed. She cradled him tightly and moved in a gentle rocking motion as she continued to sing. Her voice positively soared now, its sound filling the entire room. The full gamut of emotions she had held back came pouring out in a torrent of music.

She sang to him for four hours. When she had finished there was only silence; no further communication was conceivable. Totally exhausted, both physically and emotionally, they lay back on the bed and fell asleep.

* * *

The race that had inhabited Pompeii had been a fierce and warlike people. Technology had thrived on Pompeii, spurred on by the constant warfare. Perhaps if there had been any other planets in the system, some of the ethnological drive might have been sublimated into space exploration. But the Pompeiian system was an anomaly among solar systems—it possessed but a single, terrestrial-sized planet, *sans* satellites, and assorted cosmic debris that, if one were being generous, might be termed asteroids. The nearest star was slightly less than a parsec away. Hence space offered no viable challenge or alternative to the Pompeiian mind, nothing to distract them from the pursuit of warfare.

They started out with stones and clubs, which lasted them well through their most primitive stages. Then they graduated to the spear. That new

development kept them satisfied for 700 years until the invention of the chariot mechanized their warfare. After that, the pace of development quickened. The bow and arrow came 400 years later and gunpowder a mere 200 years after that. From that point on, activity never slackened. New wars pressed the Pompeiians into ever more frantic searches for superior weapons. Fear and hatred, more than any individual government, ruled the people.

Then came the atomic weapons, adding a whole new dimension to warfare. From great distances, the Pompeiians could kill more people at a single blow than had ever before been dreamed possible. A series of atomic wars on a scale never before witnessed in the recorded history of the Galaxy followed. Cities were flattened, people were slaughtered, and the air was thick with radiation, but the Pompeiians stubbornly continued.

There was one city, however, that strove to break the pattern of cyclic destruction—it buried itself completely underground. In subterranean tunnels lined with titanium and other superstrong metals, the people barricaded themselves against the world. They boasted that their city could withstand even a direct nuclear assault... and they were right. Other nations directed their supreme efforts at this fortress, but without success. And when they had finished with their biggest blows, the city struck back. Its all-out nuclear attacks completely devastated its foes, leaving them scattered and impotent. Suddenly, the city found itself the only major power on the planet.

The city's dominance lasted for more than three centuries. Occasionally, a resistance group, refusing to let hatreds die, would build and launch an atomic device at the city; the effort would fail and the city would proceed to wipe out the resistance again. What passed for peace on Pompeii reigned supreme during this time.

Then a new secret weapon was developed by some dissidents. It was known as a lava bomb, and it generated a heat so intense it could melt the very ground itself. This, they thought, would be the weapon that would finally put an end to the rule of their hated masters.

Their attack was launched in one incredibly devastating day. Most of the lava bombs had been planted secretly within the main city itself, while the rest were located in secondary cities that were used as control points around the globe. And the events of that one day were the culmination of

Pompeii's millennia of warfare—all life ceased to exist.

What the Pompeiians had failed to take into account was their world itself. For more than 1,000 years, it had withstood frequent and harsh abuse from nuclear armaments—vast explosions ripping away at the crust. Collectively, these cataclysms had weakened the superstructure of the entire planet. The lava bombs completed the collapse.

The planet opened up like one enormous, festering sore. Within hours, all the land was covered with seething pools of molten metal. The seas churned and boiled into the overheated atmosphere. An orgy of vulcanism ravaged the world, sweeping all life before it as though it had never existed at all.

That final day of warfare produced a year of molten fire. Then gradually the planet calmed down again. The water that had steamed into the atmosphere began to condense, and once more Pompeii felt the cleansing of rain. At first, the water simply boiled up again on contact with the land, but eventually its cooling effect caused the lava to harden. The water ran down in rivulets, cutting shallow grooves into the land, and new oceans were formed in deep basins on the planet's surface. Eventually the planet again took on the appearance of a stable, if sterile, world.

But there was an exception to the stability. The site of the underground city had been the target of nuclear barrages for centuries, making the area radioactive and hot. Also, more lava bombs had exploded in this area than any other. As a result, the entire region had collapsed into a deep valley of flames and bubbling earth. Long after the rest of the planet had made peace with itself, this one hotbed remained, perhaps as a testament to the city that had once flourished there. That city had been built to last, and even now some scraps of its metal remained, occasionally surfacing on the pool of fire and giving archeologists their only chance to assess the culture that had once been Pompeii's.

The site where the city had once been buried was known to humans as the Flame Pits.

* * *

Even from space, Pompeii had looked like a dead world, its landmasses brown and cracked as withered leaves, its oceans blue but lifeless. Now, as Luuj Kirre brought the *Honey B* closer to its surface, the world appeared

even more forbidding; not even a spot of green relieved the monotony of brown. The world was much as it must have been in its beginnings. As though angered at the abuse it had received, it had reached out and obliterated its own child, Life. Stillness reigned over the planet.

From an altitude of 150 kilometers, the Flame Pits had been barely visible as a pinpoint of red on the grayish brown background. Now, however, with the spacecraft hovering just 500 meters above, the pits dominated the landscape. Beneath them the molten mass boiled and bubbled like a witch's brew.

"Can't we go any lower?" Tyla asked the captain. "I'd like a closer look if possible."

Luj hesitated before replying. "It might be dangerous."

"It might also be dangerous to go down there with one of the lifeboats before we've scouted the area with this ship."

Reluctantly, Luj agreed. Moving her hands across the control console, she caused the ship to swoop down over the lava bed.

The Flame Pits lay in a gorge between two towering mountain ranges. The pits were roughly 80 kilometers long and 20 wide at the broadest part. As the *Honey B* crept downward, the crew could see the ever-changing picture below as the hot lava seethed and burbled.

The ship shook. "Air currents," Captain Kirre explained. Normally, the stabilization units could keep the ship safe from buffeting winds, but the hot air rising from the enormous mass of molten lava was sufficient to jar even a ship the size of the *Honey B*.

"Lower," Tyla said curtly.

Luj gave her a silent stare. She wanted to tell Mistress deVrie that they were pushing the danger limit now, but Bred nodded at her and, reluctantly, she obeyed.

They had reached an altitude of 200 meters when the buffeting began in earnest. The ship jerked, then pulled violently sideways. If the crew hadn't been strapped in, they would have been thrown from their acceleration couches. "That's low enough," Luj decided. "Engineer,

prepare to reverse engines, We'll go up high enough to get ourselves out of these drafts, then look for a solid spot nearby where we can park."

As Nezla started to comply with the orders, another wave of air currents jolted the ship. This time it felt as though a giant hand had grabbed the vessel and was shaking it like a toy. The crew's teeth rattled as they struggled to maintain their control.

"We're off balance," Sora reported sharply.

LuuJ glanced quickly at her own console. According to the instruments, the ship was now pointed three and a half degrees from the vertical. "Engineer, emergency power," she snapped. "Get us upright!" Should their cant increase, they would be in serious trouble.

Nezla knew the situation as well as the captain. "There ain't no emergency power," she said. "We've been jury-rigged since Gondra. I'd have to go arear and change everythin' around to get more juice out."

"How long would that take?"

"Half an hour."

They didn't have half an hour to spare, and both of them knew that. "Then shift some power over from the drive circuits."

"If I do that, we'll fall."

"And if you don't, we may end up leaning at an intolerable angle with no dragons to straighten us up again. I want this ship righted at once."

"Yes, Captain." Nezla started playing with her own controls just as another jolt of air hit the ship. The *Honey B* twisted and spun in the grip of the current, making the occupants slightly dizzy. The tilt angle was now six degrees—well past the acceptable limit.

Nezla moved quickly. She cut the power from the drives with one switch and instead fed it over to the stabilization units, which normally used only minimum power. The ship was vibrating steadily as, helpless, it rode the currents of hot air rising around it. Slowly, it began to fall toward the heated ooze beneath it as the engineer concentrated her efforts to keep its nose pointed straight up. Finally, with a jarring plop, the ship landed in

the lava itself.

"Tilt angle, two and a half degrees," Sora read off.

"Tolerable," Luuj nodded, hiding her tremendous relief.

The captain turned to Nezla. "What about the hull? Is it safe in the lava?"

"From what I've heard, the lava's at 1200 Celsius, and durasteel can take up to 1500. The ship'll hold together, yes. But pretty soon the air in here is gonna get drummin' hot."

"Can we pull ourselves out of this?" was Luuj's next question.

"Only with a complete reworkin' of the engines. The lava's actin' like quicksand, slowly suckin' us down. I can try soupin' up the engines, but it'll take us right to the tolerance safety limit."

"Well," drawled Vini, "I'd rather risk an engine explosion than be cooped up here for the rest of what would be a short, hot lifetime."

The rest of the crew murmured agreement. "How long will it take you?" Luuj asked.

"If you're willin' to help me, I'd say three hours, maybe less."

"Then let's get started." Luuj, closely followed by Nezla, unstrapped herself from her couch and started toward the rear of the ship.

"As long as we're stuck here, we might as well go fishing for our artifact," Tyla said.

"We might not need to," Sora put in. "This ship itself is an artifact. By pulling it out, we will have already gotten an artifact from the Flame Pits."

"NO!" the Umpire roared vehemently. "That interpretation is not acceptable. As was the case in the Vortex, the artifact must have been in the Flame Pits *before* the contestant arrived, and it may not be something placed there by any parties assisting the contestant."

"Well, Sora, you can't win 'em all," Vini consoled.

"Johnathan," Tyla continued after the interruption, "will you fly the lifeboat for us again?"

"I'd be glad to," he smiled, marveling at how Tyla was finally accepting him as a person. *Maybe she is in love with me*, he thought—and that realization made him feel so warm that he decided he must be in love with her as well.

"Okay," said Tyla. "Bred, you, me, Johnathan and the Umpire are going out right now. With any luck, we'll have our artifact by the time Nezla's ready to get us out of here again."

They climbed down the Core to the Lifeboat Dock in Sector III. *Queen* and *Drone*, the two lifeboats that had been used in the Vortex, had not yet been completely modified for normal use, and so *Worker* would be used. Although Pompeii did have an oxygen atmosphere, the lifeboat party donned their space helmets anyway. Not only would their completely closed suits give them better insulation from the heat, but also protection from the noxious rising fumes—poisonous if inhaled for any length of time.

