

# The Alejandra Variations

*Paul Cook*

An [*e - reads* ] Book

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*First e-reads publication 1999*

*www.e-reads.com*

*ISBN 0-7592-0057-2*

## Author Biography

Paul Cook worked at the Arizona State University as an acquisitions librarian for five years, much of his time was spent doing research in the Noble Science Library. He currently works in the English Department as a Senior Lecturer. He has written several novels, including TINTAGEL, THE ALEJANDRA VARIATIONS, and FORTRESS ON THE SUN.

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*Tintagel*

*—Para ella que tiene  
su corazón  
en la casa de luz,  
Cecily Dallas.*

*Why does the eye see a thing  
more clearly in dreams  
than the imagination when awake?*

**—Leonardo da Vinci**

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## *The Alejandra Variations*

# The First Variation

## Chapter One

### *IDENTIFY THE CITY!*

It wasn't so much a command as an impulse which he couldn't ignore. It rang out like the brass of a clarion, echoing down the deepest corridors of his mind, thundering through to the stanchions of his muscles and bones.

Identify the city! Find a street sign, an imposing and familiar building or a landmark—even a bridge to be recognized by its spidery limbs or vast construction. *Anything!*

But try as he might, he couldn't. At least, not in his present state of mind.

How he had gotten to the picturesque sidewalk café that seemed to jut rudely from the sidewalk out into

the crowded street was beyond him. The liqueur he'd been quaffing these past few hours had dulled his mind.

What Nicholas Tejada did know was that this did not look like any American or European city.

Languishing in his alcoholic stupor, he stared blearily around him, fingering the small glass in his hand, swirling the liquid around in lazy, hypnotic spirals.

"Sir, may I recommend the *bhel puri*?"

The voice came out of nowhere. Nicholas was watching an assembly of finely robed women walk down the center of the bustling street, chanting and clacking finger-cymbals. The women seemed uncommonly graceful in their veiled beauty.

The word *Pakistan* came into his mind suddenly. Then came *Bangladesh*. Both words were followed by the mental equivalent of question marks.

There were no automobiles moving along the avenue. An occasional car of foreign manufacture could be seen parked alongside the curbs, apparently abandoned and useless. The buildings themselves, though tall and relatively modern, spoke mostly of poverty and profound despair. Clothing, hung out to dry, waved in the slightest of breezes high above like the flags of a long-lost cause.

Nicholas could not comprehend why there were so many people on the street. *Why?* the voice inside his mind asked. *Why?*

"Sir?"

Nicholas turned and glanced up at the waiter—a young man of walnut skin and sharp, intelligent brown eyes. Over one wrist he held a clean white towel—just the thing to waylay the prim consciousness of an American tourist possibly ill-at-ease in a foreign land.

"Sorry," he said and smiled up at the young waiter, a boy whose English was remarkably good. "What did you say?"

"The *bhel puri*. I would like to perhaps recommend it with your liqueur, if you are hungry. It is very tasty, sir."

Nicholas blinked, trying to assimilate the world through his drunkenness.

With a slight bow, the smiling waiter continued. "It is a flavorful dish of rice, onions, and potatoes, sir. We spice it with just a touch of chutney sauce. We find it very delicious."

A carnival air surrounded the café. Over his shoulder Nicholas could hear many voices singing, although what was being sung was utterly incomprehensible.

"That would be fine," he murmured, absorbed by the delightful music from the street. "Yes, please."

As he spoke he began fishing in his trouser pockets for money. It had occurred to him that if he could identify the currency he could identify the country. The city would come later.

He brought forth a fistful of brown and yellow bills, but he couldn't decipher the script. Scrawls and curious scribbles—the glyphs of a strange and faraway land—embossed an emblem of some dignitary, or deity, whom he couldn't recognize.

He was drunker than he had originally thought—if in fact he was drunk. He blinked twice and tried to

focus his eyes on the bills. Yen? Afghanis? Rupees? They rustled like leaves in his hand.

He found among the bills a few traveler's checks—American Express—and American dollars, all twenties.

But the other currency—exotic to the eye, peculiar to the touch—he couldn't identify.

He could ask the waiter for help. It would seem a stupid question: *Where am I, young man?* And there would be a half-dozen questions to follow it, such as: *How did I get here?* and, *What the hell am I supposed to be doing here?*

He stuffed the wad of money back into his pocket, and glanced again into the busy street. There were literally hundreds of men, women, and children, all dressed in *saris* of one kind or another. Many of the men were turbaned. Everyone was caught up in laughter and song. The young ones ran barefoot and shrieked like kids do everywhere when they are turned loose in a joyous crowd. Nicholas noticed that a strong smell of incense wafted invisibly around him like the caress of a genie.

India? Bhutan?

The need to identify the city rose like a sickness inside of him.

Then he saw in the distance a form he could definitely recognize. A fire-engine-red double-decker bus flowed through the crowd of people on the street honking noisily above the tumult. The bus listed as if injured. As it drew near the café, Nicholas could see dozens of individuals clinging to the far left side of the vehicle. The bus stopped and people mingled in a chaotic exchange of humanity, some getting on, others getting off. The bus still did not quite straighten up, and Nicholas could see what years of wretched, toiling service had done to it. He also realized that, whatever country this was, he was surrounded by very poor people: The Third World.

The young waiter returned with the *bhel puri*. Nicholas pondered the delicacy before him. On a fresh green leaf, which itself rested upon a plate of princely white china, sat a mound of steaming mush. All of a sudden he was famished. The *bhel puri*, whatever it was, smelled simply wonderful.

"Thank you," Nicholas said. He took up his fork and knife and began eating, but the waiter seemed in no hurry to leave his side. Nicholas didn't mind, feeling in fact oddly secure in the young man's presence. He pointed with his fork at the crowd parading in the street.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Where are they all headed?"

He didn't want to seem the awkward tourist, asking obvious, ingratiating questions of the natives. But he figured the waiter would be used to the most obnoxious behavior from foreign visitors.

"It is the sacred celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi," the waiter said with a certain amount of pride. His teeth, when he smiled at Nicholas, were pearl white. "The women take carved statues of our Hindu gods down to the sea. The sea is a holy place for us, sir.

"It is one of Bombay's largest festivals," the young man continued. "We close off the streets, except for the buses, even though it is very bad for business."

Bombay! He had gotten country and city in one neat package. Inwardly, Nicholas could feel something taut relax, like a fist slowly unclenching. His mission was accomplished.

Then he sat up. Mission accomplished?

The young waiter stood nearby, eyeing the parade of people in the street. Another bus, coughing diesel smoke in great bouts, came by—heading for the seashore and carrying more enthusiasts of Ganesh Chaturthi.

Nicholas was confused and made somewhat uneasy by all this. Why had the recognition of the city been so urgent?

"How many of these things have I had?"

"Sir?" The waiter turned to him.

Nicholas indicated the small glass of liqueur. Everything about him drifted in a haze.

"These drinks. How many have I ordered?"

The waiter smiled understandingly. "Only three, sir." He consulted a bar tab in the side pocket of his elegant coat. "Yes, just three. Would you like something else with the *bhel puri*? I can bring you a light chablis in a chilled carafe if you would prefer."

The feeling of relief which had followed his initial recognition of the city was now replaced with one of rapt suspicion.

*Threedrinks?* Normally it took more than three drinks to get him drunk. He must be slipping.

He stared down at his *bhel puri*, suddenly not hungry at all. Quite clearly something was amiss.

"Is there anything wrong, sir?" The waiter appeared to be genuinely concerned. "I understand, if it is the food. There are times when it does not agree with our visitors from the States."

*Find the Prime Minister.*

"What did you say?"

"Pardon me, sir?"

"What you said just now."

"I was talking about the food. If it is not to your liking, I can return with something a little more suited to your palate."

Nicholas turned in his seat. "No, not that. You said, 'Find the Prime Minister.' I heard you. I'm sure of it."

An expression of sincere confusion passed across the waiter's brow. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. I said nothing like that."

Nicholas wiped his mouth lightly with his folded napkin and stood up, fighting the effects of the liqueur.

"I apologize," Nicholas said, rather embarrassed. "I thought you'd said something." He smiled thinly.

"I understand, sir." The waiter was very courteous. "The heat and the crowd at this time of the year can be disturbing to strangers. This is not a good time to visit India, I'm afraid."

Nicholas drew out his money, knowing now that the bills were rupees, and gave them to the waiter, who beamed at the American's generosity.

He decided that someone must have passed close to the sidewalk restaurant and shouted out the words

he had heard. In his clouded state of mind, he had assumed that it was the waiter speaking.

The command came again.

*Find the Prime Minister. It's got to be the Prime Minister.*

Nicholas jerked about suddenly. This time the words were more than clear. It was definitely not a voice from the crowded, cacophonous Bombay street, not remote and impersonal, or meant for someone else's ears. It was clearly meant for him. He was the only person who could have heard it, for...

It had come from *within*.

*The Prime Minister!*

A wave of fear gripped him. In the multitude of bright colors, confusing sounds, and earthy smells, he felt a familiar anxiety tugging at him. He began to sweat. He loosened his tie and breathed deeply, trying to calm himself, to concentrate.

A group of barely clad, shoeless priests, brown as the bark of trees, approached in an air of righteous solitude. Nicholas stepped aside respectfully and watched them pass. They had to be headed for the shore. An impulse told him to follow.

The citizens around him seemed absorbed in a mysterious religious calm. The chanting from street corners, the bells of incense, the thumping of small, hand-held drums, were wholly alien to him, yet they stirred something within him. Despite the poverty that was everywhere around him, some unknowable vitality shined from the people's faces. The waiter had had it in his own face, and so did every person Nicholas now saw. The presence of faith, so rarely seen in the average person back in the States, was common here, and it touched him deeply.

He stumbled suddenly: *The Prime Minister!*

It came to him this time as a desperate shout: *Find the Prime Minister! Quickly!*

The mass of humanity swirled around him. The voice had seemed filled with fear and concern. Its pleading held a terrible urgency he couldn't ignore. He had to find the Prime Minister of India!

He didn't know how to begin. He looked down the street.

There, in the midst of a gathering of pilgrims, stood a beautiful woman. Nicholas recognized her immediately. She was smiling directly at him as if she'd been waiting for him to see her.

"Oh, my God," Nicholas breathed. He lifted an excited hand into the air. "Rhoanna!" he shouted. "Rhoanna!"

Rhoanna Martin stood wrapped in a wondrously adorned *sari*. A small, ruby-colored jewel glittered in the center of her forehead. Rhoanna. Thousands of miles from her home, and six years gone from his life.

"Rhoanna!" Nicholas yelled, cupping his hands to his mouth to give his voice force.

He ran toward her, pushing aside the merry-makers. Rhoanna waved to him and stepped down from the sidewalk.

"Nick!"

Nicholas Tejada stumbled, but caught himself before he fell. He was acting like a bumbling fool—but he

didn't care. Rhoanna ran up to him, and he took her into his arms. She gave a squeal of delight.

"Nick!" she laughed. Wings of orange and fuchsia silk enfolded about him as she came to him.

His heart thundered in his chest as he felt her press firmly against him. He laughed. "I don't believe it. What are you doing here?"

He held her at arm's length, examining her almost as he would a precious sculpture. Rhoanna's green eyes glistened, reaching deep into his soul as she smiled at him. Her brown hair was tucked beneath a shawl of gossamer pink cotton; her skin seemed to glow.

Unabashedly, he kissed her full on the mouth as the eyes of a thousand strangers looked on. Rhoanna's delicate fingers tugged affectionately at the hair on the nape of his neck. He could feel her pelvis press hungrily against his upper thigh.

*Nicholas!* the command rang out suddenly. *We must locate the Prime Minister before it's too late!* Nick jolted backward, his heart dancing like a wild beast in his chest.

Breathless, Rhoanna clutched his arms. "Nick, what is it?"

He was shaking. The world was beginning to spin around him and he couldn't stop it.

What is going on? he asked himself.

"Rhoanna..." he began, gazing deep into her eyes.

A siren pierced the air, and both of them froze, clinging to each other. On the street hundreds of Bombayites fell silent. The tall, poverty-ridden apartment buildings that surrounded them stood like trees in a desolate, almost defoliated, forest. The siren's ragged echo was like a living thing on the prowl.

He wanted to say to Rhoanna: "What are you doing here?" He wanted to say, with all of his heart: "What is the meaning of our being here like this?"

He wanted to say, more than anything, that he loved her. But the siren, now joined by a whole chorus of city-wide alarms, drowned out those thoughts.

He looked up, realizing that these were not the sirens common to civil authorities, but were the wails of civil-defense alarms. The crowd screamed almost in unison and began running in panic as they finally understood what was upon them.

It was an air raid—*anuclear* air raid!

*"Jesus Christ!"* Nicholas shouted, pulling Rhoanna close to a building. Holy men ran by, expressions of abject terror on their faces, having dropped their sculpted idols on the gritty sidewalk. The screams of the populace competed with the banshee wail of the air-raid sirens. The voice returned again, drowning out all other sounds:

*Nicholas! The Prime Minister is in danger!*

An elderly woman fleeing through the crowd collided with them. Everyone tumbled to the ground in the chaos. Before Nicholas could gain his feet, dozens of robed individuals were clambering over them in panic. Rhoanna was pulled helplessly out into the avenue.

"Rhoanna!" he yelled. But despite his efforts, it was impossible to reach her in the crush.

One of those big, unwieldy British buses came barreling out of nowhere. Nicholas jumped backward onto the sidewalk to get out of its way. As he regained his balance he looked for Rhoanna—but she was gone, sucked into the flood of miserable humanity.

*"Rhoanna!"* he called.

The sirens filled the air like seawater around a school of fish—tiny, frightened fish being swept away by currents over which they had no control.

*It's coming, Nicholas! Find him! Please!*

Everything seemed to hit him like a wall of seething floodwater. He turned and vomited into the narrow gutter.

Shaking, the bitter taste of gastric juices in his mouth, he stood up, his head spinning with fear. Deep within him he knew this was the end. The Bomb was going to fall—and he'd lost Rhoanna again.

He looked up into the musty sky of India for the threads of contrails from Russian bombers—or would the aircraft be of Chinese origin, arcing in from the east and not the north? Perhaps they were Libyan. It didn't matter.

A man stumbled into him and Nicholas went down, slamming his head against the brick lining of the curb. The man—an old beggar with hardly any clothing upon his shriveled body—rolled over, clutching his chest; then rose, propelled by his desperation, and vanished into the crowd.

Nicholas slowly came to his feet. The blow had knocked some sense into him. He walked out into the avenue, staying clear of the panicked natives. He took his steps gingerly, carefully, walking almost like an automaton. There was no escaping it. On the very last day of his life, he knew what he had to do.

When he reached the seashore he found it deserted, although tension was still in the air as if suspended upon each mote of dust that had been stirred up by the feet of the celebrants. The sirens still wailed deep within the canyons of the city behind him. Upon the steps that led to the dirty waters of the Arabian Sea there was no one to be seen. Above him, angry gulls drifted in the heat, crying out their own confusion.

He stood on the broken cement steps that led down to the water's edge. Sandals, clothing, and flowers lay strewn haphazardly about. A fractured idol of Siva lay staring sightlessly into an uncaring sky. The sirens wailed like the voices of godlings lost in the shadowy halls of Bombay's decaying cityscape.

Out in the bay floated a few ships—sloops or junks. Their crews were oblivious to what was happening. Nicholas squinted through the tainted, almond-colored light, watching the waves pulse toward the shore in a glistening of silver.

*Nicholas*, the inner dweller in his mind cried out. *Help us! We need to know for sure!*

"Stop it!" he screamed finally, grasping his head in his hands. "For the love of God, stop!"

*"Nick!"* came an impassioned call.

This time it was a human voice crying out, not his inner dweller.

He turned swiftly and saw Rhoanna standing like the battered statue of a Hindu goddess, her arms outstretched, on the balustrade of a weathered hotel. Fainting, she fell against a marble pillar and slid out of sight, leaving behind her a trail of smeared crimson.



"Rhoanna!"

Everything came together in his mind: the sirens; the voice; the junks at sea.

The nuclear device did not fall from the belly of a sinister bomber at sixty thousand feet, as the sirens had led him to fear. Instead, it came bubbling up from the yellow Arabian Sea, like a child spawned from an evil Nereidian womb in the deepest crevice of the ocean.

Monstrous, it climbed on rubberized treads up onto the carved, ornamental steps of the holy shoreline. It was heading right for him.

This ocean-borne steel demon was twice the size of a great white shark, and had a head full of deadly plutonium. Water slid down its slime-dark hull and drooled on to its efficient undercarriage. It looked for all the world as if it were smiling.

That smile was the last thing Nicholas Tejada saw in this life.

The whole universe suddenly burst with a light brighter than the interior of the brightest supernova in the heavens—as skin, then muscle, then bone, vanished in a terrible explosion. There was no smoke of burned flesh. No ash. Nothing.

There was only the roar of light and a single, last gasping breath on his lips.

"Rhoanna," he whispered—and was gone.

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## Chapter Two

IN THE DARKNESS of an unimaginable afterlife, Nicholas heard voices—voices that lured him slowly back to the proverbial land-of-the-living. He fought off the limbo that unpleasantly enshrouded him and homed in on the voices that were conferring at the other end of reality.

He tried to clear his throat, realizing that he was very, very thirsty. He also realized that he had a throat to clear.

With a foot in each world, he made the leap toward the better one. "Water," he said hoarsely.

His throat felt as if someone had poured sawdust down it and had followed that with sand. "I need some water," he muttered to anyone who might be listening.

He slowly opened his eyes and found that he was lying in the white cotton folds of a comfortable hospital bed. But if this was a hospital room, it wasn't like any he'd known before.

It resembled a luxury-hotel suite but one designed for invalids. The bed was large. Across the room were a few plush chairs and some tall, leafy green plants. There were no other beds. This was a private suite for VIPs. Directly opposite him was a wall of stereo and video equipment. And above him—set into the bed's headboard—was a sophisticated monitoring computer, from which depended several wires and tubes that were attached to him, keeping him alive and full of the proper juices. He hardly noticed the dull pain in his hand from the IV unit.

There were no windows.

His feelings told him that he was somewhere underground. The walls resonated *solidness*, a sense of

profound impenetrableness which effectively kept the outside world at bay.

He looked toward the door and saw two people conversing. One of them was quite tall. He wore a stethoscope around his neck, but the rest of him belied the standard look of a physician. The man wore a gray T-shirt that had stenciled across its chest, "Property of UCSB," and the rest of him was comfortably attired in tennis shoes and Levis, worn and faded in all the expected places.

Then Nicholas recognized the individual standing next to the doctor.

"Salazar," Nicholas said in a somewhat stronger voice.

It was reassuring to see Melissa Salazar waiting for him to regain consciousness. On the other hand, a number of things mitigated against his euphoria on discovering that he was still alive. The first was the fact that he was underground. The second was the idea that the director of the Pentagon's Project Foresee had decided to supervise his recovery in person. If Melissa Salazar wanted to be present to pick up and dust off one of her special Strategies, then something rather dreadful was up.

Salazar and the casually attired doctor turned and walked over to Nicholas's bed.

"Welcome back to the real world, Nick," the man said. "I'm Dr. Massingale. How do you feel?"

He proceeded to take Nicholas's pulse, gazing up at the computer screen on the console above him.

"I'm thirsty as hell," Nicholas said.

The doctor laughed comfortingly. He poured Nick a glass of clear, sparkling water.

"Go easy, now," the doctor insisted.

Beside him, the director of Project Foresee was silent, a look of concern on her face.

"You've been through a lot," Massingale said. "But you're going to be all right."

Nick drank the water slowly but steadily. He trembled as his body took in the refreshing liquid. Handing the glass back to the doctor, he settled back into the huge comfort of the pillows.

Melissa Salazar leaned over him. "How do you feel, Nick? You OK?"

"I feel like shit four ways to Sunday, is how I feel."

The director of Foresee smiled wryly, her dark brown eyes friendly. Melissa Salazar, fifteen years Nicholas's senior, had not a single gray hair on her head, although her eyes always seemed weighted by nights of little or no sleep and days of unbearable tension. Like the doctor, she was casually dressed, which was unusual for her. She wore a mid-length skirt, a cotton blouse, and boots, which suggested that she hadn't had time to dress in her usual businesslike manner. Another bad sign, Nicholas realized. Melissa Salazar earned the money to dress well, and dress well she did.

But not at the moment.

"Sorry I screwed things up, Sal. I just couldn't find the Prime Minister. I tried. I really did."

Dr. Massingale punched data into the computer board above the bed. Melissa smiled. A faint hint of her perfume could be discerned despite the hospital's antiseptic smell.

"Actually," she began, "you did a better job of locating the possible source of the attack than we'd hoped."

We had a devil of a time getting you out of Mnemos Nine, though, after you pinpointed the location of the bomb. The bomb wouldn't have gone off right at your feet if we'd gotten you out of the system when we were supposed to. We're the ones who should do the apologizing, not you. It must have been quite a scare."

*Scare* was not quite the word for what he had felt, which was maybe why he could feel the presence of some sedative in his body. The shock had been substantial.

"Everything's OK," she went on in sure, confident tones. "We're at Vandenberg Air Force Base. Dr. Massingale's been transferred to Foresee. He's as clean as a baby's breath, as they say."

"Hey," the doctor laughed slightly. "Let's not stretch things." He returned to the console, checking tubes and dials.

Melissa managed a rather professional grin herself, but Nicholas could see that it was difficult for her to achieve with any kind of sincerity. He knew that he didn't *want* answers to some of his questions. One of them was why they were inland at Vandenberg Air Force Base, when they were supposed to be at the Foresee branch in Santa Barbara.