The *Honey B* had come down at one edge of the 80-kilometer rift, known as the Flame Pits. Almost directly behind them rose a great range of hills containing the lava on the northern side. To the south of them lay the pits, their searing depths stretching for kilometer after kilometer.

They felt the effects almost at once, as the little lifeboat began bucking and bouncing the instant it was free of the mother ship. Johnathan was fully occupied with keeping the vessel on a reasonably straight course, competing with the convection currents that played at tossing it around. Inside the lifeboat, the temperature began rising, and even the tough space suits could not completely eliminate the heat.

"This isn't the most enjoyable ride I've ever had," Bred commented after one lurch of the ship bounced his helmet against the ceiling. "I'm going to be black and blue for a month."

"Keep watching outside," Tyla told him brusquely, never moving from her own porthole despite the motions of the boat. "It's all in a good cause. You'll have plenty of time to recuperate after we get our artifact."

They flew over the Flame Pits for 40 minutes, and the only sight

beneath them was the unbroken bed of lava. Finally, Tyla spotted something light-colored floating on the scarlet sea. "There!" she exclaimed. "Let's try for that."

Johnathan looked where she had pointed and saw the metal object in question. He maneuvered the ship closer to the planet's surface. The lower they got, the worse the convection currents became until, at a height of 20 meters, the lifeboat was barely controllable. "This is as close as we can come," he said. "We'll have to try fishing for the thing from here."

Bred took a thick metal cable with a magnetic hook attached to its end and began lowering it out the opened door of the lifeboat. He worked quickly, for the cable's heat was penetrating his gloves, and he wanted to haul in his catch before the cable itself melted from the intense heat. As he worked, he peered over the side in an effort to identify the thing shimmering below him.

Whatever the object was, it did not seem to be magnetic. But it did have some projections, and after several unsuccessful tries, Bred managed to snare it on his hook. "Got it," he said quietly. Then he added to his sister, "Help me pull it in."

Quickly, yet carefully, so as not to let the object unhook itself and fall back into the pits, the two of them reeled in the cable. It was heavy, about 50 kilos, and required their combined strength to lift it. To make matters worse, its great weight was stretching the cable. The more heat the cable was subjected to, the more pliable it became. It seemed to stretch an additional meter for every three they hauled in.

But at last the object was up and they pulled it into the lifeboat. They were careful not to touch it, for it was still tremendously hot, but all three examined it closely.

It was a large, rectangular box, a meter and a half long with a side cross section square of 40 centimeters. Its metal sides were badly scratched and dulled after countless years of floating in the lava. Tiny electronic dials and knobs on the top remained miraculously intact but unreadable, and still appeared to be functional. The box was covered with small carrying handles.

"What is it?" Bred wondered aloud.

"From the information available to me," the Umpire answered him unemotionally, "I would surmise that this is an unexploded lava bomb, of the type that caused the ultimate disaster to this planet."

Bred gave a low whistle. "I don't think we'd better bring this back with us."

"Why not?" demanded his sister.

"Just think what it could do if it went off accidentally inside the ship. We'd all be killed... and we'd lose the Hunt," he added facetiously.

"If it hasn't gone off all those centuries in the Flame Pits, maybe it can't explode," Tyla argued. "It might be just a dud."

"I wouldn't like to take that chance," Bred insisted.

"Those dials look like a timing device," Johnathan murmured, taking a few moments off from the controls of the boat to examine the object more closely. "Maybe it was just never set properly."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, that box is suicide." Bred made that declaration with an air of finality. "I'm sorry, little sibling, but we're going to have to find some other artifact to take home with us."

Tyla did not argue the point further; no doubt she was also worried that the bomb might still be live. "How do we get rid of it, though?" she asked. "It's still too hot to push out of here."

"Let me do it," Johnathan volunteered. "With just one push, not too much heat will penetrate my suit, and my skin doesn't burn very easily anyway."

He braced his legs against the wall opposite the doorway. In one quick motion, he pushed against the box with the palms of his gloved hands and shoved. The box grated slowly across the lifeboat floor and then fell out the hatchway. Johnathan's momentum almost carried him out with it, but Bred and Tyla each grabbed an arm and held him securely inside the boat. They watched the bomb splash down into the lava to float there as before.

They set out again to find a new object. After 30 more minutes of searching, they were rewarded with another glint of metal in the fiery lake

below. The same procedure was repeated and the cable lowered. This time, the magnetic hook brought up a small, twisted scrap of metal, possibly part of a corridor wall from the underground city. Although it had no identifiable markings, it was clearly an artificial creation.

"Will this do?" Bred asked the Umpire.

The robot examined the object carefully before rendering a verdict. "Yes, this appears to be an article artificially produced that existed here before the contestant arrived. This object therefore fulfills the requirements of the Hunt."

Bred smiled and turned to the android. "Home, Johnathan," he said.

* * *

Vini met them as they emerged from the Lifeboat Dock. "How'd it go?" she asked eagerly.

"We got it," Bred told her. "A small piece of metal. It's still too hot to handle, so I left it in the boat to cool off. Wow, it's hot in here though, isn't it?"

"Yeah, the cooling units are having trouble getting rid of all the heat soaking through our hull. I hope we can get out of here soon before we roast. I mean, I like an occasional trip to the Sauna, but this is too much of a good thing."

Using the intercom, Bred signaled to the Engineering Sector. "We've got what we need up here," he said. "How are things down there?"

"Give us about an hour more," came back Nezla's voice.

"We might as well go up to the Control Sector meanwhile," Tyla suggested. "Sora and Dru can plot a course to our next destination so we'll be all ready when Nezla and the captain finish their work."

They climbed up the Core to Sector I and gave the crewwomen who'd stayed aboard a brief account of their adventures over the Flame Pits. Then Bred asked the Umpire, "Okay, what do we need next?"

"There are no more items on your list," the robot stated. "You are now

to proceed to Huntworld, and if you are the first contestant to arrive with all items obtained, you will be the winner."

A dead silence hung in the air as the disbelieving crew digested this news. Then Tyla turned to Bred. "We did it!" she said. Her words were ecstatic, but her tone was merely tired. "We have everything on our list. And I'll bet, *bruder mein*, you thought we'd never do it."

"There were a couple of times when I had my doubts," Bred admitted. "But we've got a good crew and we worked hard. I suppose that's all it takes."

"Now all we have to do is beat Jusser back," Tyla said. The glint in her eyes was positively carnivorous. "And we will, I can feel it. We're going to beat him to Huntworld and we're going to win. It's Destiny, like I've been saying all along. Jusser killed Mom and Dad last time, and now we're going to beat him."

Could she be right about her Destiny? Bred wondered. It sounds so farfetched, though everything that's happened has borne it out. Well, I'll still reserve my judgment until we're actually on Huntworld.

He moved to the intercom on the control console. "Hey, you two," he called down to Sector VI, "the Umpire says we've got all the objects on our list, so hurry it up. We want to get back to Huntworld."

"Great," Nezla shouted back.

"Our immediate problem," Luuj said more soberly, "is getting off this planet. We'll be pushing the engines' tolerances right up to the safety limit. They could explode on takeoff and either kill us immediately or leave us to a lingering death in the lava. I suggest you consider that possibility before doing any celebrating."

"I'm not going to let that depress me," Tyla said. "We are going to win, I know it."

"We've got visitors," Sora broke in suddenly.

"What?" The exclamation was general throughout the Control Sector.

"Another ship just registered on the instrument panel. It's in orbit

above us right now, and if it's going to come down it'll take about 45 minutes to spiral in. It may be another contestant. Want me to try to contact them?"

"Yes," Tyla said quickly. As Sora reached over to the Engineer's console to turn on the radio equipment, Bred could see his sister inhale and hold a deep breath. He knew what she was thinking—that this new visitor might be the one who would most seriously threaten the *Honey B*'s chances.

"This is the *Honey B*," Sora said calmly. "Who's up there?"

There was a momentary pause before an answer came back. "Well, so we meet again," said the well-oiled voice of Ambic Jusser. "This is the *Hermes*. How is everything down there with you?"

"Very bad," Tyla said to him. "There are no more artifacts to be had anywhere in the Flame Pits. We've been searching here for three days and haven't found a thing."

"Please excuse the cynicism, my dear, but I'm afraid I don't believe you any more—about anything," Jusser said. "The items on the lists may be difficult to obtain, but never impossible. If indeed you haven't found what you were looking for, then I suggest it might be due to a lack of ability. Perhaps you should leave the hunting to those more capable of it."

"We are perfectly capable, thank you," Tyla bristled.

"Be that as it may, I intend to come down and look around for myself. By the way, my instruments tell me that your ship is actually within the pits themselves. What are you doing there?"

"Enjoying the unseasonable warmth," Bred put in.

"Well, I would dearly love to chat with you some more, but unfortunately I have some piloting chores that will occupy most of my time. Perhaps I'll have the opportunity to talk to you again at my victory party." And with that, he cut off his radio.

"Damn!" Tyla shouted. "He would have to show up right now, the swaggering, drumheaded, murderous..."

"Calm down," Bred told her, then turned to the robot. "Umpire, is an

artifact from the Flame Pits also the last item on Ambic Jusser's list?"

"I do not have that information," the robot informed him.

"It probably is," Sora pointed out. "His list and ours have run parallel in three of the six items, and if all lists are supposed to be of equal difficulty, I'd bet on this being his last item, too. But, of course, he won't know that until after he's obtained his artifact. We have the advantage in that respect, because we know something he doesn't."

Tyla was still muttering under her breath, and Bred tried his best to calm her. "Even if this is his last object, we're still ahead of him," he reasoned. "Nezla said we'll be ready to go in less than an hour, and it'll take him 45 minutes just to spiral down here and start looking for his artifact. Even if it takes him half as long as it took us to find one, we'll still have a headstart on him back to Huntworld."