Nicholas looked up at the Director. "How long was I out?"

"You were gone for two days. Nervous collapse. We kept you asleep to let you heal. After what you went through, you certainly needed the rest."

"You make it sound as if you were there," Nicholas said.

"I was," the Director said evenly. "Flew in from Colorado the morning Foresee threw you in-system in Santa Barbara. I came out of a general staff meeting when you got locked into Mnemos Nine. It was supposed to be a routine scenario."

"Locked in?" He didn't like the sound of that.

Melissa Salazar continued. "When you didn't wake out of the system, we enlisted Dr. Massingale here. The computer wouldn't shut down even though you had determined where the nuclear device was about to detonate. When it finally affirmed the success of the extrapolation, it shut itself down. We've been watching you ever since."

As the Director spoke, Nicholas recalled his last, crisp images of Rhoanna staring at him like a dying Madonna, as she leaned against that soiled pillar in a Bombay created by a supercomputer. Then he remembered the submarine bomb lumbering up out of the soiled Arabian Sea. It had only been a few feet away from him as he stood there on the steps. He could still hear the water lapping against the eroded stone stairs—or at least he thought he could.

He shuddered, momentarily closing his eyes. Dreams had always affected him this way. It sometimes took him hours to recover from the force of a night of fitful dreaming, especially when those dreams encompassed the modern horror of nuclear warfare.

"So, tell me what happened—two days ago," Nick asked. Melissa seemed proud of the accomplishment of Mnemos Nine, despite what the computer had nearly done to her Strategic. She said, "We apparently programmed Mnemos Nine too well. The scenario felt so real to you, we couldn't get you properly motivated to find the source of the attack directly. However, given the information as it came into us at Foresee, you were eventually able to locate yourself in the middle of Ganesh Chaturthi. But there were too many diversions—interruptions which either you or Mnemos Nine provided."

"I remember being in a weird cafe," Nicholas said distantly, recalling the peculiar aroma of the bhel puri.

"In real-world time it took you a half a day to get going," the doctor volunteered. "The whole staff was watching you all the way."

"Half a day," Nicholas whispered to himself.

"In any case," Melissa continued, "you did manage to locate the most likely source of the assault with the information we threw at you. We had never imagined that it would come from the sea."

"It was so real," Nicholas said, as he had said each time he'd gone in—and come out—of the system over the past five years.

Mnemos Nine was the most sophisticated computer the Pentagon had yet developed. Nicholas had never actually seen it; his only experience with Mnemos Nine had come through the various system terminals around the country, usually the one in Santa Barbara, near where he lived. He knew from what Melissa and others had told him that the Mnemos computer itself was hidden deep within the Rocky Mountains. The core computer was an extremely complicated device about the size of a beach ball, perpetually immersed in liquid helium. Its storage capacities were measured in gigabytes, and its retrieval system functioned at near to the speed of light.

It had everything there was to know at the tips of its metaphorical fingers. All the nasty facts a modern nation needed to keep up to date in a world of terrorism and advanced technologies were stored in the microcircuits of Mnemos Nine: profiles of political leaders, past revolutions and current revolutions and sites of possible future revolutions, movements of troops, the status of various countries' fluctuating economies, world stock-market patterns—even the price of peanuts in Guatemala City. Mnemos Nine had it all, and assimilated more data every minute.

But only by the input of emotional responses to all that vital data could Mnemos Nine come alive. Years ago Nicholas Tejada had interviewed with CIA and Pentagon officials at the University of California at San Diego, at their request. Then a test dream-extrapolation with the then-current Mnemos Eight computer at the Project Foresee's recruitment center got him out of the university's philosophy department and into the world of nonreality. It was a much better place.

But that was all a long time ago. His latest little excursion into a computer-created world had almost cost him his sanity, and now he was worried about his future with the Project. He'd never collapsed emotionally before, either in-system or out.

Melissa Salazar had pulled a newspaper from a drawer in the bedside table. She handed it to him.

Nicholas unfolded the previous day's paper. The headlines told it all: "TERRORIST ATTACK FOILED—INDIAN PRIME MINISTER SAVED."

As Nick scanned the article, the nightmare started coming true all over again, only this time there was an important difference in the facts.

In the real world there had been no panic at the festival of Ganesh Chaturthi. No sirens went off. Chowpatty Beach did not give birth to a superbomb nosing out of the surf on rubberized treads. There hadn't been an explosion of any kind.

But there could've been.

The Prime Minister of India and his entire cabinet were scheduled to be in the area that day, but information provided by an unnamed source—which Nicholas knew was Project Foresee, through the

State Department—suggested that a terrorist attack of unknown proportions might come from the direction of the sea should the Prime Minister choose to attend the festivities. Local authorities had rushed the Indian leader out of the vicinity at about the same time they had discovered that a small, barely seaworthy boat several hundred yards offshore was bringing in a Libyan-made atomic bomb.

Only Mnemos Nine and Nicholas Tejada had figured that the attack might come from the sea, and not from the air—or the land, as had been attempted only the previous month in Milan by the infamous Red Brigade.

What came as a genuine surprise to Nicholas was the disclosure in the newspaper that it had been a "dirty" bomb. The American naval authorities who dismantled it discovered that, had it exploded, whole chunks of radioactive plutonium would have scattered into the sea and onto the land—making the area uninhabitable for hundreds of years.

Naturally, Libya denied any role in the incident, saying that the disruption of any kind of religious ceremony was a sacrilege and a slur upon the sacred name of God. But the article pointed out that a few miles to the north of Chowpatty Beach were docked three American destroyers. Several months earlier they had seized a Libyan freighter that was ferrying reactor waste material from Russia—presumably for the clandestine construction of nuclear weapons.

Nicholas put the paper down and stared at the Director of Project Foresee. A pall of sorts fell about Melissa Salazar.

She rubbed her hands together nervously. Dr. Massingale was at the door, speaking with a nurse.

"Unfortunately, some other complications have arisen while you were out," Salazar said.

"Like what?"

"Our Santa Barbara center has been destroyed. Completely."

"What?"

Melissa nodded.

Nicholas's stomach heaved. The West Coast was littered with hundreds of tiny electronic firms and computer businesses. Some of them were connected with the government, some not. Project Foresee had been concealed in a series of innocuous buildings in downtown Santa Barbara that seemed to be nothing more than warehouses owned by one of the larger southern California aerospace concerns.

Industrial sabotage, or military sabotage, was considered a virtual inevitability. But Foresee, at least the S.B. branch, was hidden very well. Or so Nicholas had thought.

"How did it happen?" he asked.

"It was bombed."

"Bombed? You mean from an airplane?" The idea sounded preposterous.

Dr. Massingale stepped out into the corridor with the nurse.

Melissa continued, "They found the plane that did it. It was a drone. Made locally, too. The CIA doesn't think anyone's onto us specifically, since a number of other plants further north in Silicon Valley have also been struck with the same method. Aias Electronics and TonTec Systems were hit only a few months

ago. It could be a coincidence."

"I don't like coincidences, Sal. I never have."

"Neither do I," she said. "But we got a little warning, so we pulled up stakes and hightailed it here to Vandenberg."

"We have Mnemos looking into who might have done it, but we don't expect to learn anything soon. There are so many fringe groups who deplore our high-tech surge."

"It could have been someone else," he remarked.

"Yes, someone else," the Director affirmed grimly.

There seemed to be electricity in the air; Nicholas felt Melissa's suppressed uneasiness.

"Sal," he said, staring evenly at her. "You're not giving me the full poop on this, are you?"

There was a small chair at the bedside. She pulled it over and wearily lowered herself down into it. As she did, Nicholas heard a large glass object being dropped out in the hallway. But the Director of Foresee showed no interest in what was going on beyond the room.

"Nick," she said, "we're as close today as we've ever been to going to war with the Soviet Union. I mean today. This minute."

Nicholas stared up at the ceiling. He realized it now. He'd been feeling its terrible weight all along. He'd awoken from one nightmare into another, more real and tangible horror.

He knew that the Vandenberg hospital—along with all the other main buildings—was aboveground. But here they were, bunkered under the surface of the earth. There was an oppressive air surrounding them—the kind of clamminess that one finds in caves, or tombs. They were underground for a reason. He knew what it was.

"Minutes before you woke we got word from Derek Mallory, working with Mnemos Nine in Colorado, that the Russians might strike first at Vandenberg," she told him.

"Here? You mean right here? Now?" Nicholas sat up. "Oh, swell!"

"There's a small flotilla of Russian trawlers just beyond our territorial waters. They've been there for days." She fussed unconsciously with her wedding ring, moving it in small turns around her finger. "And there are Russian ships of one sort or another in place all around the United States. In the Caribbean, off Newfoundland. Everywhere there's water."

Nicholas rolled back the covers of the bed and reached for his IV, preparing to disconnect himself from the computer. Melissa quickly stood up and stopped him.

"Hold on, Nick. We haven't gotten a confirmation on Derek's projection just yet; and even if we did, you're in no condition to go rushing off, at least at the moment."

Nicholas pointed to the outer hallway beyond his closed door. There had been some commotion there for the past few minutes. "What's that all about? Somebody knows something."

Neil Massingale came back into the room at that point and nodded unhappily to the Director of Foresee, who immediately rose from her scat.

She said, "Vandenberg was the nearest link to Mnemos where we felt it was safe enough to move you. But now it looks as if there might be a preemptive strike against us here. We're so far underground that we could survive a direct hit, and an electromagnetic pulse probably won't penetrate this far. But I want all the Strategics where they can reach reliable Mnemos systems terminals and are able to stay within the network with relative security. So we're going to move you."

Nicholas sagged back, feeling abjectly helpless for the first time in his life.

Whatever drugs they'd given him to ease the transfer-shock out of Mnemos Nine had wiped out his energy reserves. But something else was demoralizing him as well, a parasitic worm gnawing at him from within. He was the only Strategic to suffer in such a manner. There were dozens of other individuals in Strategics. The system also included tie-ins for experts in intelligence, economics, environment, and politics. There were even extrapolators for things like aeronautics and xenobiology. All of the other specialists came and went without a trace of any kind of suffering, emotional or physical. Not Nicholas.

He knew that all across the nation there were millions of people depending upon individuals such as himself to ensure their security. But the prospect of a thermonuclear war was no small burden for anyone to carry. How did you live with the weight that such knowledge thrust upon you each day? All he had to do was look into Melissa Salazar's eyes to see the answer.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," he mumbled.

Massingale walked over to Nick's bed, looking more like a track coach than a physician. A nurse had entered the room behind him. Dr. Massingale spoke in soft but controlled tones. "Nick, we're going to have to evacuate the base hospital, and, while I'd like to let you lie around for another day or two, we're going to have to get moving." The nurse had already begun to unhook him from the IV unit and to switch off the various components of the monitoring computer.

Nick realized that the space he was in might soon be filled with more deserving folk. It was a thought he didn't like.

"Do you think you can make it, Nick?" Melissa asked, standing back to let the nurse and Dr. Massingale help him.

He nodded. Strangely, he felt like laughing as the two medical personnel helped him out of bed. As if it makes much difference, he thought distantly. What's one human life going to matter in an all-out thermonuclear war? He might be safe underground, but he'd be out one set of parents, a brand-new condominium (with a brand-new mortgage), two lazy cats, money in the bank (he'd even be out of a bank), and sunsets on Jalama Beach.

And much, much more.

"It's real, isn't it, Sal," he said, free of the monitoring computer.

The Director's eyes were dark and profoundly troubled, but there was strength in them, and concern for him. Perhaps her strength came from the fact that her family was lodged in Longmont, close to Foresee in Colorado. Her two children would be safe, and her husband was where he could be notified. So, Nicholas could almost see in her eyes ninety-two million Americans vanishing in a radioactive haze. They both knew the facts about a full-scale nuclear war—the real facts that the governments involved didn't want to admit even to themselves. Melissa's kids might be safe—but so what? Both he and Melissa stood to lose equally, whatever the outcome. It was a frightful burden indeed.

"It's always been real, Nick. Right now, we're just taking precautions. You can bet the Russians are

doing the same."

"Wonderful," Nick muttered sardonically.

Dr. Massingale got clothing for Nicholas from a closet near the bed. "There's nothing really to worry about, Nick," he said, tossing over a pair of pants. "You're in our care, and we're going to hustle you back to Colorado as soon as you're ready to get to the evac Tubes."

Nicholas stared at Melissa, the pants still in his hands. "It's that bad?"

"Like he said, it's just a precaution. I want everyone where I can reach them if things get rough."

When things get rough is more like it, Nicholas thought.

His paranoia about nuclear warfare dated back as far as he could remember. He dreamed about mushroom clouds, fiery contrails pushing SS-20s in from the Arctic, radioactive winds so harsh that they peeled the very skin from your bones. He could almost feel the fingers poised over the doomsday buttons; he could almost hear the growl of missiles deep in the cement throats of silos hidden beneath the snows of the Poluostrov Tajmyr plain in northern Russia.

He had inherited more than a certain chromosomal arrangement from his parents and his grandparents: he'd also inherited their Cold War apprehensions. And world history was beginning to suggest that the lid could not be kept on any longer. China finally had too many people. England was plagued with uncontrollable race riots and a paralyzed economy. Poland was a moonscape of idle factories and barren farmlands. Italy was run by terrorists who kept assassinating each other. And half the Christian world—in existential despair—was doing nothing, waiting for the Messiah to return. The other half was waiting to shoot Him if He did return. Dwindling resources, pockets of sheer starvation, and rampant paranoia created a disease for which there was no known cure.

Nicholas took a deep breath and stared squarely at his boss, "I think I get the hint, Sal. I'm in the army now."

Melissa Salazar stood tight-lipped for a moment, her hands resting in the pockets of her skirt. In the corridor outside, people ran past, lugging boxes, files, and briefcases. Nicholas saw an MP jog by, whistle in his mouth, hastening to direct traffic somewhere down the line.

He had just finished strapping on his boots when he was suddenly jolted by a tremendous thud that threw everyone to the floor. It was followed by a kind of hollow-throated thunder that made him weak. His cheek was pressed to the cold tile of the recovery room floor.

"Holy Mother of God," Melissa Salazar whispered, hair streaming across her face. She looked around her. In the corridor, several people were screaming. Others were shouting.

The lights flickered overhead, dimmed, then came back on. *EMP*, Nicholas thought. The base's optical fibers and protein circuits had taken over where copper and aluminum wiring had been fused by the pulse.

Melissa, regaining control, said, "Looks like we got visited by a small warhead."

Everyone got quickly to his feet. Dr. Massingale helped Nicholas up.

"We'd better head for the Tube tunnels. Do you feel you can walk, Nick?" he asked. "If not, we can get a wheelchair for you."



"Just show me the door, friend," Nicholas said, squirming into his shirt. Though he was still groggy, he managed it easily. "If I'm going to spend the rest of my natural life inside the Rocky Mountains, I'd like to get started."

He realized that such a life would not be a happy one. All the things he'd had any strong feeling for would be gone. He couldn't bear to think of his family. Maybe somehow they had a chance...

Melissa had gone out with Dr. Massingale to oversee the rest of Project Foresee's evacuation. Records would have to be destroyed, equipment smashed. The lights kept burning. Somewhere generators were still turning, men and women still functioned. But overhead a small mushroom cloud sprouted upward into the stratosphere, its radioactive ions breaking a hole in the ozone. If the war scenarios were correct, other monstrosities were growing with malevolent rapidity all across the earth's once-green surface.

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## Chapter Three

DISCRETIONARYPERSONNEL.

That was the euphemism handed down to them by the military brass stationed at Vandenberg. All discretionary personnel were to have priority in the evac procedure. In his slightly medicated state, Nicholas Tejada managed to grin at the silliness of the term. It sounded as if he and the others so listed were among a certain kind of moral elite, as if he spent most of his time being "discreet."

The Tube that whisked him and the other Vandenberg discretionary personnel out into Death Valley contained nearly eighty-five residents, mostly civilian, of the former California missile base. Nicholas knew that they were extremely important, for there were few military personnel in this first contingent. Only two generals were on board—a brigadier and a major general. The rest of the Vandenberg Air Force personnel were staying behind. Waiting....

But there was something calming about the fact that the Air Force retained most of its active personnel at the base. Someone had to fight.

The compartment in which Nicholas languished hardly shook, hardly made a sound, as it passed safely beneath hundreds of feet of solid rock on its way through the Mojave Desert. Somewhere, Nicholas knew, there would be Tube links which would take the members of Foresee into Colorado. Other people would be rapidly funneled to various Air Force bases in Utah, Nevada, and southern Arizona.

There was only the slightest sensation of movement—a gliding, womblike feeling as the Tube raced at three-hundred-plus miles an hour through a near-vacuum. The smooth, relaxing motion of the Tube allowed him to forget briefly that in all likelihood there was nothing on the surface but ash and radioactive debris.

He wished he had been able to anticipate the attack on Vandenberg through Mnemos Nine. He couldn't bear the thought that if his mother and father had perished he had contributed to their deaths through inaction.

Why had they sent him to Bombay instead of having him prowl around the dream streets of someplace close to Vandenberg—Lompoc, perhaps, or Santa Barbara itself? They had to have known that the Russians were up to something. And he knew that region of California much better than the India conjured up by the microchips of Mnemos Nine's superbrain. Even in a hypothetical, computer-induced Santa Barbara, Nicholas knew that he would have spotted the harm those Russian trawlers could do.

On the other hand, two days ago he had gone comatose and the bombs had come down today. In a world of instant communications and instant destruction, computer scenarios, though precise, changed almost hourly.

The thing that perhaps bothered him the most about Bombay was the appearance of Rhoanna Martin. He had no idea where she had come from. Obviously, his memories of her were waiting to be culled, when such strong emotional responses were called for. Yet none were theoretically required in the Bombay/Ganesh Chaturthi sequence.

But she had appeared in Mnemos Nine scenarios many times before. Just three weeks previous, Nicholas had entered a scenario that was trying to anticipate a possible attack on the life of Pope Gregory XVII during his visit to Rio de Janeiro. The scenario had surprised him.

Rhoanna had walked out of the mass of revelers—the enthusiastic well-wishers who lined the streets—and waved at him. How full of life her smile was! A rapturous light glittered in her hair!

Then the bomb went off. It got the Pope and took out a third of Rio. It got Nicholas as well.

He shuddered, remembering all the gory details. It hurt to think back on it. The crumbling buildings of Rio—a city long wrapped like Laocoön in the crushing coils of spiritual and economic collapse—had burst into atomic flame like matchstick boxes. His body recalled the pain as needles of glass from the buildings ribboned through his flesh before each shred of torn skin shriveled away in a nanosecond. Fire stormed the poor streets of Rio de Janeiro.

In the real world the Pope lived and the bomb was found. Mnemos Nine had seen it coming from the sky, extrapolating that it might come from the upper reaches of a building rather than from an aircraft. All Nick knew was that it hurt. It hurt because Rhoanna had been there and the bomb had robbed them of their lives and love.

The door to Nicholas's private compartment eased open just then, and a short, stocky man entered, chewing on a carrot.

"Nelson," Nick said, putting aside the week-old copy of *Time* he had not been reading anyhow. "I didn't know you were on the Tube. Come on in." He got up and shook his colleague's hand.

Nelson Reitingger was another of the Mnemos system functionaries. He was an Environmental, not a Strategic. Nicholas was surprised to discover that the short man had been back at Vandenberg. Melissa Salazar hadn't said anything about his being here—but they had been hurrying to board the Tubes.

"How do, Nick?" he smiled, crushing Nicholas's hand in a firm but jovial grip. "Sal gave me the go-ahead to stop by and see you for a while."

"That's great," Nicholas said. "No one's come by since we evacuated Vandenberg. Have you seen Dr. Massingale?"

"I hear he's waiting for the next Tube out." Reitingger always seemed casual, at ease with the world, no matter how big the crisis.

"What's the news? Have you heard anything?" Nicholas asked.

"There's not much to tell, yet," Reitingger said around a mouthful of carrot. He had short curly hair and hands the size of a normal man's head. Though he looked rather comic, Nick knew that he was also physically dangerous. At a party in Santa Barbara, he'd seen Reitingger bend a tire-iron into something resembling a Möbius strip. Nicholas could not understand how or what he contributed to Mnemos's

Environmental scenarios. He considered Reitingger a borderline mental case—even though his Ph.D. in biochemistry and his background in forestry and animal husbandry were points in his favor.

Reitingger continued, "We found out that they inflicted some minor damage to the Coast Highway. The latest word also has it that we took out part of Olenegorsk. That's about it for World War III so far." He seemed unimpressed by the whole situation.

Nicholas couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. He had visions—because he was trained to have visions—of the entire southern California coastline bubbling in a nuclear inferno, perhaps presaging the end of mankind and of all life on earth.

"What's at Olenegorsk?" he queried, trying to stay calm. "I've never heard of it before."

Reitingger began picking his teeth with a stubby little finger. He reached over and swept up Nick's copy of *Time*, with its picture of Meher Baba on the cover. As he spoke he leafed through it.

"Basically, it's a huge radar facility, like the one we got that covers most of the upper peninsula of Michigan. It's protected by some low-range ABMs—most of which were caught sleeping."

"Damn it," Nick breathed. "They never tell me anything."

Reitingger laughed, commiserating with him. "Relax, Nickie. If something big had developed, everyone on the Tube would be shaking in their little booties. But all that's happening is that Sal's conferring with the Major General about our next plan of action."

Nick stared at Reitingger, who had thumbed his way to the sports section. He could hear the man's teeth clacking disgustingly.