Dismally, Tyla shook her head. "That won't matter. Remember how he beat us to Gondra? The *Honey B* isn't a racing ship; the *Hermes* is. It's simply faster than ours. Even with a two-hour head start, he'd be able to pass us. Sora, how long will it take us to get from here to Huntworld?"

The astrogator made a quick mental calculation. "Roughly ten days," she said.

"In that time, the *Hermes* could gain maybe nine or ten hours on us—enough to put him ahead. Unless Jusser is incredibly bad at finding an artifact—and we know he won't be—he'll beat us back to Huntworld."

"Do you want to give up, then?" Bred asked.

Tyla's face went red. "No! We keep on trying. Something will happen to help us; it always does. We will win. It's my Destiny."

The maniacal glow on Tyla's face was frightening. The sweet, sometimes insecure sister Bred had known had given way to a ranting megalomaniac who believed in a mystical fate that would solve all her problems. The signs had been there for a long time, but he had deliberately failed to read their meaning: his sister was going insane. And he could think of nothing to alleviate the situation.

As Bred stood there, unsure of what to do or say, Johnathan spoke up.

"This Hunt means everything to you, doesn't it, Tyla?"

"Damned right," Tyla growled. "It means a lot to you too, after all the effort your people have put into training you to win."

The android nodded absently, then walked out of the cabin. No one paid him any particular attention; Tyla held the center stage.

"What if you're wrong?" Bred asked his sister quietly. "What if there is no Destiny after all?"

"But there is..."

"Just suppose there isn't. Suppose you do lose. Would you survive it?"

"What makes you so sure I'm wrong?" Tyla countered evasively. "What if you're wrong, and there is a Destiny?"

Bred shrugged. "Then I'll face up to it and admit I made a mistake. It wouldn't be so terrible. Could you do the same thing?"

Tyla did not answer immediately. She gripped the edge of the couch tightly. The profuse sweat on her forehead was not just a result of the temperature inside the Control Sector. "I'm not wrong," she repeated hoarsely. "I'm not..."

Suddenly, below them, was a short rasping sound, and the ship shuddered slightly. "What was that?" Bred asked.

In answer, Sora pointed to the trivid screen. One of the *Honey B's* lifeboats could be seen drawing away from the parent ship. "Somebody went out," she said.

"But who?" Vini asked. "We're all here."

"Johnathan isn't," Sora pointed out. She was already starting to hail the lifeboat on its emergency frequency. "*Honey B to Worker*, come in."

"I hear you," Johnathan acknowledged.

"Just what in Space do you think you're doing?" Bred asked angrily.

"I'm going to save the Hunt for Tyla."

"How do you plan to do that? Pick up all the artifacts yourself?"

"No. I'm going to detonate that lava bomb we found."

A crashing silence throughout the Control Sector followed several sharp intakes of breath. Finally Tyla spoke. "But the artifact we already have is in your boat. You're risking losing it just to destroy all the others."

"No, I dragged it out of the lifeboat before I left, just in case something should happen to me. It's in the Lifeboat Dock."

"You're being ridiculous," Bred said. "There's nothing to gain this way."

"Yes there is. By blowing up the Flame Pits with the remaining lava bomb, I'll keep Jusser from getting any artifacts, and Tyla will win."

"Come back here this instant," Bred ordered.

"Sorry, Bred, but this is something I have to do. I think you know why. See you in a little while."

A sharp click followed. Sora checked the instrument panel and proclaimed, "He's switched off his radio. We can't even talk to him now."

Damn that fool! Bred thought angrily. *Why does he always have to be so drumming melodramatic?*

Tyla was staring at him. "What did he mean, 'you know why'?"

"I'll tell you later," Bred said. He was in no mood to explain the facts of romance to his sister at a time like this.

They watched *Worker* erratically making its way through the violent air currents above the Flame Pits. Since Johnathan now had the double duty of pilot and spotter, he moved slowly and carefully, sacrificing speed in order not to miss a glimpse of the bomb. *Worker* jerked several times, threatening to plunge into the fiery pits, but each time Johnathan managed to hold the boat on its course.

"Finished a little sooner'n I thought we would." Behind them Nezla's voice startled everyone in the cabin with its suddenness. "We can take off now. What's everybody watchin'?"

Bred gave her and the captain a brief account of what had transpired, and Nezla swore loudly. "That foamheaded setchsucker's gonna ruin everythin'!"

"Let's hope not," Bred said.

Luuji Kirre was all business. "There's nothing we can do about him now except hope he comes back safely. Meanwhile, we can make preparations for takeoff and be ready to leave the moment *Worker* returns."

The Flight Operations crewwomen began their pre-takeoff checkout, burying themselves in routine in an effort to avoid worrying about Johnathan. Bred, Tyla and Vini, however, had no such refuge and could only watch the trivid screens in helpless fascination. When *Worker* shrank to a small dot, they turned up the magnification so they could continue watching. Now 50 kilometers away, the lifeboat slowed and hovered—or tried to—in one spot, bouncing wildly as it caught the vicious currents. The hatch opened and the hook was lowered slowly to an object that was invisible on the *Honey B's* screens. The only sound in the Control Sector was the quiet murmurs of the Flight Operations women. Bred could appreciate the difficulty Johnathan would be having in trying to lift that 50 kilo weight all by himself. The boat was shaking even worse than on the first trip because no additional person was there to man the controls and hold it steady.

Bred shot a quick glance at his sister. Tyla's face was ashen, and her hands were gripping the couch so tightly that her fingers, as well as her knuckles, were white.

She was sweating profusely—but then, they all were in this overheated atmosphere. With zombielike intensity she was staring at the screens, and occasionally her lips would move silently. If Bred had had any doubts at all about his sister's feelings for the android, they vanished at that moment. Anxiety was altogether too visible on her face.

"We're ready," Luuji said unexpectedly. "Now we just have to wait for him."

"He's cutting it close," Sora commented. "Jusser will be down here soon."

Bred glanced at his wrist chronometer and was surprised to discover

that 35 minutes had elapsed since Johnathan had left the *Honey B*. Time had completely ceased to exist for the witnesses to the silent drama.

They were all watching now. Nothing happened for several minutes after the bomb disappeared into the lifeboat. Suddenly it was pushed out the hatch again to fall into the lava below. *Worker's* hatch closed and the boat turned around to head back to the mother ship. Johnathan now abandoned care in favor of speed.

"I hope he realized when he set the timer," Sora said, "that alien time units are different than ours. Any markings on it are not likely to correspond to minutes and seconds."

"There were no markings that I recall," Bred put in. "I'm hoping it turns out to be a dud."

"Maybe he'll make it yet," Nezla said, very softly.

But he didn't. The lifeboat had traversed only 20 of the 50 kilometers back to the ship when the explosion occurred. A brilliant flash of light temporarily blinded everyone in the cabin. When they could see again, the valley had become an inferno. The mountains on either side were melting like chocolate in the sun. Large, semi-solid chunks of lava were flung high in the air. The pits seethed and bubbled with an immense, renewed energy.

The little lifeboat was caught in the aftermath. Its motors, though powerful enough to propel it quickly between planets, were no match for the fury of the nightmarish blast. It was thrown about like a piece of uncontrolled debris, tossed high in the air, allowed to fall, only to be borne upward again by some freak current. Several times, they could detect attempts by Johnathan to regain control of his craft, but he was fighting a useless struggle against stronger natural forces.

Then a large piece of flying debris struck *Worker*. The lifeboat plummeted downward and stuck in the ooze. The lava, hotter than ever, surrounded the vessel and, within the space of five seconds, swallowed it completely. The lifeboat vanished without a trace.

Dead silence for a full minute. Then Tyla, who had apparently been holding her breath during the episode, began panting harshly. No one could think of anything to say. Johnathan had been everyone's friend and

companion throughout their interesting and dangerous adventures. In the backs of their minds, they knew that one of their number might die in this enterprise, but so far this fear had remained buried. Now, with shocking reality, it was brought to the surface and left them all stunned.

It was Tyla who recovered her voice first. "I don't think there's any point in remaining here any longer," she said hoarsely.

"You're still determined to win, ain't you?" Nezla accused.

With frightening coolness, Tyla gazed at the engineer. "Johnathan died so that we would have a chance to beat Jusser. I don't want him to have died in vain." She turned to Luuj. "Captain Kirre, take off at once."

CHAPTER SIX

Bred could see no better course than to go along with his sister's wishes. Nothing more could be done here, and Johnathan's intention had been for them to win. To deny that triumph now would make his death a mockery. With a sigh, he said, "She's right, Luuj. Let's get out of here."

"If we can," the captain muttered under her breath.

Minds numbed by tragedy had to wrench themselves away to concentrate on the business at hand. Fortunately, the preliminaries had all been completed while Johnathan had been planting the fatal bomb; all that was left now was to set the ship in motion and hope that Nezla's adjustments to the engines would be sufficient to pull the ship out of the pits.

The heat within the cabin was stifling, but even that could not account for all the sweat on the foreheads of the Flight Operations crewwomen. The *Honey B* was thoroughly mired in the molten lava, and its engines, in poor shape since the crash on Gondra, had had to be completely overhauled. Asking them now to perform at an above-average level would bring them right to their critical limit. There was the definite chance that they might explode, stranding the *Honey B* here permanently. And if they held together, there was still doubt that the modifications had been sufficient to be of any use.

"It's gonna be a little heavier than usual in here," Nezla warned people. "In order to get up enough power outside, the internal grav field has to be

hyped up above normal."

"How high?" Bred asked.

"Four drummin' gees," Nezla said matter-of-factly.

Without giving the passengers time to consider that, Captain Kirre gave the order to turn on the internal field. Instantly, the occupants of the vessel were hit by the crippling force of four times their standard weight, pressing them deeply into their acceleration couches. Breathing became difficult, movement next to impossible. Their eyes ached.

"External drive," said Luuj tersely, flipping the appropriate switch. The crew was quite familiar with a routine lift-off, gentle and seemingly effortless despite the enormous forces involved. This lift-off, however, was far from routine. As they watched the landscape outside the ship, it did not fall away easily beneath them as would normally have been expected. For a few highly suspenseful seconds, the ship did not move at all.

"Engine tolerances?" Luuj asked.

"Pushin' the limit," Nezla informed her. "This is it. If we don't move now, we never will."