"How many of us are there on the Tube?" Nicholas asked.

Nelson looked up at the ceiling, and counted off on his fingers. "Well, let's see. There's me and you. There's Melissa, of course. And Staci Bolyard. She's up front with Mnemos. The rest on board are Vandenberg personnel, heading either for Edwards Air Force Base or up to Nellis in Nevada."

"We've got a system link here on the Tube?"

"Sure. Staci's been plugged in ever since we left. We lost the Vandenberg link when the bomb went off up the coast. Electromagnetic pulse, and all that. But she's been in touch with Colorado and Omaha through the other in-system links."

To Reitingger it was like gossip—news to be imparted over a backyard fence. Nothing seemed to affect him. But he had never suffered the utter pain of being blown away in a Mnemos Nine scenario. Even so, Reitingger must have known—he was a superb Environmental—what a full nuclear exchange would do to the earth.

"I didn't know that we had an in-system link to Mnemos on the Tube. I wish Melissa had told me that."

"She doesn't want to upset you, sweetie. We all know what a terrible time you had," Reitingger said in an unusual burst of cuteness. He pulled another carrot from his pocket and offered it to Nicholas. "You want one? Helps you see at night."

Bonkers, Nicholas thought. Completely unconnected with anything normal. . . . If they had put him into Strategics, the entire Mnemos system would cave in.

Nick demurred, and the second carrot vanished back into Nelson's pocket. "So, what happened back at Vandenberg? Why didn't the rest of the world blow up?"

Reitinger surrounded himself with as much of a cloak of seriousness as he could temporarily muster. He crunched thoughtfully on his carrot, looking properly profound.

"It seems," he began, "that this Soviet trawler was cruising off our territorial waters, about three hundred miles out, when this Chinese destroyer jammed its radar, or some such nonsense—they haven't gotten the facts right yet. Anyway, whatever it was they jammed did more than its fair share of the work, because half the Soviet ship was on automatic, run mostly by a skeleton crew and computers. The ships fired at each other and one missile went wild. It headed for Vandenberg and exploded about ten miles offshore. We don't know if it was the Chinese or the Russian ship that did it. So, the Pentagon accidentally-on-purpose took out the Olenegorsk facility just to keep the Russians honest."

Reitinger finished by saying, "We had about three minutes flight time to intercept the incoming warhead, so Vandenberg sent up a decoy. The blast got the decoy and fizzled up part of Point Sal Beach."

Nick watched as Reitinger returned casually to the mangled copy of *Time*. It was as if the man were waiting in a dentist's office. An article in the sports section caught his pea-brained attention. He tapped it with a knobby finger. "That Weigl's the best damn thing to happen to the Colts. Too bad he had to go and deck the fine coach."

Nicholas snatched the magazine away from him. "Wait a minute. That's not the end of the story, is it?"

Reitinger looked up in surprise; then he smiled. "Well, when President Runciman sent that Cruise missile to nose around the Olenegorsk vicinity to see what it could come up with, he also called the Soviet premier. And after he read him the riot act, they decided between the two of them that it would be something of a trade-off. The Major General here says the score's about even. Maybe a couple Russian technicians at Olenegorsk, on their side, and some pleasure craft off Point Sal Beach on our side. And some low-level radiation flying around. Actually, we don't know the casualty count yet, because the Olenegorsk facility was mostly automated."

Nicholas breathed a little easier. He listened to the reassuring hum of the Tube as it wended its way underground. How many Tubes were shunting other "discretionary personnel" across the country? Were sirens going off in the world up above? Were fingers cocked and waiting over launch buttons? Were radio and television stations finally broadcasting those horrible words: *This is not a test. Repeat. This is not a test ...*

What were the real-life scenarios of panic and fear?

"I wouldn't worry, Nickie," Reitinger said, smiling. "Sal says that it's all being treated as an 'incident' up above. Quote, unquote. Very low key. Although Staci says every plane we've got's being scrambled."

Nicholas thought about the wealth of data that had to be flying into the circuits of Mnemos Nine deep beneath the alpine hills of Longmont, Colorado.

"What else does Staci know?" he asked.

He trusted Staci. Staci Bolyard was an Intelligence in-system extrapolator for Mnemos. Under regular circumstances, a Strategic like Nicholas would be listening in on Mnemos—for this was a genuine wartime scenario. But these were not normal conditions.

He couldn't imagine what kind of dream scenario Staci was drifting in. It depended upon her mental state

at the time she went in and the material Mnemos felt she could handle. If she worried too much about her children or her family, it would affect her every level of understanding and assimilation of the information the computer was laying out for her.

The system had other links, of course, and almost certainly Derek Mallory would be participating in Colorado. The last Nick had heard, Steven Childs, another Strategic, was at the University of Minnesota, doing some undercover recruiting for the Project. He wouldn't be too far from a Foresee link. Discretionary personnel were always where the government could reach them.

The Russians weren't too far away from developing a Project Foresee equivalent. They had made some peculiar computer advances of their own. What little information the CIA had been able to input into the Mnemos system indicated the Russian scientists had been able to link a small computer brain to a human body that had lost its mental functions—the patient's mind had clinically died but the body itself kept kicking. The brain had been overridden and plugged into the computer. The body couldn't get up and wander about, but the computer was learning slowly what it was like to be a human being, with much of the sensory input that a human being would experience.

"So, we're not at war yet," Nick said to Reitingger. "Officially."

"Officially, no. But when it's nuclear war you're talking about, is anything official?" he asked.

Nick shook his head. "Nothing but the mushroom clouds and the crying when it's over."

Reitingger seemed sure that developments topside weren't all that drastic; at least, that's what his words seemed to communicate to Nicholas. But Nicholas knew so little about how Nelson Reitingger's mind worked—if it worked at all.

Reitingger rose from the couch and gripped the overhang of the baggage compartment. Though there was little swaying of the Tube train, Nelson's reflexive actions made it appear as if they rode the Orient Express. All he needed was a trenchcoat and a porkpie hat.

"I'm on my way up to see Staci. You want to plug in and take a look at what's coming into the system? I don't think Staci would mind."

"No," Nicholas said, recalling the advice of both Melissa and Dr. Massingale. "I want to talk to Sal before I do anything." He still felt too lethargic—drugged—to partake of the perils of the system.

"Right," Reitingger said. "I getcha. Staci's just looking around anyway, assessing data as it comes in from the Pentagon and Omaha."

Nicholas knew that "looking around" might be the equivalent of wandering the dream streets of Moscow or Peking, or perhaps listening in to an English-language broadcast on a street corner somewhere in Helsinki. Scenarios were always unpredictable and initially baffling. One never knew where one would find oneself when exposed to the system, but Staci Bolyard was a very flexible woman and quite competent. Approximately Nicholas's own age, she had three children back at Santa Barbara and a husband in the Air Force. Staci had been working in the Intelligence branch for Foresee since a couple of years before Nick had joined. She knew her way around the system very well.

Nicholas wondered if her present thoughts were entirely focused on Mnemos Nine's scenarios, or if there was some fragment of her mind lingering on the safety of her family. He could sympathize with her dilemma. If a nuclear war broke out, it would be very difficult to concentrate on anything but the welfare of your loved ones—even if you did happen to work for one of the agencies designed to help combat such an exigency as a full-scale attack.

Nelson stood at the open compartment door. "You want me to signal Melissa to come on down? She told us all what a roller-coaster ride you had with Mnemos. I don't think you and that computer get along, Nickie."

"At least I get results," he said in defense. He meant it as a barb, considering what meager work Environmentals actually did, but Reitinger missed the point entirely. He only smiled.

Nicholas stopped him as he was about to vanish into the corridor of the Tube.

"By the way," he began. "Who was it who figured out the source of the attack? Sal said that Derek was working in system. Did he do it?"

"It was us," Nelson said, his tiny eyes smiling with a fraction more pride than intelligence. "Or me, I should say, in all modesty."

"*You?*"

"Nickie!" he said. "Don't look so disappointed!"

"I'm just surprised," Nick quickly muttered.

"Hey, don't you remember a few weeks back when Mnemos dropped me into that offshore scenario at Namor City—where they found that gusher?"

Nick nodded. Reitinger in a scenario sounding out the consequences of a possible oil-spill made sense to him. That's what Environmentals were for.

Reitinger continued. "Well, when Sal moved us all to Vandenberg, she had me go under, since I had experience with that region of the Pacific. It was only natural to run the sequence with Derek and those trawlers with me in to provide the right balance of data. All the information suggested that something might happen with that flotilla of Russians and that one trigger-happy Chinese tub. I knew the area well, and Mnemos just added things up." He shrugged. "Derek was there for a while. I guess he gets some credit." He smiled and walked away.

Nicholas marveled at the man's flippancy. He related to computer-induced scenarios like a kid might play a game in a supermarket arcade. A missile here, a missile there. *Boom!*

Perhaps it was because Reitinger, like Nick, was a loner. He had no family to speak of back in Santa Barbara—and even fewer friends. All he really had were the trees and the little furry animals of his profession. And Mnemos Nine.

And Reitinger knew that he would be part of any government plan of survival. No matter what happened in any of the scenarios—real or imagined—he and Nick would always have Tubes to whisk them away to safety.

But what about the rest of the world?

Even in the time it would take to get to Foresee in the Rockies, war could break out. The missiles might be launched, the bombers airborne.

He thought about Rhoanna Martin, who was now living somewhere south of Tucson. What was life like for her down there? Were the new Diomedes missiles being readied in their desert silos? Were Stealth III bombers silently lifting from Davis Monthan Air Force Base? Were the radar installations perched high in the Catalina Mountains going wild with incoming blips? Thankfully, he was tranquilized enough not to

ponder those thoughts much further.

Abruptly Reitinger rushed back down the corridor and burst into Nick's nook.

"Just got the word," he said in a very agitated manner.

Nicholas's heart skipped a beat as he anticipated the absolute worst. "What is it?"

"Back East. The Colts just demolished the Bears! Can you believe it? Forty-two to fifteen! You owe me twenty bucks."

"*What?* Hey, wait..."

Reitinger scurried down the corridor—off to spread the news—before Nicholas could stop him.

The goddamn football pool. He'd forgotten all about it. Along with everything else that was trivial.

He picked up the copy of *Time* and stared at the cover. The world was on the verge of a real nuclear conflict, and somewhere in Baltimore ordinary people were going home from an ordinary football game.

How he longed for an ordinary life. Maybe in the long run the whole thing was just a game anyway.

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## Chapter Four

RIDING UP IN quiet elevator from the Tube terminals in the eternally secure Rocky Mountains, Nicholas noticed that much of the anxiety he'd felt leaving California had dissipated. Staci Bolyard, a well-kept blonde hardly ever out of sorts, had maintained her composure, and Nicholas was able to absorb her confidence. She was slightly preoccupied as the elevator gently breezed them up to the fortress of the Project Foresee headquarters. She was making a disinterested attempt at filing down her fingernails, as Nicholas stood beside her and Melissa Salazar.

"I didn't think they could do it," Staci suddenly said, idly filing her fingernails. She blew away the fine dust at the tips of her nails.

Melissa, only a few feet away, looked evenly at her, her arms folded around a purse and leather briefing pouch. Nick glanced down at Staci, listening to the emery board sigh away at her fingers.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She smiled at him, but it was a smile more of relief than triumph. One did not consider successful extrapolations an indication of personal worth. They were just extrapolations, after all.

"I guess you could call it sabre rattling between the Russians and us," Staci said. "The scenarios I'm familiar with say that the Soviets aren't in a position yet to risk everything they've got just to rid the world of capitalism."

He could almost hear the mother in her telling her children that there was nothing to fear in the thunder and lightning of a summer's storm.

Nicholas watched the luminous numbers overhead diminish as they approached the lower levels of Foresee. He had never been here before, and he was somewhat apprehensive.

He said, "I just can't help but think what that little radioactive cloud is doing over Santa Barbara."

Staci pinched back a curl of blond hair that had strayed across her cheek. "I think Nelson said the prevailing winds will take it into the San Rafael Mountains. If we get the rain we've been expecting, it might be washed away. The watersheds will take it back into the Pacific."

Melissa, quiet until now, had been watching her two extrapolators closely. "I wish that it could be so simple," she said in a very quiet voice.

"Well," Staci began, "both warheads—ours and theirs—were extremely low-yield. That tells us one thing right there."

They all knew what she was talking about. A low-yield warhead would not contribute that much fallout in the first place, regardless of the actual damage done. It *was* saber-rattling—or chest-pounding, as Nicholas saw it: just a couple of big gorillas in the mimosa trees, hooting at one another across the Holocene plain.

"Come children," Melissa Salazar said as the doors of the elevator wheezed open, presenting them with Foresee.

This was all new to Nicholas. His only experience with the system as a whole had been through the scattered lead-ins at the Foresee offices surface-side. All of his apprentice training had been conducted in San Diego, and for the last four years he'd been stationed in Santa Barbara. He'd always intended a trip to Foresee Headquarters, but there had never been any real need.

Now there was the need.

The mountain above them was impenetrable granite. Nicholas knew that on the far northern slope was a busy ski resort that was just now in the process of gearing up for the snows of Thanksgiving. With more than thirty-two Olympic-rated runs—and two enormous lodges that attracted skiers from around the world—it was very much the perfect cover for a clandestine government operation.

The elevator doors parted and presented them with a large open corridor where they could see dozens of people moving about, most dressed in military uniforms. A number of others, in mufti, were driving small electric-powered carts. Two efficient women were checking in various individuals at a desk studded with computer terminals and security monitors.

Melissa walked up to the desk and nodded. "The others will be here shortly. Staci Bolyard you know, and this," she indicated Nick, "is Nicholas Tejada."

A brassy blond lieutenant stood up and offered security badges to them both.

"Welcome to Foresee, Mr. Tejada. We've heard a lot about you." She smiled. The badge she gave him bore his picture and his original security number.

Both women at the check-in desk seemed happy with their jobs. He wondered if they had any idea what was going on in the world above. The activity in the room beyond them betrayed a certain quality of alarm or concern. But it probably would be their job not to be too interested.

He put on his security badge.

Staci turned to Melissa. "Sal," she said with a worried look, "I'll check back with you later. I want to get to the communications room. I've got to see what they're doing about Cole and the kids."



She spoke rather quickly, almost as if the words were getting in the way of her deepest feelings. Nicholas didn't have to be a mind reader to know what would be foremost in Staci's thoughts.

"Go ahead," Melissa nodded, her eyes full of compassion. "I'll be with Nick in the Play Room."

"Thanks," Staci said. She shot an almost embarrassed smile at Nicholas. He smiled back at her. They were all a team now, and every one of them had his and her priorities. Nicholas couldn't begrudge Staci her concern about her family.

Melissa walked him down the corridor, past the check-in desk. Her nod of recognition to the two security guards standing before the wide glass doors of the Play Room brought similar, if understandably grim, nods in return. The Plexiglas doors parted, and before them were row upon row of computer consoles.

Melissa said, "It doesn't look bad yet on the outside, but we're doing the best we can to locate and shelter the families of everyone involved with Foresee."

Nicholas glanced down into the auditoriumlike Play Room. Military personnel—and at least two dozen important-looking civilians—were hovering over computer consoles and television screens, their faces glowing in the preternaturally green light off of the boards before them.

He'd heard about the Play Room often enough from Derek Mallory and Melissa herself. It was more or less as he'd imagined it would be.

Melissa directed Nick to the top of the arena, where they could overlook the whole operation.

She pointed upward. "The dorms and recreation spaces are upstairs. We might as well get ourselves assigned to sleeping quarters, since we're going to be here until the President blows the halftime whistle." She tried to seem relaxed. "You should consider yourself lucky. Before your time, all this was nothing more than a mineshaft, some cots, and a few computers. It was Mnemos Five when I started. We've all come a long way since."

Nicholas marveled at the near-luxury of the Play Room and of Foresee itself. It was hard to believe that they were under eight hundred feet of solid mountain. The floors were richly carpeted, and someone had wisely set out a few decorative plants.

The place felt comfortable and homey. And he knew why it felt that way: in all likelihood it was going to be home for some time to come.

Nick said, "I'm doing fine. I can check out quarters later. Right now I think I'd like to see the layout of the place and get to work."

Melissa pondered Nicholas for a brief instant. She was concerned with both his mental health and his physical disposition. "Nick," she said, "I didn't much like that last little jaunt we put you through in Mnemos Nine. You've had some rough ones before, but nothing like that."

"Well, I'd like to be doing something. I'm a bit shaky, but I can still function," he told her.

"I'm still worried about you," she told him. "And Dr. Massingale wants to examine you later when he gets a chance. You're one of the very best Strategics we have. I don't want your nightmares to devour you."

"I'll be fine," he said.

Melissa led him down to a row of computer screens. She set aside her purse and briefing pouch. Several

technicians were bent over a console that stood out from the others. On the wall before them were several monitoring screens. Nicholas realized that beyond that wall lay Mnemos Nine, languishing in its bath of supercool liquid helium, waiting for the next in-system link to be arranged.

A small fusion reactor, fueled by the hydrogen contained within artesian waters, would keep the computer and the Project headquarters functioning—independent of the topside world—for nearly a thousand years. Nicholas felt a trifle dwarfed knowing that beyond the walls was a machine so quick, so terribly efficient, that it could outthink any human being.

A door from another room off to their right opened, and a man dressed in slacks and a canary-colored cardigan came swaggering in as if he were stepping out onto a golf course.

"Hi, Chief," he called out to Melissa Salazar. "Hey, Nick. Glad to see you here for once."

"Derek," Nicholas smiled, stepping over. He shook his friend's hand eagerly.

Derek Mallory grinned broadly. "Sal said that you had a spat with the machine a couple days ago. Nice work."

"Thanks," Nick said. "I appreciate it. I hear you got to play frogman with Nelson."

"Nelson," Mallory said, shaking his head sadly. "That boy's got a long way to go. But he found that missile. Have to hand it to him."

Mallory was only a shade taller than Nick, and though in his mid-thirties, there was a salt-and-peppering of gray at his curly temples. Nick had always looked upon Derek as one of the few normal people at Foresee. Fortunately, Mallory was also a Strategic, where normalcy counted the most.

Though Derek now made Longmont his home, he had lived for a few years in Santa Barbara, where he and Nick had become friends. However, Mallory had never been able to abandon his native cliffrock of Colorado, and decided to move back—helped, unfortunately, by a divorce and a runaway sixteen-year-old daughter. Colorado was just the medicine he needed.

He and Nick would often rendezvous in southern Colorado to ski, taking in Aspen and Telluride when they could. And on occasion they'd even make it up into Utah, to ski Brighton or Solitude.

Melissa said, "Nick's just getting acquainted with the Play Room. Staci's gone over to communications to track down the rest of her family."

Nick gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "And Reitinger's still down at the Tubes, playing with the trains."

"So, the gang's almost all here," Mallory said.

They faced the consoles which babysat Mnemos Nine. Nick turned to Derek. "On our way here, Staci was in-system watching things develop. She unplugged when the situation softened. Is there anything new going on?"

Mallory pointed to one particular screen. "Runciman's been guardedly mum about the incident. However, much of southern California saw the Vandenberg fireball; the explanation the media's been given is that an experimental rocket went haywire, just like the time two years ago when that missile fell onto Sisquoc. So far, it looks like the press has bought it. Intelligence reports that the State Department's already in the process of filing official complaints at the UN and in Geneva. But it doesn't look like war. Yet."

"I still don't like it," Nicholas muttered.

"It was a damn stupid thing to happen," Melissa said, not completely suppressing her anger.

Mallory pointed to one readout on a screen before them. "We've got a handful of Soviet warships just off Madagascar that have suddenly changed course."

"Where?" Nick asked. Around Madagascar, or anywhere along the east coast of Africa, there would be only one place of strategic interest for the Soviets: the Persian Gulf region.

But Mallory's answer surprised him entirely. "They're headed south, from what our satellites can tell."

"South?"

"And possibly west," Derek said.

There went the Persian Gulf theory. "But why would they do that?" Nicholas looked at the screen.

"Well, we can only guess, until all the data is ready for a trip into Mnemos. But the Russians might be off to counter the fleet we've got in the South Atlantic. That would be rather foolish, though, since there's a huge storm brewing there and the Soviets know it. I can't imagine the Russians risking a major naval excursion, with thirty-foot waves lashing their decks. Nor can the Pentagon."

Melissa stepped over to a console and began typing in a sequence which, as it appeared on the screens before them, indicated troop movements in South Africa. Nicholas knew that the mineral wealth of that part of Africa was tremendous, but he still couldn't fathom the rationale for Soviet agitation down there. Russia itself was a vast country, rich in both petroleum and a wide range of mineral resources. It could be that they were making sure the forces of the United States or western Europe wouldn't be able to get at the supplies of vanadium, manganese, gold, and bauxite so abundant there. Or perhaps the Russian convoy was moving toward the Falkland Islands and the oilfields beneath their shores that the U.S. depended so greatly upon. It could be the first step toward a blockade.

Mallory pointed at one of the computer screens. "We're getting some input right now from the Pentagon war room. Apparently, they've alerted all of our armed forces. They've even notified Heimdall Station in earth orbit. If anything happens up there, it'll mean our one platform against the three Salyut stations. It could be messy all the way around."

Nicholas didn't like the feel of it.