The ship shuddered. Wondering if the engines had exploded, all eyes turned to Nezla, but she shook her head. The ship was merely trying to pull itself free. More shudders. The ship began to tilt.

"Four degrees," Sora read from her instruments, and everyone's mind had the same thought: was this to be the total result of their super-powered engines? Falling over sideways into the lava?

Then, with one teeth-rattling burst, the *Honey B* pulled free and began accelerating upward. The ground fell away below them at a dizzying rate, as their enhanced engines, suddenly without the lava to contend with, shot them upward at superspeed.

"Cut power," Luuj ordered, and Nezla complied at once. Now that they were free of the Flame Pits, there was no need for the extra energy. By turning several dials on her console, the engineer was able to slacken their rate of climb and ease the burden on their overtaxed engines. The ship assumed a more normal skyward pace, and the internal gravity was eased.

"We passed Jusser's ship," Sora announced. "He was almost down as we came up."

"I hope we backwashed him," Tyla said bitterly.

"No such luck," Sora answered. "But I doubt he'll be able to find any artifacts in that mess down there."

The ship climbed above the atmosphere and established itself in an orbit around Pompeii. Sora and Dru had already calculated the path from Pompeii to Huntworld, and were preparing the ship for its insertion once more into hyperspace.

Bred was watching his sister carefully. She did not take her eyes off the image of Pompeii on the screen below. Probably she had not yet realized that she had been in love with Johnathan, but her sense of loss and grief was clearly evident on her face. She had left a part of her life down there, buried in the pits. Johnathan would have given her a chance to grow and mature, a chance she needed desperately—something that, by the very nature of his own sibling relationship to her, Bred knew he could never provide. He only hoped the chance would not be gone forever, that someone else would come along to regain her love before it became too late for her to love anyone.

The *Honey B* slipped into hyperspace and began its journey back to Huntworld and a probable victory. But the mood of its occupants was far from victorious.

* * *

Heat.

That was what he was most aware of as consciousness slowly returned. Even through his spacesuit he could feel the blazing relentlessness of it. He thought his bones were on fire and his eyes were sparking. His mouth felt as parched as the inside of a blast furnace.

There was a ringing in his head that would not stop and a pounding throughout his entire body that he recognized belatedly as his own heartbeat.

He opened his eyes. The walls were glowing; everything was red.

Nothing in his line of vision had a definite shape or a sharp outline. The very air within the boat was working against him, as it shimmered madly, refusing to let him see straight.

Something had hit the lifeboat, knocking him against the wall and rendering him unconscious. Evidently the boat had fallen into the lava pits, and perhaps now was completely submerged. But how long had he been blacked out? It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes, he was sure, or he wouldn't have awakened at all. His helmet was still intact after banging against the wall, but he'd expected that—the helmet and suit were both made of materials guaranteed to endure a wide variety of abuses.

One thing was certain: he was going to die. In the midst of this heat, the fact seemed inescapable. He had done what he'd set out to do and had perhaps shown Tyla the depth of his feelings. He regretted the outcome, but knew that he would act the same way if given the choice again. The Scavenger Hunt was the most important thing in Tyla's life; she deserved to win it.

The knowledge of imminent death brought his mind to perfect clarity. The death itself was unavoidable, but at least he did have some choice in the style of his demise. He could stay inside the lifeboat and wait for a slow, painful death—inevitable as the heat built up through his spacesuit. The temperature would become progressively more torturous, until at some point his blood would begin to boil and he would die in agony. The concept made him shiver despite the heat.

The survival gear in the boat included a laser pistol.

He could use it on himself. The death would be quick and merciful, sparing him the pain of the lingering end. The idea was tempting—he had no particular fondness for pain, and a laser beam through the head was probably the most painless way to die. But there was something ignominious about that form of suicide, something that would brand him as less than human in his own eyes. Even though he would be the only one to know it—and for a brief time, at that—he could not accept that alternative.

Bred would say I'm being a hopeless romantic, he thought, and he'd probably be right. But I've lived my whole life that way, so I may as well die that way.

There was a third alternative. He could leave the lifeboat—open the hatch and try swimming upward to the surface. He would die that way too, of course. No one, not even in a space suit, not even with an android's unusual heat-resistant skin, could survive a bath in molten metal at 1200 Celsius. He had no delusions of somehow succeeding. But the idea appealed to him. He would not be simply sitting and waiting for death, nor would he die by his own hand in an attempt to cheat it. He would die by challenging death, by meeting it head on in a valiant, if useless, struggle for life. He would die swimming upward to the light and air, like a man should, rather than surrendering alone and pitiful in an ocean of fire. He would be the only person to note his own passing; but death is a very personal thing, and after all, he was the only person to whom it mattered.

With a last, lingering look at life, he reached for the hatch door.

* * *

When the bomb went off, the *Hermes* was slightly less than a kilometer above the Flame Pits. Jusser had, of course, noted the flight of *Worker*, but had assumed that it was merely Tyla's party picking up its own artifact. He had been on the other side of the planet when Johnathan had informed the *Honey B* of his intentions and could not eavesdrop on the radio contact between the lifeboat and its parent ship. Consequently, the events that followed took him completely by surprise.

The explosion threw his ship off balance and the subsequent violent air currents threatened to toss the *Hermes*, less than two-thirds the size of the *Honey B*, into chaotic flight. But Jusser was a skilled racing pilot, quite experienced with turbulent atmosphere. His assistant, Kor Znalencov, was no less adept. The two of them, after a moment of initial confusion, managed to keep their vessel stable and airborne.

"What in holy Space was that?" Jusser growled when the ship was back under control.

The *Hermes*, unlike the *Honey B*, had been constructed in a mood of common sense and practicality, and its control room walls were not one enormous trivid screen. A small screen was a part of the console, however, and pointing to it Znalencov said, "They set off a bomb down there. See how the lava's churning?"

"Damn! It'll be impossible to find anything in that." He fumed privately for several seconds. "This must have been Tyla's idea. Bred is far too idealistic to have pulled something as underhanded as this."

"The *Honey B*'s taking off," Znalenzov noted.

"Sure, they've done what they wanted to do—drum me up. They've probably gotten their artifact and are on their way to the next object. But I'm not going to let them stop me." He turned his full attention to the control console. "Let's go down again and look for something."

Slowly, fighting off the air currents, the *Hermes* descended to within a dozen meters of the surface. Neither Jusser nor his assistant needed to be concerned with keeping their ship upright, as had the crew of the *Honey B*. Jusser had planned the *Hermes* for all contingencies, and the ship could take off at any angle. All of the ship's power could be concentrated on keeping it in the air and out of the lava.

Once his ship had reached the desired altitude, Jusser began cruising horizontally. He turned the exterior trivid cameras to their widest possible scope, and he and his assistant began searching through the molten metal for some sign of the object they needed.

"There!" A split second ahead of Jusser, Znalenzov spotted it—a small, light patch on the darker lava, at the edge of the screen's vision. At that range they couldn't identify it, but it was definitely not part of the lava bed itself.

Playing his console by feel and never once taking his eyes from the trivid screen, Jusser maneuvered the ship. In just a few seconds, they were hovering over the object, staring down at it with disbelief.

"It's a body," Znalenzov said quietly.

"Take over the controls. I'm going to haul it up." Jusser swiveled quickly out of his seat and moved toward the rear of his ship, staggering as the ship bounced on the air currents. His Umpire was right behind him.

His mind was racing as he ran, wondering whose body it could be. It had to be that of someone from the *Honey B*; no Pompeiian could have lasted this long. Probably it was the body of whoever had set the bomb.

But who was that? Despite her jilting him, he hoped it wasn't Tyla—such an end would ill-befit her.

On their way to Pompeii, he and Znalenkov had prepared a length of cable as a lasso to catch possible artifacts. Upon reaching the rear hatch, Jusser donned his helmet and tanks and began fishing for the body. After two unsuccessful tries, the cable caught. It looped around the body and tightened. Slowly, he reeled it into the ship.

The body was a mess. The spacesuit had been subjected to more punishment than even its tough material could handle—it had melted away to a slimy gray film like a second skin. In spots, the suit had burned away completely, leaving the skin exposed to the lava. Bloody areas of muscle tissue showed where skin had been burned off. The helmet was still in place, though it would not have survived much longer. While it had given some protection, the head within it was not unharmed. The air inside had become superheated, charring off all the hair and burning the skin to a fiery red. It was a horrible sight, and Jusser was more than a little appalled.

When he recovered from his initial shock, he examined his catch more closely. It was definitely not a female body; his worst fears were relieved but now he was puzzled. The only male aboard the *Honey B* was Bred, and he would never have been foolish enough to set the lava bomb. He studied the face carefully, then realized with surprise that this was the android's body.

But how could that be? He could distinctly remember backwashing the android's ship on Eclipsiascus. How could it have survived that, and how had it come to be here on Pompeii with the *Honey B*!

A finger on the body's left hand twitched and attracted Jusser's attention. He was about to dismiss the movement as merely a galvanic reflex when suddenly the body began to gasp convulsively for air. This was a minor miracle—the android was still alive!

Jusser thought fast. He was not an unnecessarily cruel man. True, he would let nothing—particularly scruples—interfere with his winning whatever game he was playing. But when the circumstances suited him, he could open his bag of charm and be as magnanimous as anyone. While the android had caused the explosion that seemed destined to rob him of victory, nothing positive could be accomplished by killing it now. "Kor," he

yelled to his assistant, "take the ship out of these currents and put it on auto. I need your help back here."

Several minutes later, Znalenkov arrived at the hatch and peered at the body. "It's the android," Jusser explained, "and it's still alive. Help me get it to the med-chest."

The two men carried Johnathan with difficulty, for they were working in the two-gee internal field needed to maintain the ship's drive. They managed to carry the android into the small dispensary, the Umpire following closely behind. They removed the helmet, peeled off the melted spacesuit—sometimes taking pieces of skin with it—and laid the android gently in the medchest. The apparatus, sensing body warmth, went into operation. An oxygen mask closed over Johnathan's face and needles inserted themselves into his arms to deliver nutrient fluids to his body, particularly his brain. A yellow green liquid filled the chest, submerging the unconscious body. A balm and a regenerative, it would soothe the scarred tissue and encourage new skin to grow. The entire process was automatic and thorough; the medchest could diagnose and treat everything from a skinned elbow to lung cancer. It was the next best thing to—and in some cases, better than—a live doctor, which Jusser had no room for aboard his ship.