He knew human nature too well. He knew that tensions built up slowly, but sooner or later those tensions found release. He knew that if one or two nuclear devices were allowed to be detonated—even for saber-rattling purposes—it would then be easier for anyone, anywhere, to set off a bomb in his neighbor's territory. The escalation might be incremental—or it might be instant. The experts often disagreed. But the Mnemos Nine Environmental scenarios suggested that if even one or two warheads were used in bush wars in Africa or in desert skirmishes in Iran or Afghanistan, the radioactivity in the atmosphere would accumulate to dangerous levels. Strontium 90 and Cesium 137 would linger for many many years. Nitrogen in the upper atmosphere would be reconverted by *any* kind of nuclear detonation—and the ozone layer would be affected. Ultraviolet radiation would then pelt the planet, causing untold damage to all organisms living on the surface, particularly the small ones so important to the biological chains.

It was all part of the Mnemos Nine scenarios, and the banks in front of them were absorbing as much data as they could for future extrapolations.

Nicholas turned to Mallory. "How many other Strategics are here?"

"Stewart Flinn and Paul Northcott. Steve Childs is only an hour away. They got him into the Tube in Minnesota as soon as things started looking nasty."

Melissa Salazar had been speaking in low tones with the few technicians. She picked up a special telephone and spoke into it for a few seconds. After a brief spell of listening and shaking her head, she hung up.

"I'm afraid that you're going to have to get right into the thick of things, Nicholas," she said with a hand on his arm. Given the look in her eyes, and the somberness in her voice, Nicholas knew that, although she was being genuinely solicitous of his condition, she also had other things on her mind.

She said, "We've got to put you into an important scenario, if you think you're up to it. We'd give it to someone else, but it's just been discovered that there's something going on down in southern Arizona. That's your old stomping grounds. Massingale won't be here yet for—"

Nicholas held his hand up to stop her. "Don't worry, Sal. That's what I'm here for." Dr. Massingale would arrive while he was under, so there should be nothing risky about a small trip into the system.

Melissa seemed tense. "Derek here will be going under in an hour or so, because we want to monitor those trawlers. But this thing down around Tucson just came in."

While Nick could still feel the drift of the drugs within his system, he knew that he would be able to go with the scenario without any problem. He only wished that there could've been *a little* more time...

"All right, Sal," he said. "I wanted to see the couches anyway."

Melissa nodded grimly. "Let's go," she said.

*Faster!* the impulses told him. *Faster!*

But he couldn't press the gas pedal to the floor any harder than he was doing at the moment. His heart raced, and his hands, sweating feverishly in the harsh, desert heat, gripped the steering wheel as if it were the only tangible object in the known universe.

Outside the car, the wide dry desert rushed by. Here, inside the automobile, it seemed so peaceful and calm. But the voice on the radio speaker was virtually screaming with a desperation he'd never felt before in his life.

"It's war!" the announcer shouted hysterically. *"Everybody, it's war!"*

The announcer on the long-distance radio station had interrupted the music to shout that there were flocks of armed Soviet bombers soaring over the north pole and that submarine-launched missiles were already falling on the cities of both coasts.

Now the radio stations—all of them—had gone off the air without any prior warning. The last voice Nick had heard had urged them all to get out of town, to get as far away from Tucson as they could. The announcer's voice had choked with sobs, and then the station's place on the dial was taken over by sudden silence.

And he couldn't drive fast enough.

In the back seat of the car were two children. His children.

But he didn't have any children.

He quickly looked back: yes, they were his. There was his daughter, only a month old, napping soundly, lost to the world. But the other child, an eighteen-month-old boy, was bouncing around in the backseat, having just awoken nervous and fidgety. The boy kept craning his head up for a look out of the side window of the car.

"Stay down," Nicholas commanded him. "Oh, sweet Jesus," he whispered to himself.

He felt dazed, bludgeoned by the entire sensory world.

Then he discovered that there was a woman beside him.

His wife. Yes, he thought. My wife.

She slowly turned to him in the agonized light of the sunset, a long, harried look on her face—a face suddenly become familiar, shifting and changing in the coruscating aura of the sunset.

"Oh, Nickie!" she exclaimed. "What are we going to do about Mother? What are we going to do?"

He blinked, staring at her. The name, the face, came to him. Rhoanna.

Confused, frightened, and desperate, he said, "I don't know." His throat was dry in the Sonoran heat. "Let me think. Just let me think!"

On the highway not a single car obeyed the speed limit. In his rearview mirror, Nicholas could discern the teeth of faraway Picacho Peak to the south. Barreling up the road from behind came a wildman in a huge car, possibly an armored Cadillac.

The Highway Patrol was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, God. Hold on!" Nicholas yelled.

He jerked his car off to the far right-hand side of the highway in order to avoid a fiery collision. His wife had turned around to see the frantic car approaching. *Rhoanna!*

"Grab the babies!" Nick shouted at her.

In blue jeans and workshirt, her hair tied up in a turquoise scarf, Rhoanna leaned across the seat of the car as the Cadillac rocketed up beside them. Nicholas pulled a sharp maneuver that tossed his wife bodily back into the front seat, still holding the little girl in her arms. The baby screamed, having been rudely awoken from her dreams. The little boy had disappeared behind the seat, probably as safe there as anywhere else in the vehicle.

The Cadillac sideswiped Nick's car with a dinosaur scream—but otherwise there was no harm done.

The Cadillac wobbled back into the center of the two-lane highway, carried on down the road by its frantic momentum, in search of better prey, now that the world was coming to an end and law didn't matter. The man was doing better than one hundred ten miles an hour, by Nicholas's reckoning.

Nick lifted his foot from the gas pedal and for a brief second closed his eyes. He'd never been so frightened in his life. Everything seemed to rush about his ears.

The baby began screaming loudly in her mother's arms.

The radio—which up until now had been a squall of static—suddenly resumed broadcasting. The announcer's voice was unsteady; as he spoke, the words themselves seemed to shake.

He cleared his throat, then said, "The President has called for a state of national emergency. Several American cities have been struck with nuclear weapons. Governor Lowen has called out the National Guard to assist with emergency procedures, and martial law is now in force. Citizens are urged not to panic."

The man had obviously been reading from a prepared statement, and sounded like a machine ready to slip a few gears. Nicholas switched the radio off after searching the airwaves for other channels. Even the stations in Phoenix had gone off the air.

*Nicholas*, the voice came. *Look around you* .

"Oh, Nickie, what are we going to do?"

Nicholas slowly turned to his wife. In the glow of the sunset to the west, her face was illuminated by a divine light. Her green eyes floated in a vision that was both beautiful and sad. Another woman's name came fleetingly into his mind, but vanished as if thrust out by the horror of the situation. Melissa? Melissa who?

"Da!" the little boy in the back seat squealed excitedly, pointing a chubby finger out the window to the west.

Still driving, Nicholas looked off toward the horizon and saw a row of snaggletoothed mountains. Thrown up against the sky like a nightmare were hundreds of jet contrails from Davis Monthan Air Force Base. Blossoming up from the south like the spidery arms of a giant ocotillo cactus, each one was tipped with the deadly glistening jewel of a fighter craft or bomber.

But that wasn't what his son was pointing to.

*What is it, Nicholas?*

The little boy knew nothing of adult matters. Nicholas gazed where the boy was pointing. Off in the distance, between two tall, ragged mountain peaks, a dirigible of some kind was slowly drifting across the desert. He recognized it. It was one of the Donner Luftwerk Corporation's giant air-freighters, just the thing to attract the attention of a small child fascinated by bright, shiny things in the sky.

His son giggled with delight.

The contrails above, with their silver arrowheads of destruction, shook the entire desert with sonic thunder. Nick pulled over into a roadside rest area.

It was a good decision. Ahead of him, driving *against* the swell of traffic, the Cadillac with its frenzied driver was coming back down the highway. Nick swerved up into the rest-stop entrance where the Cadillac could not possibly get at them.

"Jesus!" he swore as his wife held on tight to the screaming baby girl.

They heard an ugly rending of steel accompanied by a chorus of bursting glass and an explosion. Nick shut off the car and looked around. The Cadillac was somersaulting down the highway, having collided head-on with another speeding automobile. The other car had been instantly transformed into a twisted ball of metal and fire.

"My God!" his wife cried, clutching the child.

Nicholas got out of the car and stared with horror at the Cadillac, which had come to a tormented end in a cactus-studded gully beside the road. There were cries from the interior of the automobile, from someone made sober by the heartless fires that engulfed him.

*What was in the sky, Nicholas?*

Nicholas spun around and saw an older gentleman—a farmer of sorts—standing beside him, his eyes wide, staring at the carnage littered on the highway.

"What did you say?" Nicholas asked him.

"I said, 'Did you see that crazy sombitch?' Craziest thing I ever did see!"

The man was a scrawny creature, wearing a grimy baseball cap and four days worth of beard on his rawhide face. He dribbled chewing tobacco down the side of his stubbly check.

"Jimminy Christ!" he snorted, shaking his head violently. "Now what the sam hill you think made him do that fer?"

Nick stared at the man. "The radio," he said simply.

"The radio?" he asked incredulously, as if Nicholas too had gone loco. "What the hell you talkin' radio?"

Nicholas pointed into the sky. "It's an attack." His voice sounded hollow, dreamlike. "The Russians are attacking us." They could hear the small rumbles of the sound barrier being broken by jets and bombers as they slid up into the stratosphere, heading north.

The old guy laughed and slapped his thigh. "Now yet talkin', pardner! Now yet talkin'! I always did want them Ruskies to pull a fast one on old Uncle Sam! Yessir!"

Suddenly there was a vast orange ball of hellish light to the south of them.

*What is it, Nicholas?*

Nicholas turned around. It wasn't the old man who had spoken. Who, then?

The ball of light—like a vision of Armageddon—got progressively larger and larger, expanding until it filled the entire southeastern horizon. Tucson was directly underneath it.

"Christ Almighty!" the farmer gasped.

The shock wave would be upon them within ten seconds. Nicholas smelled the man's bowels as they let loose, filling his overalls.

"Oh, Lordy," the old man whimpered, his eyes gone blind with a glimpse of the terrible Angel of Death. He crumpled up beside Nicholas, dead in the stench of his own waste.

Nick swiftly turned away from the glare and ran back to his car. *Only seconds*, his body told him hurriedly.

"Get out!" he screamed. He pulled open the rear door and grabbed his son, who was looking at the pretty orange sky.

"But, Nick!" his wife protested, arms full of wailing baby. "What are we going to do?"

*Nicholas!* the cry rang out in his mind, but he was too busy to pay any heed to it. He was like a prairie animal caught in a savage range fire.

They had to get behind several feet of dirt to protect themselves.

*No!* came the insistent voice from within. *Help us, Nicholas!*

The rest stop was set up on a low rise that sloped down into an arroyo full of blooming saguaro cactus and tangly mesquite. With the light of Ragnarok behind them, Nicholas shuffled his family down the side of the asphalt rise and over a modest railing. They dropped into a culvert lined with cement and overgrown with sage weeds and debris.

The instant they skidded to a halt, the shock wave descended. It was like being beneath the crest of a fantastic tidal wave. Thirty miles high, it swept over them. Nicholas covered his ears, bidding his wife do the same—and as he did, that inner voice screamed to him.

*Don't stop!* it yelled. *We have to know more!*

But Nicholas knew that it was the end. No single multi-targeted independent-reentry-vehicle warhead could have done this kind of damage to Tucson. This was far more widespread than the destruction done from a lone MIRV bursting in from the ionosphere. This was a different weapon entirely.

*Yes, Nicholas! That's it!* came the hidden, interior chorus.

Something far back in his mind told him that only those within a ten-mile radius from the epicenter of the blast would be killed instantly. Twenty-five miles out everything would sustain major damage. But *seventy* miles out?

Phoenix lay just forty miles up the road. Yet the shock wave and surge of radioactive light that was sweeping over them seemed as if it arose from the force of *hundreds* of warheads.

*Yes!* the voice encouraged.

The wind soared overhead in a scream so colossal that Nick thought that he'd go deaf. His son had disappeared—along with part of the culvert itself. A truck, probably the dead farmer's, stripped of paint and glass, crashed into the gully like a child's push-toy.

"What's happening?" he yelled into the wind, clutching his ears. "*What's happening?*"

He stood up and tried to locate the boy. But he knew he didn't have a son. Or did he?

He turned and saw his wife, then staggered backward in the blood-colored light.

His daughter was fused to his wife's chest. His wife had no face. They were on fire. Nicholas screamed and ran through the culvert underneath the highway to where it opened outward, facing Tucson and the southern deserts.

He *had* to know!

A mushroom cloud seventy thousand feet high had sprouted in the sky, topped by a scar of reddish-black. But the black was not from ash and smoke.

Nicholas realized what he was seeing: The bomb had been so powerful that it had actually punched a



hole in the atmosphere; above the mushroom cloud he could see stars. Stars!

Tucson was being sucked up into outer space!

"*Jesus!*" he shouted, putting his hands to his face.

When he did, he felt bone. The flesh was dripping from his fingers and hands.

He fell backward against a rock and sat down with a jolt. What madness kept him grappling for life? The wind had abated slightly, and the light had dimmed. He believed he could hear the atmosphere rushing up into the cold wastelands of space, pulling up the glowing dust that was once Tucson with it.

Then, like something lovely and delicate from a fairy tale, he saw it. The Donner Luftwerk air-cargo freighter lumbered its way over the desert terrain just a few miles away. Untouched! How it had survived the holocaust he didn't know; but there it was, moving lugubriously like some happy-go-lucky sky-elephant.

All of his attention was focused upon it with childlike fascination. Like his son's....

The voices inside him said, *Nicholas! That's it! You found it! That's exactly what we're looking for!*

But he didn't care.

There was nothing he could do with the fact that an air-freighter like this one had taken out Tucson. The ships from Donner Luftwerk were Trojan horses, eased up to the unsuspecting walls of Ilium, their bellies full of death.

And Phoenix—with Williams Air Force Base forty miles away—was next.

He tried to stand up, but fell back onto the hot desert floor. "Please," he cried out. "No more! I can't stand it anymore!"

He thought he heard the helpless cries of a child—his child—coming from the far reaches of his consciousness. The cry echoed from the culvert behind him, sounding haunted and terribly lost.

But there was nothing he could do.

Then he heard a different voice, expressing an even greater urgency. *Nick!* it shouted. *It's real! It's happening! It's really happening!*

Suddenly, he had visions of Soviet Backfire bombers at sixty thousand feet. He saw SS-20s racing across the Danube and up over the Pyrenees. Trident missiles rose on columns of superheated steam out of the oceans. Lasers arced down crimson beams from satellites in space. *War!*

The visions, the *facts*, stampeded across his mind in megabytes of precise data; he couldn't separate them from what he was literally seeing.

*It's real, Nick!* It was a woman's voice this time. *World War III is really happening!*

Overhead, the Donner Luftwerk air-freighter drifted like a gray cloud, its engines directed toward an unknowing Phoenix.

With each beat of his heart, the end of the world got closer and closer.

His last thoughts were of the woman in the ditch.

# The Second Variation

## Chapter One

THE GIRL'S FACE rose over the horizon of his consciousness and smiled down at him. Her voice was soft and flowed to him through the dim folds of wakefulness.

"Hi, doll," she breathed. "It's been a while, hasn't it."

Nicholas blinked several times, looking up at her. The skin of her face was pearl-white, her eyes green and wide. Small star-clusters of dusty freckles dotted each rosy cheek. Her platinum-blond hair, short and prim—almost military in its style—surrounded the moon of her young face. It filled his whole waking world. She didn't appear to be any older than eighteen years of age. And he had never seen her before in his life.

It's been a while?

He shivered. His body was telling him that indeed it *had* been a while, but a while since what?

The girl put an arm around his bare shoulders and helped him slowly sit upright. The bones in his spine snapped and popped into place as if they'd been too long settled into one position.

He was rather taken with the girl's strength. She was short—he guessed her to be about five foot two—yet, she was magnificently built. Her uniform was a sparkling white and was as clean as the surface of a crystal. She could've been the child of a snow-country queen stepped out of a Norwegian myth.

"*Lexie!*" grumbled a voice behind them in the darkness. "I told you not to fiddle with the equipment! Dammit, it's for the Historians!"

Still holding Nicholas upright, the girl turned. "Oh, Daddy! *I am* an Historian!" She turned back to him, saying as much for Nicholas's benefit as her father's, "And this one's mine."

Nicholas coughed and looked around, pushing away the cobwebs of the almost interminable sleep that had gripped him.

He was sitting on something like a morgue tray. It had been pulled from a tall, flat wall where he could see other trays still locked in their cubbyholes.

A cone of light radiated up from the floor at the girl's feet. He was stark naked, and the beautiful girl was staring rather delightfully at him.

Embarrassed, he turned away, using a slight thigh motion to casually cover himself. She seemed unabashed. There was a large purple hourglass embroidered above one breast on her uniform. An Historian? He blushed as she smiled wonderfully at him.

He couldn't recall seeing a uniform quite like hers before in Foresee.

"Where am I?" he asked, staring through the darkness at the wall of trays. These weren't at all like the Mnemos couches.

"Omaha," the girl said happily. "We think. We just got here."

"Omaha?" The incredulousness in his voice made the word come out like a religious chant. It echoed through the room flatly.

"Lexie!" The call reverberated as if it had been sounded in the corridors of a cave. Omaha?

Lexie bent over and kicked at something with her foot. "Move!" she said, and the light rolled away several feet. Nicholas glanced down at it. It was a strange globe of white luminescence on silent wheels that hastened to do her bidding.

When the little machine reached the center of the room, Nicholas discovered that he was in a largely empty chamber of immense proportions. Three walls contained somber trays. On the fourth, opposite them, there was a long console and the screen-system of a computer. By the looks of it, it was cold and long dead.

"What is this place?" Nick asked.

Nothing had moved here for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. The movable lantern's treads stood almost half an inch deep in dust. The pattern of the girl's footprints, made as she had entered the room and explored the trays, was visible as well. It was quite cold and deathly still.

He found that he was suddenly shivering. He drew in his arms as goose pimples rippled across his skin. His body was only now beginning to come alive. The girl ran a warm hand up and down his back. It was palpably electric and stirred him in unexpected ways.

"Are you OK?" she breathed softly.

Her appraisal of him was a little peculiar. It was almost as if he were some kind of newly acquired treasure. But she had said, hadn't she, that he was hers.

"It's cold in here," he managed to get out.

"Daddy!" she yelled into the darkness of the corridor beyond the immense chamber. "He says it's cold!"

Nicholas heard a noise in the corridor, and he turned around, trying to see what was going on. More bones popped.

The gruff voice outside sounded angry at his daughter's badgering. "If it's cold in here, it's because the heat hasn't been on in a thousand years! What's the matter with you?"

Nicholas heard ponderous footsteps crunching the dust of the outer corridor. Beyond the large door was a shimmering of light in the darkness.

"OK," Nick said. "What is this? What's this all about?" he asked the girl. "Where's Melissa?" How could a thousand years have passed? He was beginning to feel nauseous, and not a little scared. "And who in the world are you?"

He noticed how cracked and aged his voice felt, as if his vocal chords had not been in use for many, many years. His skin felt like lifeless leather. He began rubbing himself vigorously.

"Hurry up, Daddy!" Lexie yelled. Her impatience was like that of a little girl wanting to show her father a prize. She rummaged through a compact bag at her belt and held up a cube-shaped instrument. "This should help," she said, pressing it against his cold flesh. He tried to draw back from her, but his reactions were too slow. Something hissed painlessly into his arm.

Suddenly an overhead light flashed on. Nicholas jerked up a hand to shield his eyes from the brightness.

A number of men entered the quiet room from the outer corridor. They all seemed to be of a military order. The man leading them was a large, husky individual, and before him rolled another of those mobile globes of light. The soldiers behind the heavy man were all dressed in metallic uniforms similar to Lexie's, but of an iridescent green. They all halted when they saw Nicholas. Some of the soldiers gasped.

"*Eridani!*" one soldier, hardly more than a boy, breathed, falling back to the safety of the door.

The big man looked over at Nicholas, naked on the table, and pointed at Lexie. "I told you to let me and the boys handle it. This is goddamn serious business!"

The soldiers clustered like frightened sheep against the wall opposite the trays. Lexie's father stepped up to Nicholas with considerably less fear.

Nicholas noticed that on the breast of the man's shiny green uniform was a patch of a warrior's ax. On the man's head rested a pair of thick-lensed black goggles, and at his side was a peculiar-looking gun. He also wore jodhpurs and tall boots of the same metallic green.

Nicholas's mind raced. Whoever they were, they weren't like any Americans he had known. But they didn't seem to be Russians, either.

The man chewed on a small cigar that glowed at its tip. The smell of the cigar seemed pleasant and familiar to Nicholas as his olfactory sense began coming alive.

"He's mine, Daddy," the girl pouted, seeing her father's stern expression. "It's part of the Creed. I found him."

She held onto Nicholas's right arm, nuzzling a warm breast tightly to him with a sense of divine right by conquest. Nicholas found her warmth highly desirable, and did not want to pull away.

"You want to tell me what this is all about?" he demanded of the imposing leader. "Are you in charge?"

"I am," he began, then turned back to his men and barked out, "Sye, make sure Jarre doesn't lose us. I don't want to have to go back for him like the last time. Tell him we found what we're looking for."

The soldier at the door to whom he had directed this order was a young man of moderate build whose frightened pale blue eyes seemed drawn to Nicholas. His black-lensed goggles were down around his throat. Sye turned quickly, obviously glad to leave the room.

The leader addressed the other men. "Well? We didn't come here to pick our noses!"

The soldiers stared and did not move.

The big man took out his cigar and yelled at them once again. "This guy's *not* an Eridani, so snap out of it!" He leaped at a waspish soldier and collared him. "I count to three and your goddamn head comes off! Check out the upper levels to this room! I want to find out where the ground-leads are. I want to know where the hell the energy in this place's coming from!"

He rattled the timid soldier like a balsa-wood puppet and threw him into two others.

"But, Captain Lazlo..." one of them whined, never once taking his eyes off Nicholas.

"I said *move!* "

A few of them began searching the room, but others lingered beside the faithful glow-globe.

Captain Lazlo walked up to Nicholas.

"The first thing we gotta do is get some clothes for you, before your dingus falls off," he said.

The Captain's goggles glittered in the overhead lights. Nicholas was surprised at the difference between Lazlo's reaction to his presence on the morgue tray and that of the soldiers.

Lazlo turned to the soldier by the door. "Titus," he ordered. A lanky, pasty-faced redheaded boy of nineteen stepped forward reluctantly.

Lazlo said, "Titus, get on over to the Bore and find this man a uniform. Boots, too. And do it fast, before he freezes up like the rest of these puppies." He made an all-encompassing gesture to indicate the vast wall of trays.

"But, Captain," Titus said, "he's an Eridani."

Captain Lazlo's voice thundered in the bare chamber. "Goddamn it, Titus! Do you believe everything you read? You do as I say, or you'll stay home next time!"

"Yes, sir," Titus said, quickly vanishing into the outer hall.

Lazlo turned to Nick and his smiling daughter. He scrutinized the nameplate fastened to the front of the tray. Lexie watched with an air of utter satisfaction.

"Struck gold," Lazlo said victoriously. "I knew we'd do it eventually." The leader straightened up proudly and held out a beefy hand. "So, you're Tejada," he said, correctly softening the j in Nick's name. Few people ever got it right. "Lazlo's the name. DefCon Warrior, Class One. You've already met Lexie, my offspring. Apprentice Historian."

"I'm not an apprentice," she snapped.

Lazlo jerked out his cigar and glared at her. "The hell you aren't! You aren't even supposed to be on this trip!"

"Well," she said, suddenly sure of herself, "after *this*, I will be an Historian."

Whatever Lexie had given Nicholas was beginning to work. He felt a little more alive.

"Look, people," he said firmly. "I think it's about time someone gave me some answers."

Lazlo was interested in answers only to his own questions. He presently looked up at the wall of trays. To Nicholas he said, "Just how long've you been in here, anyway?"

Nicholas remembered the "thousand-years" remark. "What do you mean, how long have I been in here?"

The remaining soldiers stared at him, glued to their stations beside the door. But for the cigar, the place smelled like a tomb. Nicholas knew that Foresee was never like this. Was it really Omaha? Had he somehow gotten locked into Mnemos and never woken up?

Titus, the nervous red-head, hustled back into the chamber with an armload of clothing. He stopped short of the tray and placed the clothing on the floor, never once taking his eyes off of Nick.

"Dammit!" Lazlo growled, scooping up the metallic clothes. Titus backed off quickly.

Lazlo offered the clothes to Nick. "They'll shrink to fit you."

He pulled on the uniform as quickly as he could. He discovered that it was like some fluid, self-adjusting membrane which easily found all the curves and odd angles of his body and molded itself to his form. No wonder Lexie looked so incredible. He had noticed just how the barely discernible circles of her nipples had shown through the material.

He drew on his boots and stood upright beside the tray. More bones creaked. "Now," he said. "Some answers."

Lazlo gave him a serious, if doubtful, look. "I thought you'd be able to tell *us*. We think this is one of the old SAC bases outside Omaha, but we're not exactly sure yet. That's what Jarre is looking into upstairs." He pointed with his thumb. "We got an energy-flow reading inside the Bore and followed it here. Surprised us all."

Captain Lazlo puffed aggressively on his cigar, gazing around him. "Boy, you know, I thought a place like this was for the history tapes. We thought most of the SAC bases had gotten blasted during the war. I guess not."

Nicholas noticed the soldiers by the door whispering among themselves. He could hear the word "Eridani" being bantered around.

"So, all this isn't part of Foresee," Nick said. "We're in Nebraska."

Lexie cuddled up to him. "Foresee's long gone. And so's most of everything else. But it doesn't matter. We found you, and you're *all* mine."

Captain Lazlo had other ideas. "Damn it!" he said, pulling Nicholas away from her soft embrace. "When are you going to grow up? If he's all that's left of Foresee and the Old World, then he belongs to everyone. He's DefCon's property, you got that? Keep away from him!"

"You know what the Creed says," Lexie countered.

"We'll let Riordan make the decisions about the Creed when we get back," Lazlo boomed.

"The hell with Riordan! He's mine and I found him!" Lexie put an end to the matter then and there.

Nicholas got the impression that this sort of verbal pyrotechnics occurred frequently between father and daughter. A soldier Nicholas had not seen before walked into the room—and stopped abruptly upon seeing Nicholas. Captain Lazlo faced him, pulling out his cigar.

"What did you find, Jarre?" he asked his underling.

Jarre was mouselike, with rascally brown hair and quick furtive brown eyes. He was a little older than the rest. Nicholas guessed that he was Lazlo's right-hand man.

Jarre looked once more at Nicholas, then faced the Captain. "The only leads we found come from a small reactor, and they all flow to here. The computer says those are stasis couches, Captain."

Lazlo and Jarre walked up to one of the couches. Jarre put the Captain between himself and Nick as they carefully stepped up to the trays still in place in the huge wall.

Nicholas looked about the room. Although it did not resemble the in-system sleep center for Mnemos Nine at Foresee's headquarters, it obviously served the same purposes. The names on the other trays

told Nicholas more than he wanted to know.

Reitinger. Bolyard. Mallory. Childs. Flinn. Feterling. McKibben. And several dozen others he'd never heard of before. The whole Project was here. Things were starting to add up, and Nicholas didn't like it. His knees were beginning to wobble. He closed his eyes briefly and leaned back on the tray as Jarre and Lazlo tried to draw out the couches one by one.

Lazlo turned to Nicholas. "That one electrical lead we picked up must've been plugged into your couch. All these others are out."

"And I found him," Lexie sang proudly beside him.

"The computer must have kept him alive all this time," Jarre said. Jarre didn't say it, but Nicholas could almost hear the word "Eridani" on his lips—certainly it had been in his eyes.

Lazlo squinted as cigar smoke curled up about his face. He looked myopically at Nicholas. "When did you go under?"

Nicholas recalled his last scenario—and the circumstances under which he had gone into it. He gave Lazlo the date.

"Makes sense," the Captain muttered as the tray Jarre was pulling on finally yielded. Nicholas thought he was going to be sick.

The couch had been marked "Bolyard." Inside was a diminutive skeleton shrouded in the fibers of a blouse that had given away to the passing of the centuries. The skull, jarred by the motion of the tray, snapped off at the neck, falling to gaze directly up at Nicholas. A small necklace glittered like a constellation lost in a forest of bones. Blond-gray strands of hair still clung in places to Staci's skull.

"Oh, my God," Nicholas whispered, feeling faint.

"Thought so," Lazlo stated flatly, emotionlessly. "I don't think any of the others made it either."

The soldiers examining some of the other stasis couches all concurred with their Captain. The trays were full of bones and dust and the shards of ancient apparel. *A thousand years!* Somehow, when Nicholas hadn't come out of Mnemos, they'd moved him here, along with the rest of Foresee. How they did this—or when—he had no idea.

Lazlo said, "Let's get some more readings of the place, and get you back to DefCon. I don't think you should be burdened with all the facts at once." He puffed once or twice on his cigar, then said with a touch of sadness, "I think you know what's happened."

Lexie held onto Nicholas. She said, "I'll debrief him, Daddy."

Lazlo glared at her. "You'll do no such thing, young lady. This is a job for Class One Historians. We're just an exploratory team. No one's going to hog a discovery like this."

Nicholas swayed. The injection Lexie had given him helped him stay on his feet. The overhead lights were dreamlike, and the shiny metallic uniforms everyone wore cast the whole scene into a kind of unreality that nothing in his training had led him to expect. No scenario of the far future had come up like this. The last thing he remembered was the image of his dream wife and daughter in a fiery wind. He now knew that *it had* been a dream.

He found himself wishing this were one too.

Captain Lazlo turned and clapped his hands like an impatient impresario at his uneasy brood, who had returned to the far wall upon discovering the crypts of the Foresee dead. "Well, gentlemen, haven't we got business to attend to? We aren't here for our goddamn health, you know!"

The soldiers reluctantly began withdrawing instruments from their packs, and a few of them returned to the outer corridors. From the sounds of their footsteps in the hallway beyond, Nicholas surmised that the place was large indeed. Cameras were being set up and measurements taken, consoles disassembled and analyzed.

Lazlo faced Nicholas. "Don't let any of this bother you, son. Riordan will explain it all when we get back to DefCon.

Nicholas knew of no place named DefCon.

Lexie cooed beside him, tugging him closer to her breast. "I'll explain *everything* to him." Her lips seemed to be a naturally passionate crimson.

Lazlo curled up a fist and leaned close to his daughter. "You're not a Class One yet, missie, and don't you forget it! You're not going to screw up this venture for me!" He said to Nick, "My advice is to stay away from her."

The soldiers had been about their tasks for some minutes when a voice suddenly broke in from a button pinned to Lazlo's epaulet.

"Captain!" crackled the voice. Nicholas guessed it was the missing man, Sye, sent out a while ago.

Lazlo pinched the small disk on his epaulet. "What is it?" he growled.

"Captain," the voice continued nervously—not wanting to incur the not inconsiderable wrath of his leader. "I think I've picked up a shark headed our way."

Everyone in the room froze. Lexie had just pushed Nick's stasis couch back into the wall. She turned around in alarm and returned to Nicholas's side. Lazlo spoke back into the communication disk.

"Corporal Sye," Lazlo began slowly and carefully, "if you are upstairs smoking *genna* again, I'm going to climb up there and pull your goddamn legs off. Quit joking around." The bravado had gone out of his voice.

The other men in the room were staring at each other—and Nick—fear grown larger upon their mushroom-complected faces.

"I swear to God, Captain! It's a shark, and it's a big one, too!" Sye reported.

Nicholas could hear Lazlo breathing uncomfortably.

Lexie, her fingernails digging into the metal of Nick's uniform, had a sudden flair of courage, or anger—Nicholas couldn't tell which.

She said, "That's impossible. There aren't any more sharks. They'd be so old that..."

"*Shut up!*" Captain Lazlo barked. He looked at Nicholas, as if embarrassed by the whole situation, and spoke into the disk. "Tell me what happened. How far away is it?"

"I was following a terminal lead and sent through a preliminary burst of power to see if I could trace it through the complex. The damn thing must've been sleeping up top. You'll be able to hear it in about a



minute."

"He's wrong," Lexie said, suddenly indignant. "He's lying, Daddy. He just wants to get away from here."

"You know that sharks were dropped all over this part of the country," Lazlo snapped. "Figure it out, *Historian*. The only reason this place's still here is because the sharks didn't find it."

"Daddy, that's not true!" Lexie said.

Sye broke back in, having apparently picked up the conversation. "Captain, look. I'm not stoned. But you ask Jarre, he's got a reader there." Sye sounded frightened.

Lazlo stared over at Jarre. "Sergeant?"

Jarre, glancing from Lazlo to Nicholas, hesitated. Then he took out his pack, went down on one knee, and laid everything out.

He drew up a cylindrical device and made some adjustments on it. Attaching a pistol grip to it, he stood up and walked to the center of the room. He turned the instrument on, and held it in front of him. A tiny blue light glowed on the top as he waved it about. He then pointed it along a wall, ran it across the ceiling.

The device beeped faintly as he aimed it directly overhead.

Jarre read a minuscule digital screen on the pistol grip. "It's a shark, all right, Captain. Eighty feet surface-side and closing in fast. It's got a number of levels to go through first, but it knows we're here."

The other soldiers, apparently knowing something Nicholas did not, began hustling their equipment back into pouches and packs—and moving into the hallway. Nicholas suspected that his presence had a large part in their enthusiastic evacuation of the premises.

Lazlo took his cigar out and looked at it like an old, world-weary philosopher. "And everything was looking so good, too."

"Daddy!" Lexie suddenly said. "Let's go!" She had begun pulling at Nicholas's arm, moving him toward the door. He could now hear the men in the corridor making their hasty retreat.

A contradictory emotion sparked through him. He knew that he was in danger, but found he didn't want to leave the stasis couches. They were his only contact with the world he'd lost. And now they were taking even that away from him.

But the Captain pinched the radio disk at his shoulder. "Sye, where are you now?"

Sye's voice immediately returned. "One floor up in a computer room we missed. I found some old video equipment and data leaves that look real important."

"Forget it," Lazlo said aside into the receiver. "We don't have the time now. Better follow the boys down to the Bore."

There was a slight pause, then Sye's voice came back. "Lazlo, are you bringing the Eridani?"

"Goddamn it, yes! You think I'm just going to leave him here?" Lazlo was quite angry now. He switched the radio off. "The hell with it," he said to Nicholas. "If they can't live with you, it's their problem."

The weight of defeat hung heavily in Lazlo's voice. His shaggy eyebrows were dark with disappointment.

"I guess the Class One Historians will have to settle for just you, Nicholas Tejada. This place was a gold mine, and it would've taken DefCon a good hundred years or more to explore it properly." He shook his head, his goggles glinting in the fluorescent light. "It's a goddamn shame, is what it is."

"Daddy!" Lexie urged.

"All right, all right! Let's do it."

Lazlo stepped out into the corridor. Nicholas had no choice but to follow. Lexie yelled down at the light machine that pursued them. "Follow us and don't get lost," she commanded. It acted as if it fully understood.

As in the stasis-couch room, the corridor possessed the sinister ambiance of a tomb. But it was clear that they were in some sort of military fortress.

"Wait, Captain!" Nicholas shouted. The lights overhead had begun shutting down; all they had to go by was the illumination given them by the glow-globes among them. Lazlo stopped.

"Look, why are we running? What is this 'shark' thing that's upstairs?"

Lazlo said, "I thought you knew. Jesus, son, they made them during your day."

"What, sharks? I don't even know what you're talking about."

Sergeant Jarre was at the far end of the long hallway. All the other men were out of sight, having clambered down the stairs into the dark. Jarre waved a small lantern for them.

"They're almost extinct now, if what the Historians say is correct." He gave his daughter a disparaging look. "They're mostly machines left over from the days of the Eridani."

"Wait!" Nicholas said as Lazlo and Lexie turned to go. "What's an Eridani?"

But Lexie pulled Nicholas up to her. "Come on, baby. We can't wait." She smiled playfully at him. Her suddenly shifting emotions baffled Nick. There seemed to be the unmistakable presence of sexuality between them, despite the present circumstances concerning the shark.

Sergeant Jarre yelled at them from where he waited down the hall. "The Bore's this way, sir! A shortcut!"

"Right," Captain Lazlo said.

At that moment they heard a horrifying explosion above them, followed by a resounding, tortured crash. On a reflex, Sergeant Jarre fell into a crouch—as did both Lexie and Captain Lazlo. The glass in the windows around them shattered into dust and the little glow-globes whirled to a halt.

"It's the shark!" Lexie breathed.

"Be quiet!" snapped her father.

Off in the sepulchral distance they could feel a tremendous rending through the floor, as if something were trying to make its way through walls of cement and steel alloy. Nicholas didn't like the sound of its determination. It seemed to be at least one floor above them.

"Jarre," the Captain said.

"Right here, Captain," the sergeant said, leaping from his position at the stairwell.

Listening to the approach of the sounds above, Lazlo faced his right-hand man. "Let's have some fun. We might as well see what we can do with it."

Lexie protested. "Daddy! Let's go!" She still had her territorial grip on Nicholas.

Jarre kept his distance from Nick. He turned to his Captain. "What have you got in mind?"

"Let's see your crawler." Lazlo pointed to the man's shoulder pack.

"OK," Jarre said, dropping down to unlatch his pack. He sorted through it until he found what he was looking for.

"Daddy!" Lexie cried. "Come on!"

Lazlo puffed his cigar.

Jarre extracted a small device that had four wheels and looked like some kind of remote-controlled toy any kid in the twentieth century might have. After Jarre threw a couple of delicate switches, he set the thing on the floor.

"Which way?" Jarre said, looking up at the Captain.

They were at an intersection in the dark building. Lazlo pointed back to the way they had come. "It picked us up back there. It'll go there first."

"Right," Jarre said, touching a final switch.

Silently, the crawler shot off down the corridor.

Lazlo and Jarre, despite the gravity of the situation, watched the crawler speed off into the darkness as if they were children.

"I won't put up with this any longer," Lexie announced.

Jarre rearranged his shoulder pack. Lazlo bit on his cigar and faced his imperious daughter. "Well, then, missie. Make the shark go away. Go ahead! You got what you want, but we got a shark!"

Lexie tried staring him down, but it didn't work. She retorted, "You know that the instant we start up the Bore it'll go off!"

"Not if it decides to follow the crawler, it won't."

Jarre stood up, shouldering the pack and ignoring Nicholas as best he could. He walked past Lazlo. "It won't do anything if you don't stop bickering," he said, then handed Captain Lazlo a compact control unit.

Lazlo took the box and pointed it toward where the crawler had gone. He pressed a tiny button.

From down the hall they could hear the crawler begin to emit a squealing sound. It was much louder than their conversation had been, and it was obviously just the thing to attract the hungry shark as it gnawed through the centuries-old walls of the military fortress.

Nicholas watched as Lazlo observed a readout on the control unit. "Any minute now...." he breathed.

"Daddy!"

Jarre was back down by the stairwell. Nicholas could hear him start to descend.

Lazlo began moving backward. "Got it! The shark's picked up the crawler and shifted direction. Let's get out of here."

Lexie seemed as proud of the accomplishment as if she had been responsible. "No shark's going to come between us, doll." Her breathing was sensuous with excitement.

Nicholas could hear the ruckus upstairs. It sounded as if things were being pushed aside in a hurry, but it was clear that the shark had taken the bait. It was receding.

They heard a roar like that of an engine starting up. Captain Lazlo jumped.

"It's starting to dig," he said quickly. "Bad sign!"

They ran for the stairwell, coughing through the dust of the ages, and dropped down into a larger corridor beneath. They rounded a corner, the glow-globes wobbling after them. Lazlo pushed open two large steel doors that looked like blast-protection doors to Nicholas. They swung freely but were cracked with rust and time.

Nicholas plunged through the doors. Lazlo spun around and pulled them both shut. There was a lock of some kind—a long bolt—and Lazlo threw it.

"For all the good it'll do," he said sardonically. The shark sounded quite distant.

The globes of light ran on ahead of them, casting out their pearl luminescence. The room, Nicholas thought, must have been a storage area, because the ceiling was easily thirty feet high. At the far end were tables, some leather-upholstered chairs, and other kinds of stacked-up equipment. But the room's most important feature was a machine which stood at a slight tilt in the very center of the facility. Clearly it had entered the room from the level below.

While Nicholas knew that he'd been in a building of some kind all along, it wasn't until this moment that he realized that the building was entirely underground. The Bore was an incredible earth-penetrating machine, so large that neither the nose nor the tail end could be seen. It was a shaft of silver alloy of a kind Nicholas could not recognize. The room was slightly warmer than the other halls and rooms of the complex, heated by the Bore's passage through the earth's crust. The floor around the Bore was cracked upward, and scattered around it were tiny globules of melted plastic or steel.

The other soldiers had already climbed inside the Bore. Jarre was at the portal, waiting for them. The glow-globes, perhaps sensing they were finally home, made an end run around Sergeant Jarre and whipped inside, leaving them all in a darkness broken only by the light from the inside of the Bore itself. Apparently, the soldiers had shut down the facility's electrical system to further delay the shark's progress.

Lexie helped Nicholas climb inside the craft, and Captain Lazlo brought up the rear. He paused at the lip of the portal and took one last mournful look before he pulled the hatch shut and sealed it. At the pressurized hiss of the lock, Nicholas felt something pierce his heart. Back in the stasis room was his past and, though containing nothing but bones, the only identification he had with his own era.

Captain Lazlo's voice brought him back to the present. "The Class Ones will skin me for losing a place like this," he muttered as he made sure the door was tight. He stepped past Nicholas. "Grab a seat, son. Anywhere. We're pulling out."

Because the Bore was in a more or less vertical position, the men were climbing up a series of notches or

steps which had cantilevered out from the long "floor". To either side were luxurious cubicles which could be sealed off from the main corridor. The soldiers were throwing their gear into these and diving in. Plastic seals were being pulled behind them, closing the cubicles off.

Nicholas stared upward as the last few of the Boremen climbed inside their cubicles. A couple of them cast puzzling glances down at Nicholas. "Eridani" echoed in his mind. They turned away, strapping themselves in, pulling down the plastic compartment doors.

Nicholas felt as welcome as a mortician at a child's birthday party.

Captain Lazlo headed for the front—or top—of the craft. Sergeant Jarre's cubicle was directly behind the pilot's compartment, and Nicholas saw Jarre's head come out as Lazlo heaved himself upward.

"Where's the Eridani going to bunk, Captain?" Jarre asked, grabbing at his leader.

Lazlo slapped away his underling's arm. "Anywhere he goddamn pleases!" Lazlo turned around and faced downward in the long well of the Bore. "You guys are pushing it! These aren't the Dark Times, you know! You pull anymore of this crap about 'Eridani' on me or him"—he pointed down at Nicholas—"and this is the last mission I'm taking you on! You got that?"

Silence.

*"Well?"*

There came several mumbles of "Yes, sir," and, "Right, Lazlo," from the sealed-off cubicles. Jarre's plastic compartment door slammed shut violently.

Lazlo whirled and climbed into the pilot's cubicle.