Once the android was safely inside the medchest, there was nothing more for Jusser and Znalenkov to do. If Johnathan could possibly pull through this ordeal, the medchest would ensure his success by adding automated care to the android's natural defenses. The two men headed back to the control room.

"Why bother?" Znalenkov asked. "It's only an android."

"It might be able to give us some information about how far Tyla's group is along its list," Jusser said. "And besides, I'd like to know what it was doing in the lava."

Once back in the control room, they brought the ship down near the surface again to resume their search. Only one hour of daylight was left, and when the sun had finally set, they were forced to halt their search until the next day. Not that it was completely dark—the lava took care of that, glowing an eerie red that filled the trivid screen—but it was impossible to make out anything significant in that light, so Jusser piloted his ship out of the Flame Pits and set it down on solid ground for the

night.

For several hours he lay awake in his bunk unable to sleep. He spent the time cursing Tyla and swearing that he would not let that bitch and her fop of a brother defeat him. There had to be some way to win, and he was going to find it. Perhaps the bomb hadn't blanketed the entire area with a new coat of lava, and tomorrow he'd be able to find the necessary artifact. He swore he would succeed.

In the dusky vortex on the edge of sleep, an idea occurred to him. At such times are great solutions given to men of insight and brilliance. Jusser had the answer, simple and direct, to the problem at hand. It was the way to obtain his object and leave, and perhaps still have time to overtake the *Honey B*. But when he awoke in the morning, he could not recall his idea. He spent several minutes lying in the bunk trying to remember it, but it would not come. Eventually he gave up; he had work to do.

He took the *Hermes* out over the pits again at the first light of Pompeii's dawn. The scenery below was unchanged from the previous day—an ocean of red, steaming and gleaming in the morning light. Not a single glint of metal broke the monotony of the landscape, and after five hours of fruitless searching, Jusser brought the ship back to the spot of its night mooring. Both he and Znalenzov were developing eyestrain and needed a break before they could continue looking. Also, both were hungry, and a brief rest would allow them time to have lunch before going back to their dismal search.

On his way back to the tiny galley, Znalenzov looked in on Johnathan. "The android's still alive," he informed Jusser over the intercom. "Still unconscious, but healing slightly. Maybe it'll even survive, who knows?"

Jusser sat in front of his control console, letting that thought seep into his mind. He visualized the hideous shape of the android under its blanket of yellow green liquid. Then he remembered—the android had been a part of the solution he had thought of last night. Something about it... What? It still eluded his mental grasp.

They ate lunch in silence. Znalenzov could see that his employer was moody and knew he had good reason. He was being thwarted in his efforts to win the Scavenger Hunt, the most important of all the Games. Znalenzov preferred not to risk bringing the anger and frustration to the

surface by saying anything. He knew Jusser's temper and was resolved not to fall victim to it.

After lunch, they flew over the pits for a third time. Again, nothing was spotted that could be construed as an artifact. Johnathan's bomb had done a very thorough job of eliminating the last traces of the Pompeiians. Jusser's temper only worsened as the hours passed unsuccessfully.

Finally, Jusser threw up his hands. "Damn! There's nothing down there at all. Every drumming scrap of loose metal has vanished, all because of that mother-drumming, foamheaded android!"

"If it'll make you feel any better," Znalenzov suggested, "we could throw it back into the lava and let it die."

Jusser stopped dead. His face took on an expression of surprise that quickly evolved into a smile of triumph. "No," he said. "No, we keep it. It's going to win the Hunt for us."

"How?"

But Jusser was too exuberant to stop and explain. Instead, he bellowed for the Umpire. When the robot had appeared in the control room, Jusser asked it, "Did you see the body of the being I hauled in yesterday?"

"I did," the robot answered.

"Did you recognize it?"

"It appeared to be the body of Johnathan R, one of the contestants in the Hunt."

"Right. You can make a positive identification later if you wish. Do you know that Johnathan R is an android?"

"I am aware of that fact, yes."

Jusser smiled. "Do you know what an android is?"

"An android is a human grown chemically in a vat instead of being born through natural biological processes."

"In other words," Jusser said triumphantly, "an android is an artifact..."

and, by pulling that android out of the Flame Pits, I have succeeded in obtaining the object on my list."

The Umpire stopped. Inside its delicate brain, Jusser imagined he could hear the electrons flowing through their computer circuits as the robot tried to analyze the situation. "I do not think that this is precisely what was intended. "

"If I'm not mistaken, an artifact is something artificially created, which an android certainly is. The android was in the Flame Pits when we got here, and neither myself nor anyone helping me put it there. All the stated conditions have been met. There was no specification that the artifact be manufactured by the Pompeiians themselves."

The robot was silent for nearly a full minute. Finally it said, "You are right. I hereby rule—reluctantly—that the android satisfies the conditions of the Hunt."

Jusser and Znalenkov both sighed with relief. "All right, then," Jusser went on, "what's next for us?"

"There are no more objects on your list," the Umpire stated. "You are now to proceed to Huntworld. If you are the first contestant to land with all objects obtained, then you will be the winner of the Scavenger Hunt."

Jusser's eyes lit up with the glow of triumph. "Then there's still a chance."

"This was probably the *Honey B's* last object, too," Znalenkov pointed out. "And they've a full day's head start on us."

Jusser barely heard his associate. He was busy digging out the coordinates of Huntworld. "But we're faster than they are. It's almost ten days back to Huntworld. We still have a chance to overtake them." His eyes glinted with the prospect of triumph, and he directed his next words to his far-off opponents.

"You'd better move out of the way, Tyla my dear. Ambic is coming home, and he's coming to win."

* * *

The door to Tyla's cabin was shut, and the sign, in bright red on yellow, said, "CAUTION. ARTIGRAV." With a sigh, Bred rotated himself ninety degrees to be aligned with the artificial gravitational field inside the cabin. There could be only one reason why Tyla had turned on the artigrav.

Sure enough, his sister was crying as he entered the cabin. She didn't even bother to look up; she knew he was the only one who would be intruding on her. In some ways, she had even expected him.

"You look like you could use a talk," he began.

"Why? Because I'm genuinely grieved at death?"

"Cut the sarcasm, Tillie. I'm here to help you. What exactly is your problem?"

Tyla bristled at the nickname and started to frame a retort, then thought better of it. Her demeanor became woeful. "Why did he do it? Why did he do such a stupid thing as that?"

Here it comes, Bred thought. He took a deep breath. "Because he was in love with you."

Tyla looked stunned. "But... but he's... he was only an android. He couldn't have."

"Androids are people, too. You must realize that by now. If he can live and die, why can't he love?"

"But why me? I never did anything to encourage him."

"I think it started out as infatuation on his part. There you were on a pedestal, symbolizing beauty, wealth, everything unattainable. That's why he brought you those flowers just before the Grand Lift-off. It was an offering to a goddess. Then, after being thrown into close confinement with you for all these weeks, he began to see some of your faults and weaknesses. That's the death knell of infatuation. Instead, he began to care about you, and that's when the love started."

Tyla was shaking her head, finding it hard to believe. "In love with me. It's a shock. I never knew..."

"Neither did he, until just before we reached Pompeii. We had a discussion about it."

For several seconds, Tyla was silent. Then she said, "It all goes to prove what I've been saying all along."

"About what?"

"About Destiny. Remember, every time something happens to threaten our victory, something else comes along to save it."

Bred was both astonished and angered at the same time. "Are you trying to tell me that Destiny made Johnathan fall in love with you and give up his life, just so you could win the Scavenger Hunt?"

"Yes, exactly. Jusser was our last and greatest obstacle. Johnathan had to be sacrificed to overcome him."

"Sacrificed!" Bred sputtered for a moment, overwhelmed with rage. "Listen, you egotistical little witch, I know you're more intelligent than that, so I'm assuming you've been taken by a fit of insanity. Johnathan made that decision of his own free will, and I think you should be damned grateful to him."

"Of course I am. But the fact remains that he did it for me and for the Hunt."

Bred reached across and slapped his sister hard on the left cheek. They made a frozen tableau as they stared at each other like strangers. Bred's right hand stung from delivering the blow, and he felt taken aback by his own action. Tyla slowly raised a hand to her cheek, her pain much more than physical.

Finally, Bred gulped and said, "You said Johnathan's loving you was a shock. Be prepared for another one. You were in love with him, too."

Tyla was caught completely off guard by the statement. Her expression fell apart under a mass of conflicting emotions. Shaking her head she started to speak, but Bred interrupted her.

"You're going to try to deny it, I know, but think about it for a while. Let the idea simmer in that kinky little head of yours. Why do you think

you've been

walking around in a trance ever since Pompeii? Because an android died? When were you ever such a champion of android equality?"

Tyla continued to shake her head. "That's impossible. I'm a deVrie. I couldn't have loved an android."

"Stranger things have happened." Now that he had her on the defensive, he was beginning to reestablish his usual calm demeanor.

"I'll admit he was useful and even pleasant company at times..."

"Check your pronoun, Tillie. You're using 'he'. Not too long ago, an android was 'it' to you."

"Yes, but Johnathan wasn't the usual type of android."

"Oh? How many androids do you know?"

"Well, he's the only one I've known personally, but I've heard..."

"Sure you've heard. Mostly from other people who don't know any, either. That's how prejudices build. But that's not really the point. We were talking about you and your love for Johnathan."

"That's ridiculous. I did not love him "

"Are you sure? Be honest with yourself for once. He's dead now, so it doesn't really concern anyone but you. You can admit it and no harm will be done. But unless you admit it to yourself, you'll go around feeling miserable without knowing why. At least give yourself a reason."

Tyla stared stubbornly at the wall behind his left shoulder, silently refusing to acknowledge anything of the sort.

Bred opened the door again and started to leave. "Well, at least think about it, Tillie. That's all I ask."

"Will you stop with that ridiculous nickname?" she shouted. But the door had already closed behind him.

Tyla did think about it. For almost a full day she was incommunicado,

locked in her cabin. Most of the time was spent lying in her bunk, staring up at the wall that served as a ceiling when the artigrav was on. She skipped meals, even when some of the crewwomen offered to bring her something from the Galley.

The walls of the cabin became increasingly confining, like a tomb she was building for herself. She wallowed in it as long as she could stand, then finally had to get out. She turned off the artigrav and swam forewards to Sector I.

The external cameras were registering the blackness of hyperspace on the walls of the Control Sector. The stars of normal space were visible in hyperspace, but their colors were all wrong; even the shape of this universe itself seemed slightly askew. Aside from the erratic starlight, only the soft blinking of the instrument console broke the quiet darkness.

I did love him, she thought in the midst of the infinity. Damn you, Bred, I did. Why do you always have to be right? What made me feel that way about him? I can't understand it.

"It is good for thought, isn't it, Mistress deVrie?"

The voice startled her out of her reverie. Looking quickly around, she saw the small, dumpy form of Dru Awa-om-anoth seated in her acceleration couch. Dru was so unobtrusive that Tyla had failed to notice her upon first entering the Control Sector.

"I did not mean to startle you," Dru went on, seeing Tyla's reaction. "I shall sing my Song of Apology."

"That's all right. I just didn't see you when I came in here."

"It is my turn to stand watch over the instruments. I often use such opportunities to contemplate, and I suspect you are here for the same reason."

"To tell the truth, I don't know why I came here."

"Hyperspace is very restful to watch," Dru said. Silence ensued. Both women had exhausted the conversational possibilities inherent in the local equivalent of the weather.

"Dru. I..." Tyla hesitated, afraid to broach the subject. Dru just looked at her with her usual expression of nonemotion, and eventually Tyla found the strength to go on. "I wonder whether I could talk to you privately about something."

"Of course you may."

"Bred says I was in love with Johnathan. What do you think?"

"Are you trying to obtain a consensus?"

From anyone else, the line would have smacked of sarcasm; from Dru it was a simple question. "I... I'm just so confused I don't know what to think any more. My life was a lot simpler several months ago before this damned Hunt started. I knew who I was and what i was supposed to think and do. Now I don't."

"Do you feel you loved him?"

Tyla exhaled softly. "Yes, I do. There, I've said it aloud. But that's only the beginning of the problem. Because if we were in love with each other, and he died for me, then I was the one who killed him. By allowing him to die that way, I'm guilty of murder."

"You could not have stopped him."

"But I didn't try. I let him go to his death."

"His death was implicit in his very nature. He chose the manner of his departure from life, and he chose to do it in a way that would be useful to you. You are not to blame for what he freely chose."

Tyla shook her head. "I don't think you understand. Because of the very fact that I'm in the Hunt and destined to win, Johnathan had to die. Events have gone beyond my control. I wanted to win, and now fate has taken over. It's like a snowball rolling downhill, getting bigger and bigger. A pressure on my mind says win, win, win, and it won't let up until the Hunt is over."

Dru did not answer immediately. Instead, she reached under her console board and brought something out. "I had a premonition," she said, "that you might come up here while I was on duty. I thought you

might like this."

In her hand was a single flower kept, in freefall, within a plastic bubble-vase. Tyla stared at it, dumbstruck. "Where... how...?"

"It is part of the bouquet he brought you before the Grand Lift-off; I picked it off the wall where you threw it and kept it. I watered the flowers and nourished them as best I could, but they all died except this one. Somehow it managed to survive."

Tyla continued to stare at the flower. Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Dru, thank you." Tentatively, she reached out a hand, and Dru gently put the vase in her palm.

"Dru, I don't know what to say..."

"Then say nothing. I will understand. It is a memento of Johnathan."

"Yes," Tyla sniffled. "A last tribute, and an ironic one at that." On impulse, she took the vase and strapped it to the acceleration couch that Johnathan had used while aboard the *Honey B*. "There," she said. "Now at least he can be symbolically with us when we land."

Dru nodded a silent consent and turned back to monitor the control consoles.

* * *

Symbolically Johnathan may have been in the Control Sector of the *Honey B*, but in actuality he lay inside the medchest aboard the *Hermes*. During the first six days of the trip from Pompeii, his condition remained unchanged—he lay comatose within the case; the only signs of life registering on the instruments were shallow respiration, light heartbeat, and very faint brain waves. The yellow green balm covered his entire body, acting as a local anesthetic to relieve the agony of the burns, and as a regenerative to coax his special skin to grow back over bared muscle. Neither Jusser nor Znalencov could have said for certain whether or not he would pull through.

On the seventh day, his condition changed for the better. He moved slightly in his medicinal bath, his head lolling slightly from side to side. The other two men in the ship took turns watching him, not because they

really cared about his health, but because there was nothing better to do on the long trip back to Huntworld.

Early on the eighth day, his movements began in earnest. His mind, while not totally conscious, was at least capable of sensation, and the liquid balm could not shield Johnathan from all of the intense pain accompanying such serious injury. Within the narrow confines of his box, the patient was almost writhing.

Jusser stood over the medchest, passionlessly observing Johnathan. On an impulse, he pushed a button at the side of the chest and temporarily drained it of its fluid. When enough of it was gone, he removed the air mask that had been placed over the android's nose and mouth. Johnathan's lips were twitching spasmodically, and Jusser went closer to see if he could make out any words. The android was in a state of pain-induced delirium. At first, the only audible sounds were gibberish. After several minutes, individual words became distinguishable.

"... love... sacrifice... die... win Hunt... Tillie... need..."

Tillie? It meant Tyla, more than likely, Jusser decided. The android, he knew, was an extreme romantic; no doubt it had thought it would die nobly in Tyla's service. It very nearly had, and it still might, though how noble the death would be was open to debate.

Jusser listened for about 15 minutes, but the android's delirium only repeated itself, and disclosed no useful information. After refilling the chest with the fluid, Jusser left to tend to other tasks.

The next day, he visited the android again. Johnathan appeared vastly improved from the previous day. New skin had begun to cover the legs, arms and chest, though large red splotches appeared in ugly profusion all over his body. His face, while badly burned, was better off than the rest of him, for it had been protected by the spacesuit helmet. Johnathan's chest moved in an even rhythm, signifying a return to regular breathing.

Jusser partially drained the tank and removed the android's air mask once more. After a moment of reflection, he administered a stimulant and waited. Johnathan's face began contorting as his brain awakened and the agony of his wounds reached in to torment him. Suddenly his eyes shot open, as he realized that he was still alive. His attempt to sit upright was thwarted by his pain.

"Welcome aboard the *Hermes*," Jusser said.

With great effort, Johnathan turned his head to stare at Jusser. At first his lips moved feebly, ineffectually, but eventually his voice returned. "You!" he rasped with disgust.

"Your gratitude is overwhelming."

"You... you almost killed me twice."

"Twice? Oh, you were in the *Honey B* on Gondra, too. But I've also just saved your life. That should count for something."

"I was prepared to die," Johnathan said stubbornly.

"How very noble... and how very typical. That is a loser's attitude, you know."

"Better to be a noble loser than an arrogant winner."

Jusser laughed. "I should never have worried about you. With an attitude like that, you'd have been no competition." He leaned closer to the android. "It may interest you to know that you are going to help me win the Hunt."

"Never," Johnathan vowed, then gasped as a flash of pain shot through his body.

"I'm afraid it's too late for you to take that position—it's already an accomplished fact. You are the artifact I needed from the Flame Pits."

The shock of that revelation almost made Johnathan forget his pain. He was silent for a minute, then said slowly, "You had no right to pull my body out of the pits. I demand that you let me die."

"If that's the way you want it; it makes no difference to me. But a dead artifact is just as good as a live one, so you needn't think that would foil my plans. Would you care to reconsider your demand?"

Johnathan glared stonily at him.

"Your death would accomplish nothing, you know. If I keep you in the medchest, at least you'll live to see your Tillie again."

"Don't ever call her that!" hissed Johnathan.

"Why not?"

"Because she doesn't like it."

Amused, Jusser mulled that over. "We'll see," he said. "By the way, we're about 13 hours away from Huntworld. I've gotten all the objects on my list. I trust Tyla has, too."

"I'm not going to tell you."

"You really don't have to; your expression gives it away. You're a stubborn little andie, do you know that? But it doesn't matter. By tomorrow at this time, I'll have won the Scavenger Hunt." He straightened up. "I think I'll let you live for now. If you prefer, you can always kill yourself later." He reached down with a hyposprayer to give Johnathan a sedative. The android was too weak to resist.

"And tomorrow, Tyla," Jusser said quietly, "we'll see exactly who is and who isn't a winner."

* * *

Huntworld.

Like a toy globe, the planet rotated below them. Never had any world looked so beautiful. This was home base, the end of the adventure, the culmination of months of roaming the Galaxy. All dangers braved, all odds conquered, had been for this moment.

The atmosphere in the Control Sector of the *Honey B* was relaxed. At last the pressure was off. All they had to do was land and collect their prize. The Flight Operations crewwomen in the front couches went about their business in an almost informal manner. Finally Sora announced, "Landing pattern set. We'll be down in two hours."

Tyla sighed with relief. "And still no sign of Jusser. I was so worried he might find a way to win, after all."

"Don't tell me you're losing faith in your Destiny," mocked Bred.

"No, but things have a habit of being tight. For a change, it looks like

it'll be easy this time. Nezla, call the spaceport and find out if we're the first ship to come in."

The engineer sent down the radio query, and in a moment the answer was broadcast up. "No. Eighteen other ships have arrived."

Tyla's hand tightened on the arm of her couch. "Have any of them obtained all the objects on their list?"

"No," said the anonymous voice from the spaceport. "Two of them are lacking one object, five are lacking two, and the rest are lacking three or more."

Tyla loosened her grip. "Good. Then we'll be the first to come in with all objects. Bred, we've won!"