Lexie was smiling. "Follow me," she said. "Let's go into my compartment."

Nicholas looked up the leaning floor at Lazlo in the cockpit. He saw the man's arm flash out, throwing switches, punching dials into illumination and activity.

Lexie climbed down the protruding steps in the corridor's floor. Nick followed. There were other cubicles, some of them empty, but Lexie led him to hers.

The main corridor's light went out, replaced by a series of winking soft blue lights along the floor. A pleasant internal humming started up around them as Lazlo threw the main engines into gear.

On the door of Lexie's private compartment was stenciled the insignia of an hourglass. The cubicle seemed a bit more spacious and Lexie eagerly led him inside.

Nicholas felt torn between what the men above him were facing and the fascination he felt for this young woman. The threat of the impending attack of the shark seemed much more important than being in close proximity to Lexie. But Lexie had her way.

"Shouldn't I take one of these other compartments?" Nick asked, pointing across the corridor.

"Nonsense." She smiled, and shut the door.

There was an intercom in the compartment, and the channel was open. Nicholas heard Jarre conversing with the Captain.

"Lazlo," Jarre said, "the shark's picked up our engines. It's abandoned the crawler and headed our way.

Moving downside at thirty degrees. Right through the floor. It's trying for a straight line, but the complex's shielding is slowing it up."

"Got it," came Lazlo's voice.

Lexie said, "Don't listen to them. They're just grown-ups."

Nicholas found himself leaning against the door. He looked into her ocean-green eyes. "What do you think I am?"

The interior of Lexie's cubicle was at an angle, since the Bore was mostly meant for horizontal travel. Nicholas sat down on what appeared to be something of a couch. As he tried to size up the dimensions of the cubicle, he realized that when Captain Lazlo leveled out the craft Lexie's couch would transform itself into a bed that would just about fill up the entire compartment.

The Bore suddenly moved—but it began moving backward, or down, throwing everything into reverse order. With a grating of sliding rock against superalloy, they began their descent.

Lexie, though, merely cuddled up next to him. She said, "Don't worry about the shark. It's too slow. It'll sense the heat of our iron, but we'll get away in time."

He could understand her lack of interest in the drama. She was safe here in her compartment with him. As she had said upon pulling out the stasis couch: He was hers.

There were many things stirring inside Nicholas. He could not forget the remains of Staci Bolyard on the stasis couch; nor could he abandon the memories of the world he'd been forced out of. He once read a book written during the Great Depression about an Egyptian ruler who had lived long before the reign of the first Ramses. His name was Peh-de-eh-ghan, and a group of scientists managed to bring him back to life. Peh-de-eh-ghan's reactions to his sudden culture-change were quite similar to Nick's own. Much of it was panic.

Lexie was waving her metallic white derriere in his face. As she did, there was a sound of something being unzipped, and he discovered that Lexie was in the midst of making herself quite comfortable.

A waft of perfumed air drifted up from underneath the couch, and he suddenly began feeling—different. The ice of centuries of sleep began to break and melt inside him. He couldn't decide if the air was doing something to him, or if it was Lexie's proximity. The girl leaned toward him.

Captain Lazlo's voice broke in over the intercom, startling him.

"Nicholas Tejada, are you there?"

Nick held Lexie off at a slight distance, trying desperately to ignore the fact that the zipper of her tunic was now somewhere down around her navel.

"I'm right here, Captain," he said with trepidation. He didn't like the aroma of the air in the compartment—nor the sleepy-time look in Lexie's wonderful eyes.

"How are you feeling?" the Captain asked as the Bore rumbled downward.

Nicholas was surprised by the question. How was he feeling? Back where he came from, if a father came out of the bedroom late on Saturday night and found his daughter on the living-room couch with her breasts in the hands of her boyfriend, how the boyfriend felt would have been the furthest thing from the father's mind.

But he wasn't "back there" anymore, and Captain Lazlo was definitely not of the normal order of fathers.

"I'm fine, I think," Nicholas said. Was the atmosphere in the compartment actually getting hazy? The Bore made a slight pitch, and Lexie fell onto the couch. Her tunic fell somewhere else.

"Lexia?" the Captain's voice feigned at sternness.

"Yes, Daddy," she said, and turned off the intercom.

Nicholas had a vision of Peh-de-eh-ghan being chased by the scientists who had resurrected him and the villains who wanted to exploit him—everyone running across the dunes of the Sudan. Pursuing a living fossil.

He didn't know what to think. The lights dimmed further, and what lights remained aglow upon the console took on a polar radiance. Everything told him that this was wrong—that he shouldn't be here.

Like Peh-de-eh-ghan, he belonged with his own dead.

Lexie began taking off his boots. The haze in the cubicle was thickening.

Suddenly there was a thunderous explosion that shook the Bore terribly. Taken by surprise, Lexie screamed and fell upon Nicholas as the craft rode out the crushing shock waves.

The shark—whatever its dim origins—was an ingenious, burrowing nuclear device. He knew it was nuclear by the force of the explosion it had caused.

He closed his eyes. Too much was happening all at once. The wars, it seemed, were still being fought. They never ended. They never *would* end.

This place would be so thoroughly demolished and radioactive that they'd never be able to return in his lifetime. Any message Foresee might have left—any journal or recording that might have explained why he'd slept so long—was now irretrievably lost.

The Bore leveled out. Captain Lazlo stopped its descent and started it sliding forward. They were on their way home.

But where was that?

Lexie was very warm in his arms. "What's that smell?" he asked. His senses were acting in weirdly unpredictable ways. They seemed hyperattenuated, dazzled.

"*Genna*," Lexie breathed close to his mouth. "Medicine."

"No, wait," he pleaded. What had happened to his boots? Was that another zipper being unzipped?

There was a cool hand on his chest. It moved in slow circles, and within a few minutes it became the only thing in the world which seemed real.

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## Chapter Two

THEBORE HADstopped moving.

How long ago it had ceased to move beneath the earth's surface, Nicholas didn't know. He had been

drifting in and out of a wonderful prismatic sleep that had promised no end to the pleasures of dreaming. Eventually he had noticed that everything around him was quiet and still.

Lexie lay beside him, cocooned and naked in the folds of a blanket. She looked rapturously sated and slept like the dead.

The air in the compartment seemed cleansed, but Nicholas still felt the soporific effects of the *genna*. He coughed. Whatever *genna* was, it was easily the most powerful mood-altering drug he'd ever known.

Even through his haze, the Bore's lack of motion bothered him. It took several long seconds for the world to arrange itself. While it did, Nicholas looked for his metallic uniform and boots. He wanted to find out what was happening up front.

The Bore rested at only a slight angle from the horizontal, so the rungs in the floor were flattened into invisibility. After softly shutting the door to Lexie's compartment, Nicholas walked slowly up the corridor.

Through the plastic seals of the individual cubicles, he noticed that the Boremen all wore their goggles—and earphones. He assumed they were plugged into a universal computer system of some kind. They were dazed, hypnotized, or unconscious. The smell of *genna* was quite strong here.

He passed Sergeant Jarre's couch and saw that the Boreman's goggles were pushed up onto his forehead. Jarre's *genna*-glazed eyes watched Nicholas move toward the cockpit. The sergeant didn't move; didn't even blink. Nick knew from experience now just how strong *genna* was.

He was startled by Captain Lazlo's voice. "You know why we call it the Bore?" He was watching Nick from his seat on the left-hand side of the cockpit.

Nicholas started. "No, why do you call it the Bore?" He was whispering, but realized it was probably unnecessary.

The Captain, goggles resting on his forehead, laughed. "Because it's so goddam **boring**, is why." He waved Nicholas forward.

The Captain's eyes were bloodshot, and there were huge rings around them where his goggles had been clamped. The Bore's cockpit had no windows to speak of and featured a complicated control board. Nicholas took the copilot's seat.

Lazlo pointed to the console's chronometer. "You have any idea how long we've been traveling?"

Nicholas couldn't make sense of the peculiar dials and indicators. "No," he said. "Maybe seven hours." He felt suddenly awkward because of the knowledge of where and how those hours had been spent. He felt a powerful desire to apologize.

The Captain laughed. He lit a fresh cigar. "Four days," he said. "And we've still got a ways to go yet."

"Four days?" Nicholas was stunned.

"Yup," the Captain told him. "That's why we use the *genna* on board. It makes life underground much more endurable. Otherwise, it'd be boring—really boring."

The only things on the Bore that seemed to function were the lights on the console.

"Why don't you travel aboveground? You don't spend all your time underground, do you?" Nicholas asked him.



The Captain's eyes were sad. "I can see you've got a lot to learn."

"I guess." Nicholas sat back in his seat. "Is DefCon where we're headed? Is that your home, or what?"

Lazlo nodded. "Home it is, if we can shake the floater the Bore picked up an hour ago. It sensed our iron. The alarm woke me up."

Nicholas wanted to know more about DefCon, where it was and what it was like, but the floater sounded like serious business. "What's a floater, or shouldn't I ask?"

"You shouldn't," Lazlo said. "But I'll tell you anyway." He pointed at a small digital readout on the console. The numbers were slowly decreasing. "Remember the shark? Well, a floater's the same thing, except that it hangs around in the sky looking for trouble. Both are left over from the days of the Eridani."

There it was again: *Eridani*.

Lazlo caught Nicholas's worried look and continued. "There are many more of these things left in the world than there are sharks. And we've got to spook this one before it lands on us." He pointed at the descending numbers. Altitude readings, Nick realized. "Otherwise Riordan's gonna be mighty disappointed."

"Who's Riordan?"

"He's our Counselor for this Period. Our leader, you might say. He's an Historian—they're in charge for the duration of this Period—and he's Lexie's mentor. He'll be real interested in seeing you. Not much survived from the days of the Eridani."

Nick faced him. "Listen, what's this 'Eridani' thing? Is it the Third World War?"

"Something like that. Riordan'll tell you better than I could. Right now we've got to get rid of that floater."

A red warning light began blinking silently before them.

"Damn," Lazlo breathed. "It's got us for sure. I thought it was too high up. It sees our iron trail."

"Iron trail?"

"That's what the Bore leaves behind. It passes through rock and converts it to iron. It has to do with fusion. You do know about fusion, don't you?"

"Yes," Nicholas responded, "but we never had anything like this." No fusion generator in his day could fit into the nose of something the size of the Bore.

"It's how we survived all this time underground," Lazlo said as he threw some switches. "We get everything from fusion. Food, water, you name it."

"I still don't understand," Nick protested. "Why do you have to live underground in the first place?"

"You don't know, do you?" the Captain turned to him, solicitous at his newness to this world. "It's the days of the Eridani. World War Three, you called it. That's why my men fear you so."

"Look, Captain, I'm not an Eridani, whatever they are."

"I know that," Lazlo said. "But they don't."

"So, who are the Eridani?"

Lazlo tamped out his cigar. "The ones who made the earth uninhabitable."

Nicholas had the feeling that he shouldn't pursue the issue any further. He was feeling sick. Perhaps it was the *genna* . . .

"The earth's uninhabitable? After a thousand years?"

Captain Lazlo rose from his seat, taking off his goggles. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you your legacy."

Now he understood. "Eridani" would have the same connotations "Hitler" had had in his own time—*or worse*.

They reached the hatch. Lazlo unpacked two suits from a storage compartment—heavy-looking things composed of that strange pliable metal. Lazlo said, "These will protect us, unless the floater finds us first."

The suit was as cumbersome as the old deep-sea diving suits of the early twentieth century. The helmet eased into its collar easily, but the suit itself seemed composed almost of lead.

The Captain dragged something wrapped in canvas out of a small compartment. "This is our ticket," he said.

They entered the escape hatch and sealed off the airlock to the inside of the Bore. When they stepped outside, Nicholas was astounded by what he saw. And shocked.

It was unlike any version of a post-holocaust world the "experts" ever thought would come about.

Everything around him was a sullen, uniform brown, like the early photographs of the planet Mercury. Nothing whatever grew in the deserted valley before them, nor was there any sign of life on the mountains far to the west. There was only dirt, rock, and globules of once-molten soil.

"Oh, my God," Nicholas said, helplessly, into the pin-mike at his cheek. Even after a thousand years, the earth had not healed. "What happened?"

Lazlo set his peculiar burden down and walked up to Nick. At Nick's belt was a box of some kind. The Captain pressed a button on it. He said, "It was the old wars. And the warheads. Blew everything off the goddamn planet."

As he spoke, Nicholas felt a strange sensation directly beneath his feet. His suit began to expand and thicken. Some wondrous mechanism within the soles of the boots was filling his suit, and the Captain's, with a layer of malleable lead, or some such other protective metal, drawn up from the earth. The joints at the elbows and knees were reinforced mechanically so that, despite the shielding that oozed through the suit, he could move easily.

He looked around through the clear quartz of the helmet lenses. "Where are we?"

Lazlo scanned the bleak horizon. "Somewhere in old Colorado. I'm not sure. The cities and roads are long gone, covered during the years of the great ash falls. Our maps aren't that reliable, and a lot of the mountains were pounded out of shape, especially in this part of the country. We found Omaha just by luck. Pure luck."

Nicholas had never been so depressed in his life. The sky was no longer blue, but a sickly, reddish-brown from horizon to horizon. Even the clouds appeared alien. They seemed disjointed, as if

the atmospheric changes had been so great that the familiar meteorological formations were no longer possible.

"I can't tell you everything the last war did," the Captain stated. "I don't think anyone knows all the details. After the firestorms abated, the ash stayed in the atmosphere for years and years. Some say that was the worst."

Nicholas was speechless. No Mnemos system scenario had ever conjured up anything so devastating.

"All I know is that the last war took a while to beat itself out. DefCon survived totally underground, but the destruction to the ionosphere was more than anyone had anticipated. The ash destroyed most of what was left untouched on the surface. Nothing could grow. Seeds couldn't germinate. The sun wasn't seen for a whole generation. And no one I know has ever felt rain." The Captain faced the northern hills, turning away from Nicholas.

"When the ash settled, there wasn't a green thing left. We keep photosynthesis alive underground, but the Soviets had hit all our fission reactors, and there's so much plutonium scattered around the country that it'll be centuries yet before we can start over."

Nicholas could see minute particles of ash still in the air. The sun on the jagged western mountains seemed like a cancerous tumor, pustulent and ugly.

Lazlo pointed a gauntleted hand to the sky. "The Historians always tell us to watch for the Eridani. Those idiots. You can't even see the goddamn stars!"

Nicholas couldn't quite make the connection between the stars and *Eridani*, but kept silent. He turned and examined the Bore itself. He was astonished to discover that its nose was not a pointed drill arrangement but a flat plate that had a number of pentagons arrayed on it. Behind the Bore was a long, steaming trail of excreted molten iron. The Bore had apparently misjudged its depth beneath the hills and had come out in a shallow valley that was as barren as a rift on the moon.

Lazlo gestured with a thickly plated arm, pointing west. "The Bore was supposed to go under all this and come out there, in the Rockies." He looked up. "And now there's a floater somewhere up above."

The canvas around the package Lazlo held fell away, and an assembly of sticks, bright aluminum, and plastic joints dropped to the ground at their feet.

"Be careful," Lazlo advised. "Don't rip it. It's the only one we've got left on the Bore."

"What is it?"

The Captain bent down awkwardly and jerked back the top of a canister. Nick could hear a hissing noise. It was a balloon, and the hissing was coming from helium rapidly filling the voluminous spaces of an aluminum sack.

"It's a decoy, son. Floaters are easier to get rid of than sharks," he said. "A goddamn shark will follow you all over the place, and there's nothing you can do about it. A floater doesn't have that much sense. Like the Russians who made them." The intonation he gave to the word "Russians" made it sound like a curse.

The balloon rose and took shape. Nicholas was surprised at its size. The thing was enormous. He scanned the skies for the floater, but saw nothing but clouds and dust.

"You can't see it," Lazlo interjected. He held the balloon by its small gondola. "They drop down from

very old satellites looking for heat. They got a lot of cities before it was over."

The Captain manipulated some dials on the package underneath the balloon. The device began to emit a rhythmic beeping noise like that of the little crawler that had been eaten by the shark in Omaha.

"Is it going to work?" Nick asked. It seemed so fragile in the harsh world around them.

"Usually does. Floaters go for anything that moves. I want to get rid of it now before it decides to follow us to DefCon."

"I see."

"And," the Captain concluded, "I don't want to be around when it goes off."

The quartz lenses around the Captain's eyes gave off a telling iridescent light. In them was the universal fear of nuclear bombs. He released the balloon.

Nicholas watched the decoy rise into the sludge-brown skies. It was impossible to tell what season it was—if there *were* seasons now that the climate had been altered.

Nick suddenly felt vulnerable out here in the open. He nearly jumped out of his leaden skin when a buzzer at the Captain's belt sounded loudly. The Captain made for the Bore as quickly as his suit would allow.

"Damn!" he shouted into the radio. "The floater caught the decoy's signal too soon! It's gonna come down right on top of us!"

Something within Nicholas was opening up his Pandora's box of panic. The buzzer at Lazlo's belt now sounded like sirens.

*The sirens of Bombay....*

Here, though, there were no voices speaking to him. He ran after the Captain over the lifeless ground. His suit deflated with each step, triggered by the floater alarm.

Inside the lock Nick pulled the door shut, listening to Lazlo swear. His own heart was pounding to the beep of the alarm. Gusts of air scoured them clean of dust and radioactive particles in an automatic decontamination process. The Captain wasted no time whatsoever, and bounded down the corridor, past the still somnolent Boremen. Nicholas followed him to the cockpit, practically falling out of the miraculous suit. He strapped himself in.

Captain Lazlo started up the engines. The Bore sank at a steep angle. Lights flashed on the console before them. Seconds were being counted off on a digital readout. Only a few left....

A giant thunderclap struck them suddenly. The mighty Bore shook like a leaf in a cyclone. The Captain gripped the arms of his chair tightly.

"Damn!" he swore. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"What wasn't supposed to happen?" Nick asked.

The earth seemed to rock and slam against them. Nick thought about radiation. Were they deep enough to be completely protected?

The shock waves ceased, and everything became quiet.

Lazlo leaned back. "Floaters don't usually drop like goddamn rocks. It was as if it knew you were here."

Nicholas stared at him curiously. "Me? I thought you said it was attracted to the Bore."

Lazlo found his cigar and thumbed a lighter into flame. "It's part of the Eridani legacy, that's all. Like it was after you instead of the Bore or any of us."

"But how could that be?" Nick countered.

"Just a feeling I have. Like a gut reflex. I'm just glad I'm not in your shoes." The cigar glowed to life.

This seemed to be a different Lazlo. Perhaps it was the proximity of the floater, and its peril. Nicholas considered the gun at the Captain's side—remembering the redheaded boy, Titus, back in the stasis chamber, and how he had nervously fiddled with his gun, watching him with scared eyes. *Eridani*. Who wouldn't fear the Ancient Ones who'd brought about the destruction of the old world?

But the Captain didn't go for his gun. Instead, he sighed heavily and put on his dark-lensed goggles as the Bore headed down into the halls of the earth.

"You might be a jinx, son, but not because you're an Eridani. That's fairy-tale stuff. I know. I almost became a Historian myself. I know what lies in the past. But my boys back there don't. A thousand years is a long time, and these missions of ours never really amount to much. That's why we rate only apprentice Historians. But since we found *you*, we've attracted a shark and a floater. That tells us something." Lazlo was remarkably philosophical about the whole thing.

The Captain skillfully leveled out the Bore.

There was a slight, even gentle, hissing coming from somewhere under the seats. Nicholas knew it was time to go. He was alone again.

Nicholas slunk back down the corridor, trying not to inhale much of the *genna*. Passing the Boremen, he noticed that none of them seemed to be conscious of anything. Perhaps, he thought, these people only lived for their travels and *genna*. Were idle pleasures also a legacy from his own time?

He found Lexie wrapped like a baby in her blanket, but he turned away. There was a hollowness growing in his chest, and he knew that there was nothing for him back in her chamber. He stepped across the tilting corridor, found an empty chamber, and climbed in.

Here there was no *genna*, but before sleep found him, he had a single, frightening vision of Adolf Eichmann fleeing through the jungles of Argentina. He had no pity for the man. He knew what the name Eichmann meant to history.

He also knew about the bones in the Auschwitz ovens. Staci's bones. His bones: The Eridani had killed themselves off.

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## Chapter Three

THEWAR HAD ended so long ago that no one living knew even its approximate date. DefCon's best estimate was one thousand eighty-three years ago—give or take a year.

DefCon was not only the name for the city where Nicholas found himself, but the name of the surviving

nation. Professor Riordan told him there was a saying from the Days of the Eridani that, wherever you went, you were always in DefCon.

And if you were living underground, there weren't too many places you could go. DefCon was all there was.

Captain Lazlo had given Nick the impression that DefCon was a small community, an isolated fortress of nuclear survivors deep in the mountains, descendants of barricaded military personnel.

That wasn't quite true.

Nicholas stood at a sumptuous plate-glass window that stretched forty feet above him and let in a great deal of light, even at sunset. The glass was thick, keeping years of airborne plutonium at bay, and afforded the underground city some access—if only visual—to the outside world. Nick could see in the waning light that similar windows covered the mountains everywhere he looked. DefCon wasn't at all what he had expected it would be.

Although he knew he was underground, he had yet to feel it. He had been in DefCon only one week, and he still found a unique pleasure following the many creeks and rivers that flowed throughout the city. Plants grew everywhere because light from the outside world was filtered in everywhere. Even in the deepest reaches of DefCon, many stories beneath the blasted surface of the earth, trees grew and fish frolicked in fountains of light. The rooms and halls were cathedrallike and enormous. Moving sidewalks and escalators ranged to even the farthest reaches of the community.