Bred nodded glumly. Since his talk with Tyla several days ago, he had not been in a very good mood. Not even the rest of the crew had been able to cheer him up. If the talk with Johnathan had been the cutting of his sibling ties, then the conversation with Tyla had cauterized the wound. Bred and his sister were now entirely different people; for better or worse, their past relationship was dead and buried.

"A ship just materialized from hyperspace," Sora announced. "It's a lot farther out from Huntworld than we are, though."

"Ten-to-one it's the *Hermes*," Vini said.

Tyla cursed under her breath. But even though so much hung in the balance, Bred couldn't help smiling. "I guess it isn't going to be quite as simple as we thought."

Ignoring him, Tyla turned to Nezla. "Get Jusser on the radio."

Nezla sent out the standard call, and Jusser answered promptly. Tyla took over from the engineer and started the conversation. "Hello, Ambic. It was nice of you to come here to watch me win this Hunt."

"I'm afraid you have been misinformed of my motives," Jusser replied just as elegantly. "I am here to win it myself."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible. We've obtained all our objects, and

you couldn't have gotten one from Pompeii."

"Ah, but I did, my dear. I picked up an artifact after all... though I'll admit that bomb did make it difficult for me."

Tyla's face paled at the news. Her victory was not going to come easily. Unless... could Jusser be lying? But what would be the point of that, other than to shake her self-confidence?

"Even if you did get the artifact, we'll still land first. We're closer to Huntworld than you are."

"You're underestimating me, Tyla. My ship is faster than yours. You had a substantial head start on me, remember, but now I've caught up with you." And with that, he broke the connection.

"He's bluffing," Sora stated flatly. "Ship speed is only a factor in hyperspace travel; it has no influence on landing. The only way to land is to spiral inward slowly, otherwise the ship will burn up." She turned suddenly to Dru and began spouting equations. The little computer fed back answers almost immediately.

Meanwhile, Tyla turned to her brother. "Do you think he means it, Bred?"

"Oh, you know Jusser. He's a loudmouthed braggart, and will be right up until the last minute." To put his sister more at ease, he tried to sound confident, even though he was as uncertain as she was.

"There's no need to worry," Sora interrupted. "There's absolutely no way he can win."

"Are you sure?" Tyla asked breathlessly.

"Positive. We've just done a few calculations. Given our respective positions it is mathematically impossible for him to find an orbit that will enable him to land at the Huntworld Spaceport before we do. He could land someplace other than the spaceport, but the Rules say he must land there to win. If he tried going straight in, he'd burn up in the atmosphere and that would be the end of that. It's not his style."

Tyla felt only slightly relieved. "Keep an eye on him anyway. He's tricky."

Do you think he'd try to backwash us again?"

"This isn't some out-of-the-way planet," Vini said. "This is Huntworld and everybody's watching. They do have laws against murder down there. He'd never get away with it."

The *Honey B* orbited slowly downward to the surface of Huntworld. It was still too high to detect any appreciable resistance from the planet's atmosphere, and the ship's inward spiral was smooth and unhindered. Tyla's mouth felt dry, but she dared not leave the Control Sector to get a drink. She would stay in the cabin until the outcome of the Scavenger Hunt had been decided.

"He's moving," Sora said. "He's changing out of his orbit."

"Find out what he's trying to do," Tyla ordered—superfluously, for Sora and Dru were already engaged in calculations.

"Bred, I'm afraid," Tyla said.

"Relax. You heard Sora. She doesn't use words like 'mathematically impossible' unless she means exactly that. There's no way he can win."

Tyla nodded slowly. "I suppose not. But he's always so sure of himself. It gets to me after a while."

"Damn!" Sora exclaimed from the front console.

"What's the matter?" Tyla asked, her voice cracking with anxiety.

"Damn him!" Sora repeated.

"Has... has he found some way to beat us?" Tyla's words quavered.

Sora took a deep breath before continuing. "Not exactly."

"What in Space is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if we carry on in the same orbit we've got right now, we'll beat him down."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is that he's angled himself under us. In 20 minutes, we're going to have to turn on our engines for retrofire. The way his orbit is now, he'll be directly beneath us at that time."

A silence ensued as everyone digested that. Then Nezla stated the obvious. "In other words, he's deliberately put himself in our backwash."

"Right," Sora nodded.

Luuju considered the problem for a moment. "Astrogator Benning, is there any way we can change our time of retrofire to avoid backwashing the *Hermes*?"

"I'll check." Once again, she and Dru began their sequence of calculations. Not wanting to disturb the two women at this critical stage when the entire Hunt hung in the balance, the occupants of the room fell quiet.

Finally Sora shook her head. "Nope. No way. If we retro later, we'll overshoot the spaceport and have to make another complete orbit before we come in; if we retro earlier, we'll undershoot and have to make time-consuming corrections. In either case, Jusser will beat us down."

"Nezla, get me the *Hermes* again," Tyla snapped. The engineer obeyed. "Hello, Ambic? Are you there?"

"Well, well, Tyla. Imagine hearing from you again so soon."

"I noticed you just changed your orbit."

"Yes, I did."

"Well, it seems that we have a bit of a problem. Our orbit was established first, and that gives us the legal right to it according to all traditions of space law. Your orbit happens to conflict with ours, so I'm afraid you'll have to leave it."

"There's no threat of collision," Jusser pointed out, "so my orbit is perfectly legal. I happen to like it, and I don't feel like changing. Sorry."

"Are you aware that your orbit will be putting you directly in our backwash?"

"Yes. Although my orbit is perfectly legal, I never said it didn't have its drawbacks."

"If you go through our backwash, you'll be killed."

"You're right. Maybe you should change your orbit to avoid me."

Tyla set her jaw. "Our orbit was set first, and we have the legal priority to use it. You changed your orbit knowing it would place you in jeopardy. I relieve myself of any further responsibility in this matter. If you die, it will have been by your own hand." She motioned for Nezla to shut off the radio, and reluctantly, the engineer did.

Bred was staring at her coldly. "Would you mind telling me what that was all about?"

"He's gambling that I won't have the guts to kill him," Tyla replied just as coldly. "He's going to lose."

"But it'll be murder," Nezla protested.

"Suicide," Tyla insisted. "That radio conversation was broadcast publicly. So it's a matter of record that he deliberately put himself in our backwash. They'd never be able to convict me for his stupidity."

"This is insane," Bred muttered.

"No, it's perfectly sane, *bruder mein*. Jusser knows he's lost. He's betting everything on this one last hope. But he's underrated me, and he's going to die for it. I'm ahead and I'm going to stay there. I've got nothing to lose by killing him."

"Except your soul," Bred said quietly. "Little sibling, you hate Jusser, don't you?"

"That should be obvious."

"Why?"

"Because he's an egomaniac and a murderer."

"Correct. Which is precisely what you will be if you go through with this. You're turning into exactly the same sort of creature he is: one with

absolutely no morals. You're sacrificing your integrity just to win a senseless little game."

"It's not a 'senseless little game'," Tyla countered, "it's the Scavenger Hunt. Think of the glory..."

"Drum glory! You're a deVrie, you don't need anything so insubstantial. You hate Jusser for the very things that you yourself are doing. If you go through with it, you'll end up hating yourself, and nothing in the Universe is worth that price."

Tyla shook her head and her voice dropped; she spoke slowly, as to a child, explaining what she thought should have been obvious. "It's not me doing this Bred, it's Destiny. This is the one final piece that completes the picture. Jusser killed our parents in the last Hunt, now he's going to die in retribution by my hand. I don't like to kill anyone, either, but it's ordained. Johnathan died so that we could win. That hurt me terribly. You were right, I did love him. But it was necessary for him to die to set the stage for this final confrontation. I don't mean to sound callous about him, but I am not going to let his death be wasted."

Openmouthed, Bred could only stare at her. "I'm not going to let you do it," he said.

"That's what Jusser's counting on, that you wouldn't go through with it and that you'd stop me. That might have worked, except that we found out he murdered Mom and Dad. He doesn't know we know that, and it's the one thing I can't forgive him for. Never. You promised me I could run this Hunt any way I wanted, and I demand you keep that promise."

Their eyes met and locked. For several seconds, they stared at one another, the gulf between them widening. Finally Bred looked away in disgust. "Luuj, do anything my sister wants. I no longer want anything to do with this business. I will not interfere. It's her soul, and she can do with it as she damn well pleases."

"But Master deVrie," the captain began.

"That's an order, Luuj. Do what she says."

The ship continued its inexorable way around Huntworld. Total silence reigned in the Control Sector. Tyla found that everyone had averted their

eyes from her. *They all hate me*, she thought. *They all think I'm some kind of monster. Can't they see that I don't have any choice in the matter? It's all a play, and I must act my role in it just like them, whether I want to or not.*

Ten minutes before retrofire. The radio came to life. "*Hermes calling Honey B.*"

"Go ahead, Ambic," Tyla said evenly.

"I notice you haven't changed your orbit yet."

"Neither have you. Worried?"

"Not especially. You will. You couldn't live with the knowledge that you were a murderess."

"Being a murderer hasn't seemed to hurt you any."

"What makes you think I am?"

"You murdered my parents."

There was a pause at the other end. "Whatever gave you that idea?" he asked carefully.

"The dragons on Gondra are intelligent beings. They saw it happen and told us all about it."

"Well, I will admit your folks were careless enough to get in the way of my ship's backwash. I can assure you it was all quite accidental, though."

"You're a liar!"

Jusser's voice sounded smug. "Prove it, Tillie."

Tyla was too incensed already to even notice that nickname, but Bred spotted it. He had been pointedly ignoring the entire proceedings, but upon hearing that name, he became instantly alert. Only three people in the Galaxy were familiar with that nickname—himself, Tyla and Johnathan. He knew that he had never told Jusser about it, and he was positive that Tyla hadn't. That left...

He shook his head. No, it was impossible. He himself had seen Johnathan's lifeboat disappear under the lava. He couldn't have survived.

And yet, Jusser knew the nickname.

Tyla was about to make an angry retort to Jusser's comment, but Bred interrupted sharply. "Jusser, is Johnathan there with you?"

All the women in the cabin stared at him, wondering what had prompted such a question. In a second, Jusser's voice returned heartily, "You mean the android? Yes, of course. That's the artifact I managed to pick up."

Six sharp gasps were audible in the cabin as the women reacted to Jusser's statement. Relentlessly, Bred continued. "Is he still alive?"

"Yes, surprisingly. Would you like to talk to it? Hold on." Two minutes of silence passed. Then Johnathan's voice came over the radio. "Don't let him bluff you," the android said. "Don't worry about me. I'm prepared to die."

"Does the android have some significance to you?" Jusser's voice was heard a moment later. "I'd be happy to give it back to you on Huntworld... as a sort of runner-up prize."

Abruptly, Nezla turned off the radio. "What do we do now?" she asked Bred.

"That depends on Tyla," he said. All eyes turned to his sister.

"I... I don't know," Tyla said weakly. "I have to think."

"Don't take too long," the captain said. "We have only six minutes before retrofire."

"You mentioned a little while ago," Bred said to his sister, "that you had no choice in the matter; that it was Destiny driving you on. Well, now you have a choice; your destiny is in your own hands."

Tyla's face looked white and helpless, but Bred continued mercilessly. "It's not so easy, is it, when you have to take the responsibility on your own shoulders. It's much simpler to blame everything on fate. But now you

can't do that, can you? *You* have to make the choice, and you'll have to live with the consequences for the rest of your life."

Again, the room was silent. Then Luuj said, "As I understand my orders, I am to continue along our present orbit. Retrofire will be in five minutes unless I am given a countermanding order."

Tyla's whirling mind was in a frenzy. It was unthinkable to surrender the Hunt to Jusser. Months had been spent traveling throughout the Galaxy. They had risked their lives to acquire the needed objects. They had worked and sweated and strained. Did they really expect her to throw all this away?

But if they didn't change their present course, Johnathan would die. She had almost managed to convince herself that his "death" on Pompeii was not her fault, but this time there could be no doubt about her responsibility. She would be killing Johnathan, whom she had only recently realized she loved.

Why couldn't he have stayed dead? In time, the wounds would have healed and she probably would have forgotten him. Now her life was complicated once more. How could she possibly make a decision like this?

"No matter what I do, I lose," she whispered.

"That's a rather negative way of looking at it," Bred said more gently. "Try to think instead, that either way you win. One way you win the Hunt, the other way you win Johnathan. You simply have to realize that all victories have a price, and you must be willing to pay it. It's up to you to decide which is more important."

"Four minutes," Luuj announced.

How could she possibly let Jusser get away with it? He'd murdered her parents. He'd tried to kill Johnathan once, and he'd nearly destroyed the *Honey B* back on Gondra. Was she to let him get away with all that? And not only get away with it, but also win the Scavenger Hunt, the greatest Game Society had. It would be his second win in a row; his prestige would be boundless. He would receive rewards for all his underhanded dealings; his murders and attempted murders would go unavenged. At parties and social gatherings, he would never miss an opportunity to remind Tyla that he had beaten her in the Hunt.

"Three minutes," Luuj said.

Tyla's gaze wandered to the acceleration couch Johnathan had used while he'd been aboard. The flower Dru had saved was still there in its vase, strapped to the couch. Tyla remembered the sight of Johnathan sprinting across the spaceport field the morning after the Hunt Ball, risking his life to deliver that bouquet to her. She remembered her dreadful embarrassment and how simple the relationship had seemed.

She remembered seeing Johnathan running across the beach on Eclipsiascus, dodging arrows to get his Rose, only to have his ship destroyed a few moments later by Jusser's treachery. She remembered Captain Kirre bringing him, burned and pitiful, into the *Honey B*. She remembered him climbing down the cliff on Ootyoce to rescue her and diving into the hole to capture a stoney.

She recalled that first night on Gondra, when he'd joined her outside the cave and put his arm around her and talked quietly to her in the darkness. Even though she had run from him, she had stopped thinking of him as a thing. Then, caught in the Vortex in their powerless lifeboat, she had clung to him, in her fright, for protection. And she remembered kissing him with joy when Sora and Nezla had returned to the ship.

She remembered his reckless attempt to save the Hunt for her by detonating the bomb on Pompeii; and she recalled her empty feeling when she thought she'd lost him. They had shared too much for him to die.

But Jusser...

"Two minutes," the captain said.

Tears in her eyes, Tyla turned to her brother. "Bred, what should I do?"

It took all the self-discipline Bred could muster to turn his head away. "I told you before, I want nothing further to do with this Hunt. It's your life, and you're going to have to live with your decision. I can't make it for you."

In that instant, Tyla realized her loss. Her brother, whom she loved, was gone, stolen from her when she wasn't looking. Or perhaps, had she driven him away herself? In any case, she felt a wall between them that seemed impossible to scale. Winning the Hunt under these conditions would

cement the final brick into place.

Silence in the cabin. Tyla felt as though her head were about to explode. There was too much to cope with, too much to think about. *None of this is real*, part of her mind tried to tell her. *It's a bad dream with cardboard characters. Maybe I'm still back on Lethe and this is all part of the nightmare.*

But she knew this was all too real, and the people involved were all too alive. She could not just open her eyes to make the dream disappear. She had to make a decision.

Bred. Jusser. Johnathan.

All or none. Which did she want?

"One minute," warned Luuj.

The words came hard to her lips. "S-s-stop," she said hoarsely. Her eyes were so tightly shut they stung. "D-don't retrofire."

More silence in the room, as though reality had dissolved around her. When she opened her eyes, everyone was looking at her with warn! approval and sympathy. Even her brother's eyes had filled with tears.

She unstrapped herself and headed for the door of the cabin. "Drum it, drum all of you!" she spat as she swam rearwards to her sleeping cabin for a good, stiff cry.

* * *

The victory celebration in Hunt Hall was easily the most raucous affair ever held by Society. Laughter was everywhere. Drinks and drugs were endlessly abundant and wild music accompanied frenzied dancing as inhibitions were checked at the door. Another Scavenger Hunt had been completed, and there was another winner, a two-time winner.

Three-quarters of the crowd were women, since a good many of the men were still away on the Hunt, unaware that a winner had already been declared. The costumes were as extravagant as they were outlandish. The electrifying outfit Tyla had worn to the Hunt Ball several months ago had already swept through the fashion circles and been replaced just as

quickly by another style that called for one bare breast and feathers at the crotch.

As Bred approached the entrance, a small form emerged from the shadows and hesitantly addressed him. "Uh, Master deVrie, do you remember me?"

He peered at her owlishly through his glasses. "Oh yes, Mistress Kimatsan. I would never forget anyone as lovely as you."

"I, uh, well, I've been thinking over your offer and I' decided to get your story after all."

Bred smiled warmly as he looked at her eager, youthful face. "Why not Ambic Jusser's? He won."

"I'd rather have yours. I think it would be more honest."

That one word, "honest," charged up some feeling in Bred. "Honest it will be, all right," he said and on impulse, took her hand. "Come inside with me. I've got a little business to transact first." Despite the reporter's embarrassed protestations that she was not dressed suitably for the occasion, Bred led her into the hall.

Amid all the colorful costumes of that crowd, they both stood out. Shino was wearing only a plain red work dress that came down to her knees and concealed most of her body. Bred, as usual making no concessions to Society's conventions, still wore his glossy black spacer uniform. People disapproved, but no one, he knew, would say so to his face. That sort of thing just wasn't done.

It was not difficult to spot Ambic Jusser in the crowd. He was located directly in the center of an enormous knot of people, all wanting a word or favor from the two-time Hunt winner. Even considering the sex ratio within the hall, an unusually large number of women were clustered around Jusser, and Bred doubted that the winner's bed would be devoid of companionship for the next several months. Bred, looking over the mob, decided he would rate any member of his own crew above any woman in the hall.

He walked toward Jusser, taking Shino with him. Recognizing him, the crowd parted; after all, he had come in second, and a not inconsiderable

amount of status was attached to that.

Jusser was clutching the small platinum sculpture that was his official trophy. It was an expensive piece, though either Bred or Jusser could have easily afforded a dozen. The real prize was the reputation and the status. Jusser spotted Bred and waving at him good-naturedly, held up the trophy. "It's really something, isn't it?"

To Bred, it resembled a gleaming phallus cleverly disguised as a free-form sculpture. "Yes," he answered noncommittally, "it is something. I was wondering if I could have a few words with you."

"Of course." Jusser spread his hands and raised his voice so that his entire audience could hear. "Would you all excuse me for a minute? The runner-up and I have something to discuss."

Slowly the crowd dispersed. Jusser put a comradely arm around Bred's shoulder, and it was all Bred could do to contain his anger. "I see that even coming in second best has its advantages," Jusser winked, nodding broadly at Shino Kimatsan. "What did you want to talk about, Bred?"

"The dragon's egg you got on Gondra. The dragons wanted me to ask you if they could have it back."

Jusser waved a hand expansively. "Why certainly. I have no use for it any more, except to make a super omelet out of it. Sure, you can return it to them."

"Fine. Have it delivered to me and I'll take it back to Gondra. Come on, Shino, let's go." He turned to leave.

"Wait a minute. I'd like to thank you."

Bred stopped. Since gratitude from Jusser was unheard of, his interest was kindled. "For not backwashing you?" he asked, turning around again and taking off his glasses.

"No, I knew you wouldn't do that. I wanted to thank you for giving me such good competition. The prize isn't worth winning unless it's fought for, and you put up a surprisingly good fight. I never thought you had it in you. But naturally, the most courageous and determined man won."

Meaning you, Bred thought cynically.

"You saw that crowd around me," Jusser went on. "They knew it. It proves what I've been saying all along—all that counts in life is winning."

Bred could only think of the scene he'd witnessed about an hour earlier, when the medchest with Johnathan inside had been taken off the *Hermes*. Tyla had rushed to it and, bowing her head over it, wept openly. Johnathan had raised one feeble arm and laid it on her shoulder to comfort her. Bred had felt more unspoken love in that one instant than had been vocally expressed for Jusser in this entire hall.

Winning is all that counts? He put his glasses back on and peered owlishly at Jusser, wondering how any one man could be so completely wrong. "Not really," he said at last, giving Shino a broad wink and a squeeze of the hand. "It's the fun you have along the way."