DefCon was the kind of civilization that would have had to evolve if man was to survive the holocaust. If people were to remain healthy and sane, they had to have their diversions. And DefCon definitely had diversions.

Nicholas soon discovered that "diversion" meant *genna*. From what he had learned from Riordan, *genna* was a vital element in the evolution of their civilization. *Genna* was a hybrid offspring of the slime mold, *stemonitis axifera*, which had survived underground. Its relatively harmless hallucinatory powers were universally recognized as the panacea DefCon needed.

The city had been notified of Nick's discovery—which was both good and bad. Lexie, when she wasn't at the Academy discussing the mission, paraded him around to the authorities and ruling Council. She was jumped a grade to Journeyman Historian, and her sudden authority seemed to eclipse that of her powerful father. Nick hadn't seen Lazlo since their arrival.

Riordan was Nicholas's new companion. As they stood together in the light that poured through the huge window at the mountain's top, Nicholas suddenly realized that he was happy to be away from the ravenous Lexie.

"It still amazes me that DefCon survived like this," Nick said.

Professor Riordan laughed avuncularly. He was a tall, stately man, unexpectedly tanned and healthy. In his late forties, he seemed to radiate power. Perhaps it was because he was their current ruler, or Counselor, as he called himself. Historian that he was, he found Nicholas very fascinating.

"Man is always a survivor," Riordan pronounced. "Like yourself, he pulls through."

"I don't think I had any choice in the matter," Nick muttered.

Behind them, a moving sidewalk hissed through a parklike arrangement of plants, trees, and flowers. Delicate Japanese-style footbridges crossed a single, burbling creek that paralleled the sidewalk leading

to the windows. The creek wound down the large hall, made a few turns, then lowered—through a series of pleasant cataracts—to another level. Nick had given up trying to trace one such creek near Lexie's condominium complex. He'd have time enough to explore later. The city-nation of a hundred thousand people was extensive. Both he and it would be around awhile.

Nicholas watched the sky darken and the lights of DefCon come on across the mountain range. There was a slight buzzing sound not too far from his ear. He turned to face an ever-present hovering camera. Knowing that he was perpetually followed and monitored amplified his feelings of strangeness. Riordan told him it would be necessary for a few weeks. When he'd become fully acquainted with DefCon's ways, he'd be free of it.

Staring out the window, Nicholas mused. "In a way, I guess it's beautiful."

"It's not as bad as you might think," Riordan said.

"I'd say it's worse," Nick muttered. "You've never known the country as I have."

Riordan put a fatherly hand on Nick's shoulder. "I suppose back in your time, when the forests were green and the sky was blue, it must have seemed impossible that anyone could live beneath the earth's surface."

"You make it sound as if it's an achievement."

"Well," Riordan began, "DefCon is a better way of living in some respects."

"Name one," Nick turned to him. "Name just one."

Riordan laughed gently. "The disease of the Eridani cannot reach us any longer."

The camera moved in to catch Nicholas's reaction. As every citizen in DefCon, Nicholas carried a gun of sorts. He wasn't told why, only that he'd know when to use it. He felt like blowing the drifting orb into the creek behind them.

Riordan went on. "You see, the human spirit is tempered only under adverse conditions. DefCon is what it is because of the Eridani legend. Those of us who are enlightened in these matters know the difference between that and the real causes of our plight."

"The Russians," Nick responded.

Nick had learned a great deal in his one week in DefCon. And so had Riordan. Nick's first contribution to his new home had been to tell Riordan—and the rest of the city-nation, via the nosy camera unit—that "DefCon" meant "Defense Condition." DefCon started during the war—and whether they knew it or not, they were living in a constant state of Defense Conditions.

The computer lead which had enabled Captain Lazlo and the Boremen to find him in the first place was a prime example. An immense, far-reaching network of computer lines lay buried, undiscovered until isolated influxes of energy or information reached DefCon. That trickle—and many others yet unexplored—gave DefCon the suspicion that there were "others" out there somewhere in the wasteland America had become a millennium ago. The influxes also perpetuated the legend of the Eridani, investing them with mythic hugeness.

In the Last Days, according to the most conservative estimates, over fourteen thousand warheads found targets on the earth. The burst of radiation was so enormous that it acted as something of an interstellar beacon. For years, there was no time for anything more than the struggle to survive. But then, the

DefCon scientists discovered that shortly before the cataclysm, an earth-orbiting satellite twenty-two thousand miles out had picked up a powerful burst of gamma radiation from the star Epsilon Eridani. Some concluded that a nuclear war had occurred in one of its planets, and believed some kind of technological "disease" had been transferred to the earth, causing World War III. To Nicholas, it made little sense.

Though DefCon's society was already quite technologically advanced, people were people, and the survivors needed to blame someone. Blame the inhabitants of a faraway star. Blame the ones in the twentieth century who caught their disease. Blame anyone or anything, Nicholas thought bitterly, except the human conditions of fear and mistrust which were the root causes.

Robbed of a past, he retained his native reasoning capacities. Unsure of the people of DefCon, he still felt alienated and threatened everywhere he went. Riordan, and of course young Lexie, tried their best to make him feel at home, but the actions of a perhaps mythical *Eridani* a thousand years ago and several light-years distant made it impossible for Nicholas to imagine adjusting to or being accepted by life in DefCon.

What a way to attract interstellar attention: have a nuclear war. Even Mnemos had never thought of that one.

The sun went down behind the sawtooth mountains to the west, and Nicholas felt his spirits going with it. There was a commotion behind them in the park. They turned to see a group of people, mostly young adults, gathered on the moving sidewalk. They didn't see Nicholas and Riordan beside the window. They got off the sidewalk and ran to the footbridge nearest the two men.

One woman caught sight of them silhouetted phantasmagorically against the thick glass of the lounge window—and recognized Nick immediately. The camera orb raced around to record everything.

"It's the Eridani," she gasped, buttonholing the others.

Every one of them was high on *genna*, and Nicholas could see the ancestral fear flash through them. Two young men, formerly preoccupied pursuing a couple of the young ladies, turned and stumbled into the lily-covered creek.

Riordan quickly stepped between them and Nick. "Citizens! Please be calm!" he said, smiling.

"It's him," another of the women whispered. "It's really him! I didn't think he was in this sector...."

Like children discovering that ghosts are indeed real, Nick suddenly thought.

One of the young men who had fallen in the creek came up with his long-barreled pistol drawn. The pistol shook slightly in his hand. The boy was terrified down to his toenails.

Nicholas went for his own gun—and was much faster bringing it up.

"Now, wait!" Riordan's voice was strong.

Unlike marijuana, *genna* was not diminished by any kind of adrenaline rush. The kids were so hyped up that they were capable of anything, and Nick knew it by the looks on their faces. Riordan's presence must have reassured some of them, for about a half dozen had jumped back up onto the sidewalk and were on their way out of trouble.

Three people stayed behind. Riordan walked over to them confidently. Two were girls, Historians, and the other was the youth with the drawn gun. His tunic indicated that he was an Apprentice Climate



Control Officer.

"Friends," Riordan smiled his Counselor's smile. "Come on over, please! Let me introduce you to Nicholas, our newest member," He was expansive. "Come, come," he beckoned.

Riordan had his arm around one girl's shoulders. The kid with the gun, calming, eased it back into his holster. He was only about sixteen years old.

"Nicholas!" Riordan said loudly. "Come on over and meet your new friends."

Riordan reminded Nick of a very polished politician. He knew how to use people, ease their fears, heighten their expectations. And as an Historian, he had no fear of Nicholas or what he possibly meant to DefCon, although he too carried a gun at his side.

But these kids didn't know any better. *Hitler ... Himmler ...* were echoes in his mind. *How do you do, mein Fuhrer? Wie gehts Dir, dieser apokalyptischer morgan?*

Nicholas slowly stepped down from the carpeted platform in front of the massive quartz windows. The grass that grew beneath his jackbooted feet seemed as soft as that of a field in Ireland.

The young people clustered near Riordan like chickadees. Nick felt like a jaguar as he stepped into their midst. But Riordan held them all captive. He cuddled the girl. "This is Tisha, Nicholas. Her family and mine go way back. Isn't that right, Tisha?"

"Yes," the girl said meekly.

"There, you see?" Riordan smiled. "That wasn't difficult, now was it?"

Tisha shook her head. She was pale and frightened. Riordan let her go. She stepped quickly back with her friends. Riordan held out a hand to them and spoke in a voice meant to quell their fears.

"As you can see, Nicholas, our young ones need firsthand experience with any changes to DefCon. But you see?" he smiled at them all. "Nicholas here is just like you."

The young people, still jittery, said farewell to the Counselor, and jumped back across the creek to the moving sidewalk.

Nicholas had noticed that other people had entered the glade. They seemed older, but Nicholas doubted if they were any wiser.

"Professor..." Nick started.

"Forget it, Nicholas," Riordan grinned. "They are our youngest ones. They have much to learn."

Nicholas put the gun back in its holster. As he did, he heard his name called out from the opposite end of the park.

"*Nickie!*" Lexie called. Nick jerked violently at the sound. Perhaps it was the *genna*, or the week of living with the insatiable girl, that made him respond so, but there was an electric tinge to her voice that gave him a jolt where he stood.

"Ah, yes," Riordan smiled. "My future colleague. She has found us at last!"

Nicholas had agreed to come to this upper level of DefCon because he needed to get away from Lexie—from everyone. He needed a respite. It appeared though that he wasn't going to get it.

Lexie bounded up to the Professor and gave him an enormous hug, then repeated the gesture with Nicholas.

Her body was flushed with excitement. "You thought you could leave me in the archives. You know it's not that easy to lose me!"

"Well, we tried." Riordan laughed.

"Let's do something *exciting!*" she squealed.

Riordan volunteered: "I was just about to suggest a trip into the gaming system for Nicholas."

"Oh, yes!" She jumped up. Nick suddenly didn't like the suggestion. "That'd be fun!" She turned to the Professor. "Do I get to play?"

Riordan frowned. "Lexia, my dear, the boy needs to be with those of his own kind."

Lexie began to pout—but it was a masquerade. She still had Nick where she wanted him as if he were just a plaything.

Just then there came a scream from the group of adults down in the glade.

"*Get him! Get him! There he goes!*" Nicholas thought that they were finally coming after him.

Then Lexie screamed, seeing something rush out of the rhododendron bushes beside the creek. Nicholas almost screamed himself. It came scampering toward them demonically, antenna waving, legs clicking up over flagstones and rocks.

It was a four-foot-long cockroach.

"Jesus!" Nick yelled.

"Stop it!" Lexie screamed shrilly. "*Stop it!*"

The thing moved toward them with alarming speed. But Professor Riordan, faster than Nicholas had ever seen him move, drew out his gun and fired at it—getting off five deadly blasts which reduced the roach to a number of slimy, membranous pieces.

Lexie seemed close to fainting, holding loosely to Nick's arm. Nick had his gun drawn, but his own fear of cockroaches—which went back to his childhood in the poorer parts of Tucson and Phoenix—had prevented him from directly confronting the horror. The dismembered roach fell into the creek and was being swept away by the gentle waters.

Riordan stood up, putting his gun away. His hands were trembling, and now Nicholas knew why everyone wore a gun.

Riordan said as he wiped the sweat from his brow, "We get them occasionally. It's the only war we really fight anymore."

"How... how did they get *sobig*?" Nick asked as Lexie clung to him. No one had told him about the cockroaches.

"Radiation. They're the only true survivors of the war. You didn't see them when you were surface-side with Captain Lazlo and the Bore, but they were out there. They're very adaptable. You have to watch for them everywhere you go."

"I hate them!" Lexie snapped. "They're not supposed to be here! You're the Counselor." Lexie turned to Riordan. "You're supposed to do something about them!"

"They are a fact of life, Lexia, my dear," Riordan said, casting a final look of disgust at the creek which had already carried the pieces of the beast out of sight. "And you must face it."

"I don't have to do anything!" she said. "I hate them!"

Riordan turned to Nicholas. He reloaded his pistol. "Now, shall we introduce you to the gaming system?"

His moods changed almost as quickly as Lexie's and the Captain's. Was this *agenna*-induced trait? These people felt strange to Nicholas. Strange.

Lights had come on in the park, and Nick felt an urgent need to watch out for other cockroaches.

"I can assure you, Nicholas, that the gaming system is absolutely without these kinds of interferences," Riordan said.

"I... I don't know," Nick responded.

Lexie was breathing deeply, regaining her equilibrium. She turned to Riordan, away from the creek. "I get to play, too," she pronounced royally.

Nick gave Riordan a look that said he'd had enough of her. Riordan was on his side. He said, "Nicholas should enjoy himself with other people, Lexie. The gaming system will allow him to mingle and get to know others without them fearing who he is."

"I want to play!" she said.

"What do you say, Nicholas?" Riordan asked.

Nick thought about it for a few seconds, then said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

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## Chapter Four

SUDDENLY, HE WAS playing soccer.

Around him was a crowded outdoor arena brimming with tens of thousands of cheering soccer fans. Above them all was a sky so ethereally blue that it was literally breathtaking. He couldn't believe the power of the illusion! It was a perfect day for a match. The air was cold and clear. Everywhere there was color and life. It was almost *too* real.

The crowd, like a single animated creature of heroic proportions, screamed in one gigantic roar as a black-and-white soccer ball bounced swiftly to one side of him. The game was in progress.

Nicholas looked down at himself. His jersey was a bright, sparkling green. The opposing team wore red and white. Something electric surged through his body as he picked up the excitement of the crowd.

*The ball!* his body seemed to be saying. *Get the ball!* A player in red and white flashed by him and side-kicked the ball.

The soccer ball bounced across the field, and Nick raced after it. The crowd screamed tremendously.

One member of his own team danced in circles around a red-and-white opponent, and the ball came in Nick's direction, kicked in a high arc over their heads.

He reacted automatically, leaping out fantastically and bouncing the ball off the top of his head to a waiting forward. An opponent, outfoxed, tripped and fell because of Nicholas's virtuosity. The crowd went wild.

Nicholas didn't actually know what he was doing, for he had only played soccer in high school, but apparently *something* did. Perhaps the Game Masters were feeding him the rules, the automatic responses, and the excitement.

He liked it.

The ball was intercepted by the opposing team and came back downfield. Nick caught a pass with his feet, danced with it, and in turn passed it on downfield to another teammate.

He noticed how acute his onrushing sensations were. The air he breathed was clean and crisp. He could even smell the grass as his cleats chewed up the playing field. The briskness of the chill air did wonderful things to his entire nervous system. He felt terrifically alive!

This was far beyond anything Mnemos was capable of. It was an incredible achievement in computer technology.

He looked into the crowd. This was how many of DefCon's citizens spent their time. Sex, *genna*, and vicarious experiences in a gaming computer were necessary to make life underground tolerable. Nicholas was completely swept up in the drama of the game—whether it was real or fabricated.

He glanced at the scoreboard at the far end of the field and realized for the first time that the teams were the West Germans and the Italians. He, in green, was a West German. Why did the gaming system choose nations a thousand years dead? It was like the Goths versus the Lombards. It didn't make much sense, but even so, he had never felt such exuberance in his life.

The black-and-white ball came back in his direction, thrust by an Italian's kick. Nicholas ran toward it as an opponent spun around. Nick jumped up and bounded the ball back to a teammate off his forehead. The crowd seemed to like such theatrics, and Nick could feel the glory of the game bursting within him.

An Italian regained the ball and shuffled it through the feet of two of his own teammates, diving into the action. But a forward from the West German team dashed out into the fracas and stole the ball. The Italian opponent faked a trip-kick, and the two players collided, both going down.

A hearty "*Boo!*" rumbled through the crowd. Nicholas ran after the ball. He scrambled through an opening between the rear guards and quickly kick-passed the ball to a team member off to his right.

That teammate returned the pass after Nick had dodged two more Italians, and now—with a strong kick off the instep of his foot—he sent the ball soaring through the nets. The goalie had tried to stop it with a long dive, but missed. *Goal!*

The crowd loved it.

The West German players jumped up and hugged each other in triumph, patting Nicholas on the back. The Italians sulked. The crowd screamed, shouted, and jumped. Banners waved in the air.

"*Ray!*" Nicholas heard someone shout in a tiny voice in the crowded stands. "Oh, Nickie! *Yay!*"

Nick glanced over and saw Lexie, wrapped in expensive furs and waving a green banner. Hers was the only face he could make out in the thousands upon thousands of DefCon's troglodytes in the computer-imagined open-air stadium.

The referee returned the ball to midfield, and the game began again. Nicholas could not concentrate now that he knew Lexie was watching so adoringly. In fact, it almost seemed as if the whole game was staged just for her, despite the crowd that screamed and surged nearby.

"Forget about her," the referee said, running by.

Nicholas turned to the short man. The ref smiled. "It's me," he said, "Riordan. I'm in here with you. Don't worry about Lexie. She's harmless. Just play the game."

Nicholas stood still somewhat confused. "Riordan?"

The man didn't look in the least like the tall, charismatic professor.

"Of course, it's me!" he laughed. "You don't think we could play like this with our real bodies, do you? You're playing in the body of a twenty-year-old!"

Riordan, incarnated as a surly referee, jogged into the fray. Nicholas looked back into the stands and saw Lexie waving fiercely. The familiar sexual glow was in her eyes and on her cheeks.

His attention was shattered when the ball came his way. He made a dash for it.

Just then an Italian player came out of the corner of his field of vision, and before Nicholas could react the man had the ball between his shuffling feet.

He bumped into Nicholas and whispered above the excitement, "Go easy, Nick. Relax," then ran off before Nicholas could respond.

Nicholas was so startled by the secrecy in the man's voice that he froze. The Italian who had spoken ignored him, darted into a tussle over the ball, and knocked the sphere out of bounds. One of the West German players retrieved it and threw it back into play from the sidelines.

Nicholas caught it with his feet, juggled it away from an approaching Italian, then passed it on. He turned and tried to find the man who had spoken to him. It worried him that someone other than Lexie and Riordan knew that the Eridani was gaming. He had sudden, unpleasant visions of angry mobs stalking the grassy halls of DefCon, brandishing torches, scythes, and pitchforks, looking for the monster Frankenstein had built. Perhaps they'd toss him into a pit of giant cockroaches. He had thought he was safe in the game system. Apparently he wasn't.

Lexie yelled from the sidelines, "Don't stop, Nickie! It's over there!" she screamed giddily, pointing to the ball.

Another Italian player, a hefty yet oddly graceful youth with a wicked grin on his face, ran over to Nick. He waited for the ball. He was barely ten yards from Nicholas, crouching like a desert puma.

The kid suddenly yelled at Nick, and though his accent was thick, the words were clear. "Hey, keedo! You don'ta worry! We smasha de seestem good, no?"

It was almost comic. Nicholas rose from his defensive stance and walked over to him. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "What did you say?" he asked. He had his fists balled, ready.

"Hey, keeler!" the Italian mocked him. "Thatsa boy!" The ball flew between them, and the Italian shot after it with a tremendous burst of speed. Nick let him go.

Riordan, as referee, came running over to him. "Are you feeling all right, Nick? You want out of the game?"

The other soccer players pursued the ball, accompanied by the chants of the maddened crowd.

"I think someone wants me out," Nick said, looking at Lexie. All of the crowd's energy and excitement funneled down to her. She jumped up and down in her furs. "Nickie! Yay!" she yelled senselessly. Her short blond hair bounced about.

"But, Nick," Riordan said quickly. "No one knows you're in the game."

"*He* does," Nick said, pointing to the short, waddling Italian.

Riordan rubbed his chin, thinking. "Could be you picked up something."

"What are you talking about?"

Riordan laughed slightly. "Perhaps an old in-system response. Chips have memories too, you know."

The fact of the matter was that Nicholas's body was lying on a gaming couch somewhere in DefCon. Though Riordan had given his word that he'd be protected, anything could happen. *Ashad* happened one thousand eighty-three years ago, approximately. He had a vision of those cockroaches slipping in through the Gaming Hall's ventilation system, climbing over his plugged-in sleeping body....

"Nick! The ball!" Lexie shouted impatiently from the stands. "Don't listen to him!" she commanded.

Riordan spoke quickly. "It might be a residual memory of the old Mnemos system. You might have triggered an age-old linkage. But, Nick, no one knows you're in the system right now. If there's anything wrong, the Game Masters will take care of it back in the Center."

Riordan's duties as referee summoned him, and he headed up the field.

Words like "Eridani" and "jinx" echoed through Nick's mind. No one here seemed interested in him simply as *Nicholas*. He was an oddity—and always would be.

He ran toward the Italian who had spoken to him, no longer interested in playing the game. He wanted to know what was going on.

The ball rocketed in his direction, and momentarily he forgot his quest. His body acted instinctively. He pirouetted and caught it, gave it a resounding kick, aiming it downfield. An Italian player blocked it with a roughed-up knee. The ball rebounded into Nick's face and he fell backward on the chewed turf.

Angrily, the crowd shouted its disapproval.

The impact had been so sudden—and so real—that Nicholas literally saw stars. Blood flowed from his nose. He shook his head and tried to rise.

"Get up, Nickie! Sweetie, get up! Hurry!" came Lexie's call.

"Shit!" he swore.

He was helped up by a teammate. He coughed blood into his hand. The crowd was insane, bordering on

riot. The collective boos sounded like the hooves of an impending bison stampede.

"No fair!" Lexie yelled furiously. "*Foul!*"

Some of the other West German players began arguing with the officials. In the midst of it all was Professor Riordan, as the head ref. Whistles blew and hands waved, and the teams grudgingly parted to resume the game.

Perhaps someone did have it in for Nick. The ball's impact had been so forceful, it almost knocked him into pure unconsciousness, and out of the system.

One of the West German players ran by and slapped him on the rump. The ball was set free, and everyone was off. Blood had stopped flowing from his nose, but his head felt clogged. Half of his face was numb. Lexie jumped up and down like an hysterically happy child.

The ball was downfield, being pursued by three of his fellow teammates. He stayed in his zone, waiting.

The crowd once again revved up its excitement, but Nicholas suddenly felt that the sight of blood was exactly what they wanted to see. Maybe that's what the gaming system was for. He was just a gladiator. Abruptly, he didn't like being there, despite the intense sensory pleasures.

One of the officials pulled him aside. "Listen," he said quickly, "whatever happens next, don't panic."

It wasn't Riordan.

"What... hey!" he called after him. But the official was gone. Nick tried to find Riordan, but his attention was caught by two Italian players. They were foxing a West German who had the ball.

The surrounded teammate rapped the ball in Nick's direction, but it took a bad bounce that lifted it high over his head. Nick leaped for it, hoping to ricochet it off his forehead, but as he jumped for the ball an Italian player pounced out of nowhere and kicked him squarely in the head.

He nearly lost consciousness. He collapsed onto the grass as the crowd surged to its feet, a single-minded organism yelling angrily at the tops of their assembled voices. Objects flew out of the stands onto the playing field. Beer cans, pop bottles, shoes, pieces of bleachers—just about anything they could get their hands on.

"Son of a bitch!" Nicholas swore, staggering to his feet, fighting mad.

The Counselor was beside him. "Hold on, Nick. It's part of the game!"

"It's not part of any game I've ever played before!" he yelled at the Historian. "What's going on here? Who's out to get me? You said I'd be safe!"

"They're working on it back at the Gaming Center. No one's trying to get you, OK? Trust us. Just keep on playing." Riordan ran back after the Italians, leaving him where he stood.

Lexie had her hands over her mouth. Her brow was knitted with worry and she seemed pale.

The soccer ball bounced across the field. Two Italians captured it and passed it back and forth. Nicholas, blood trailing down one ear, reacted swiftly. He stole the ball in a magnificent maneuver. The crowd screamed approvingly.

At that point, another Italian slammed into him, and they both tumbled to the turf.

"Goddammit!*That's it!*" Nicholas shouted, and leaped to his feet, wanting one of those roach-guns. He came around with a thunderous punch that knocked the Italian's face a few degrees off center. Nick felt teeth and bone rearrange themselves.

The instant he had flattened that player, another Italian took a flying jump-kick at Nicholas, and the next thing he knew, they were all part of a full-fledged soccer riot.

West Germans threw themselves at Italians, members of the crowd started swinging at each other—and in the center of it all, Lexie was trying to reach him, climbing over the restraining fence.

"Nick!" she shouted. "*Darling!*"

The arena convulsed with angry people. Lexie went down as the stadium collapsed. Nick tried to find Riordan, but everyone was lost in the melee of rabid soccer fans.

It*was* the Goths versus the Lombards. These people were barbarians!

Panicked, he turned and sought some exit from the stadium. He was met head-on by a flying wine bottle. The bottle pulverized itself on the side of his face, showering him with iridescent purple stars. Wine mixed with blood.

The stars fell to the earth. And so did he.

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## Chapter Five

FLOATING UP AND UP, he tried to bring the world into focus, but in his drugged sleep the journey toward consciousness seemed never-ending. He heard voices.

"We never should have plugged him into the gaming system so soon," someone protested.

Then someone else, a different voice, a different sense of authority. "But he's used to it. Our records show he did this all the time."

He heard a chant, far away, and from an altogether different source: "Death to the death-dealers! Death to Eridani!"

The voices argued among themselves. He drifted. They sounded like the branches of trees clashing in a storm. Voices of the past. Voices of the present. The soccer riot. Italian players out to get him. Roaches crawling all over him....

A responsible woman's voice filtered through the dark. "We'll let him sleep it off. Keep him away from Lexie, Riordan, everyone. He's not a toy."

Another voice said, "If anyone knows he's here, they'll kill him,"

A judgment came: "It was an irresponsible thing to do."

And: "He doesn't take to *genna* well. It makes him forget his past. That is what we need most."

And finally, pervading all of this, came another voice. More familiar. More electric. "You can't keep me away! He's mine! You said he was mine. It's the Creed. I need him! I love him! Nickie..."



The next morning—if morning it was—Nicholas rose and quickly found his clothes. He had come to some decisions during the long night, and a look of determination was on his face when a doctor came in to check him.

"I see you survived," the young medic smiled. "I'm Dr. Bakke, the Counselor's personal physician. He wanted me here with you, as a precaution."

Dr. Bakke, unlike Riordan, seemed a little unhealthy. His face was the color of toadstools, and his hair a light, tired brown. He was only in his mid-thirties, but already he had liver spots on his hands.

"Where's Counselor Riordan? I want to talk to him."

"We'd like to run a few scans for your chart, first." His was one of the voices from the darkness, Nick realized. "You've had an unusual response to the gaming system, and if you can help us out we might be able to make some much-needed changes in it."

Nicholas stood up. He put a strong hand on the man's chest. "Sorry, bub. I'm through being your guinea pig for a while. No charts. No scans. No drugs," he snapped. "Notify Riordan, *now*."

Dr. Bakke became even paler. Nicholas didn't care if he'd suddenly seen him as an Eridani.

A nurse walked in carrying a small tray of cubes—which Nick recognized as varying doses of *genna* .

He pointed to the tray. "Do you have an antidote to that stuff?" he asked.

The doctor turned. "Well, yes, naturally. But, Nicholas, the *genna* wears off after—"

"Friend, I'm not stupid. The *genna* may wear off after a while, but the desire to take it only increases. I want no more *genna* . Got it? If there is an antidote, I'd like to have it. And call the Professor."

Dr. Bakke's examination was brief. Nicholas took a cube of something that hissed easily into his arm. Bakke seemed disappointed as he went to summon Riordan.

The Counselor had been nearby. He entered the room smiling.

"You didn't tell me your gaming system was so dangerous. They were out to kill me!" Nicholas practically jumped on him.

Caught off guard, Riordan grimaced and cleared his throat uneasily. "Please believe me, Nicholas. No one intended to harm you. Everyone in DefCon goes into the games. It's our most important source of amusement. You would've gone under sooner or later."

Nick tucked in the tails of his tunic. "I think you people are sick. You should try playing soccer the real way. Build your own goddamn arenas. Find out what it's like to get a real set of cleats in your face." He strapped on his roach-gun.

Riordan was embarrassed. "Foul-ups like that are rare within the system, Nick. That riot was totally spontaneous."

"I don't believe that," Nick said accusingly. "Someone was out to get me. They spoke to me directly. You heard them."

Nicholas strode into the hallway and glanced around, getting his bearings. Riordan followed him.

Nicholas soon made his way out of the hospital and into an area of walkways, parks, fountains, and

smoothly flowing creeks. Foxfire on the ceilings gave the place an eerie, spectral light. A tall holographic construct, representing this section of DefCon, hovered above a platform next to the moving side-walk. There was a green star in the three-dimensional direction finder indicating their position. Nick began walking toward a subway stop not too far away.

He began, "I'd like you to tell me what those two Italians were talking about."

The Counselor wheezed, trying to keep up with him. "The experts informed me that all the players were from various parts of DefCon. One man was over thirty miles away. None of them could've known who you were."

"What about Lexie's ex-lovers?" Nick asked. They entered a long tunnel which opened out into a wide glade. Nick walked across the soft green grass. "Everyone knows I'm with her, and if it wasn't for her constant duties at the Academy, blabbing about me, she'd be my Siamese twin."

Riordan walked beside him. "Lexie's new at a lot of things. She's only a child, you know."

No, she's not, Counselor, Nick thought to himself. She might be a lot of things—but "child" is not one of them. Just take a peek underneath her tunic and you'll see for yourself...

"It is possible that you entered synergistically with the gaming computer, mixing in some of your old memories, rivalries, fears, and the like," Riordan said.

"What about the riot?" Nick asked. "Are you saying that I caused the riot?"

"Well," Riordan stated. "Soccer games *were* known for their enthusiastic responses to the competition."

During his long and troubled sleep, Nicholas had decided he couldn't tolerate DefCon any further. It was too much too soon.

Nick recalled the term "future shock." When technology advanced so rapidly an individual had no sense of what he could rely upon. Obsolescence was the name of the game. Technologies changed; societies changed. Morals changed. The only way you could survive such changes—if at all—was by offering yourself as an instrument of change, so as not to become its victim. Fight back, in other words.

There had been something positive about his encounter with DefCon's gaming system. It indicated that in-system techniques had stayed with the survivors of the Third World War. Wasn't it remotely possible that there were others of his kind sleeping somewhere? Captain Lazlo had hinted as much. And much of the Eridani legend was sustained by the belief that other Peh-de-eh-gfans were waiting to be unleashed.

Nicholas knew that he could survive only with others of his kind. Otherwise he might never know how he was moved along with the rest of Foresee to Omaha—or how the stasis couches were developed. Or when the last war occurred. He had questions, and no one seemed interested in supplying answers. Maybe no one knew the answers. Life in DefCon had no future, only a present, with a few ghostly whisperings of a long-gone past.

He had a plan. To begin, he had to elude Lexie. Something about her compelled him, against all wishes, to fall into a web of unleashed desires. One week with her had been enough, though the Council had agreed with Lexie that he'd be better off in her care until full indoctrination was complete. Lexie brought back and intensified all those yearnings and sensual delights he'd buried long ago, after Rhoanna Martín. He didn't need a little busybody to dig them up.

At the far end of the glade they found a moving sidewalk. Nicholas turned to the Counselor.

"Where is Captain Lazlo?" he asked.

Riordan's eyebrows rose slightly. "I imagine he's down in the Bore bays. He's preparing for another outing to the south. Why?"

"Good," he said. "Let's go down to the bays."

"May I ask why?"

Before Nicholas could respond, the radio on the epaulet of Riordan's tunic beeped.

Riordan touched it. "Yes? What is it?"

There was an alarmed voice at the other end. "Counselor, is the Eridani with you?"

Riordan glanced at Nick, almost apologetic. "*Mister Tejada* is with me, yes. What's the problem?"

There was a tense pause, then the voice returned. "Counselor, we have a report that a committee is coming to see you about... Mister Tejada."

Nicholas didn't like the sound of that.

"A committee?" Riordan asked.

"Sir, we've called out a riot unit to the health complex, but it appears that some members of the riot-control group are part of the committee."

"I copy on that," Riordan said, switching off. "You were talking about the bays?"

"I want out of here," Nicholas told him. "You've seen it yourself. This place's out to get me."

"Nicholas, there are hundreds of locations where you can hide," the Counselor said.

"Look, I don't want to hide. I want to live!" He stepped up onto the moving sidewalk. The subway was not too far away. The Counselor followed rapidly.

"Then, why the Bore bays?" he asked.

Nicholas said, "Captain Lazlo told me no one's ever been west of the Continental Divide. Right?"

"Yes," Riordan said. "That's true."

"There's an Air Force base in Utah that once had Mnemos systems hookups. I had friends in Salt Lake City who used them on behalf of Foresee."

This shocked Riordan. Nicholas could almost read the man's mind: Eridani! Even the knowledgeable professor wasn't without his weaknesses. *One* Eridani he could probably handle. But what about a dozen? Or three dozen?

"Nicholas," Riordan began hesitatingly. "I don't know."

Nicholas pulled out his roach-gun. "Either we go for a ride and try to find more stasis couches, or all that'll be left of me in this park will be some bones. Of course, you'll go first."

The glade was empty, and the only sounds filling it were those of the bursting fountain. Ventilation provided the only kind of wind they'd ever know. They drifted along on the silent sidewalk.

"Riordan!" Nicholas began angrily. "Think about it! I don't belong here. I've got to know if there are any others like me alive."

"Nick..." Riordan began, but a voice rang out across the glade.

"*Nickie!*" it sang. "*Oh, Nickie!*"

Lexie's call came from several announcement speakers hidden in trees throughout the glade.

"And *she* doesn't come!" Nick whispered.

"We can occupy her. Don't worry."

Nicholas smiled, breathing easier. "Think of it as a matter of history. After all, you may not find any more Eridani."

"But then what would you do? You'd only have to come back here."

"Maybe I'll stay in Utah," Nick said. "Become a Mormon."

"What's a Mormon?"

Nick looked at him. "Never mind. Let's find Captain Lazlo."

In the pilot's seat in the nose of the Bore, Captain Lazlo chewed on his ever-present cigar and adjusted the controls. A rainbow of lights sprinkled him with flashing colors. Nicholas sat in the copilot's seat. The great fusion engine in front of them was sucking in rock and converting it to white-hot iron, like an earthworm digesting soil as it burrowed.

In the first compartment behind the Captain's console sat the Counselor himself. The Boremen occupied their usual seats along the central corridor. The smell of *genna* flowed everywhere about them. Captain Lazlo's men were already plugged into the delights of the shipboard computer system. They'd left DefCon only half an hour ago, and already the men were lost to their dreams of other worlds.

"You're sure a lot of trouble, son," the Captain said, making some final adjustments. "If it wasn't for the Counselor himself, I wouldn't take *anybody* into the west. Some think that's where the great ash falls started."

The Counselor had the door to his private compartment open and was listening in. Nicholas explained what he had in mind. "Hill Air Force base would have been a major target during the war, but most of it is deep underground. With a craft like this, it shouldn't be too hard to find."

Lazlo looked skeptically at Nicholas, chomping on his cigar. Smoke surrounded his goggled forehead like an ectoplasm. He punched up a three-dimensional grid of Colorado and eastern Utah.

The grid, in glowing green, showed the iron trails the Bores usually traced when they left DefCon. Those trails resembled the downward weaving of a tree's mighty roots, only the tree, DefCon, would never sprout above the earth's surface.

Lazlo moved the grid further west, and Nicholas could see that the longest iron trail went somewhere near the Unitas in eastern Utah before turning back.

The Captain pointed. "The badlands extend so far west that we just stopped looking for anything. We prefer traveling in the Midwest. At least we can find basements of old buildings, some foundations. Maybe a buried road. It's better than trying to find Los Angeles or even a place like Seattle. There's

nothing there anymore." The Captain took a long, thoughtful pull on his cigar. "Besides, it's too far to stay under *genna*. We'd be zombies when we got there."

At least the Captain still had the desire to travel, to search. It seemed to be a remnant of the American spirit to move on, though he was obviously limited by practical considerations. Nick decided that the Captain was a man he could like, despite his moods.

But there was another reason for not moving west. Travel through the rocks of western Colorado was very difficult because of the lack of aquifers. Aquifers, such as the Oglalla in the Midwest, made travel less jerky, smoother. Their rate of travel to the west would depend upon how their computers handled what little information they had on the strata overhead.

Captain Lazlo didn't mind, though. He liked the Bore and he liked exploring. He would have preferred not to have the Counselor on board though. He didn't want the Historian to hinder his decision-making process.

The Counselor had been able to keep the committee from reaching the Bore bays and wreaking havoc on everyone involved in the discovery of the Eridani. It would take the vigilantes months, perhaps years, to search every cranny of DefCon for Nicholas. But, the Counselor reasoned with Lazlo, if they returned from Utah with worthwhile data, they might be able to placate the mob.

Nick had his doubts. He knew that the committee viewed him as something of an Antichrist. Religions in his time had always held out the promise of better things: a future in which a Messiah or Avatar would return and make things better. But when that future arrived as all-out nuclear warfare—no Messiah manifested Himself. No one was saved. The Bible became lies—and now was forgotten. Nicholas could find no copy or even computer-storage memory of one.

Nicholas gave the computer approximate directions to central Utah. "Rouse me if anything exciting happens," he said to the Captain. The Bore had leveled out at a depth of five miles.

Nicholas didn't know what he was going to do for the next week; he hoped there would be enough reading material in the computer's memory. No gaming system and no *genna* for him.

But when he got to his compartment door he smelled *genna*. Mist drifted around him. He slid the door open and discovered Lexie inside, wearing only a sheer, skimpy nightie and turning the dial to increase the output of the hypnotic, aphrodisiacal drug. She was half-gone already. It was clear that she had to make an effort just to stay upright on the love-couch.

"Oh, Christ," Nick said.

He hadn't checked his quarters when he got onto the Bore, but there was no way she could've gotten on board without being spotted. He was very surprised to see her.

"Hi, sweetheart," she sang sleepily. "Come on in."

How had she done it? There was nowhere he could go, it seemed, without her knowing about it. His heart sank.

He was beginning to get a contact high just from standing at the door. Lexie turned and made a space on the pillow for him.

Shaking with rage, he quickly pulled the plastic door to the compartment shut. There was no outside lock, so he had to hold the door against her with what strength his rage could muster. Which was a lot.

The hissing of the *genna* within was cut off. Surprised, Lexie shouted, "What are you doing? Nickie! You belong to me! You can't do this!" Her little fists beat against the door.

Nick braced his feet on the opposing chamber hatch and held the door to Lexie's compartment securely shut, keeping most of the gas trapped inside. Let her pound and scream. She'd use more oxygen and would soon hyperventilate.

After a few harried moments, the pounding did stop. Everything became quiet except for the low thrumming of the fusion engines. Nicholas opened the door, looked inside, and saw Lexie spread-eagled on the couch, lost to her hallucinations.

She must have known she wasn't going to make it to her prize. She had managed in her last few seconds of wakefulness to put on the gaming computer's headphones.

Either way, he realized, selfish little Lexie was going to get some fun out of the situation. Sex or *genna*, to her it didn't matter.

He closed the hatch and stepped into the chamber across from hers.

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## Chapter Six

THE TRIP LASTED five days, seven and a half hours, and in none of that time did he yield to either the temptation of *genna* or the presence of Lexie.

Nicholas wondered if there was a rejuvenating aspect to *genna* which prevented muscle and bone from atrophying. The Boremen barely stirred during the journey, but Nick recalled how fit the soldiers, seemed when they had found him. For himself, calisthenics, yoga, and jogging in place kept him fit enough.

In the middle of the fifth day, he was reading in the computer library about the founding two hundred years previous of one of DefCon's levels, when the Captain hailed him over the intercom.

"I think we've picked up something," Lazlo said.

Nicholas left his cabin immediately. He found the Captain pouring over the three-dimensional computer grid that hovered above the driving console.

"What have you got?" Nick asked, staring at the brilliant green hologram.

Lazlo, eyes still bleary from a recent spell with *genna*, pointed at the maze of tunnels and underground rooms the grid indicated was somewhere right above them. At the very bottom of the grid, at the lowermost level of the underground sanctum, was a yellow blip that represented the slowly moving Bore. Lazlo said, "We passed an electrical conduit about a half hour ago. I traced it, and the computer found a way to diagram the burial chambers. It's a big place."

The three-dimensional grid depicted an underground complex about the size of a ten-story building. There were long halls, all interconnected, and several very large chambers. It seemed linked to the surface of the earth by a single elevator shaft.

Lazlo gestured at the grid. "The computer says it's got electricity somewhere." He looked at Nicholas.

Nick nodded. "This is it. I'm sure of it."

Lazlo pointed to a place on the grid. "This looks like out best bet," he said. "It resembles where we found you, and looks pretty blast-proof."

"Makes sense," Nicholas responded.

Lazlo pulled back on the controls, and the Bore began moving upward. Nick followed the blip of yellow light on the grid.

"I'm heading for that large chamber," the Captain pointed out. "It's big enough to hold the Bore, and it's as close as we can get to the central chamber without doing too much damage to the complex."

"Shall I wake the Counselor?" Nick asked.

"He'll come out when the Bore stops. So will the men."

Nicholas paused, then, "What about your daughter?" Lexie hadn't been heard from since Nicholas had shut her in with the *genna*.

The Captain pondered, staring at the tip of his cigar. "Well, son, she's capable of taking care of herself. She's growing by leaps and bounds."

"I thought you had the Bore checked before we left. You know I didn't want her to come along."

"Beats me how she got in. She's beyond my control. She's beyond anyone's control now."

Nick had thought a lot about Lexie during their trip. His romantic adventures in the past had always led to disaster—but Lexie was a totally different experience. In Lexie's life, there were no rules. Her mother had died when she was a child, and Lazlo, as if to somehow make up for that emotional loss, was always burrowing hither and yon, staying away from the reminders of his own past.

The Bore tilted progressively toward the vertical. Nick watched the yellow light on the hologram move up through the different layers of steel and reinforced concrete of the complex. Lazlo guided the craft with a sure hand, feeling his way through the earth.

The Bore finally halted. "We're in a large chamber, about a hundred feet wide and thirty-five feet deep. The air's clean—that's a good sign. Looks like the whole complex survived the wars," the Captain informed him.

Nicholas climbed out of his seat. Because they were vertical, he had to swing out over the rungs which had extended from the floor of the corridor.

The Boremen were starting to rouse themselves and he descended to his own compartment before the soldiers could catch sight of him. None knew that he was on board, and he wanted the Captain himself to inform them of his presence.

Nick reached his compartment, but as he did the door to Lexie's chamber eased open, letting a breath of week-old *genna* wheeze out. Lexie appeared dressed in tunic and work-boots. He watched her closely.

She just stood there, staring back. He had expected her to burst out, knife-in-teeth, like a buccaneer ready to draw blood. But she seemed pacified.

"This better be good," she announced to him.

Nicholas looked deep into her whirlpool eyes. "At least coming here's better than getting your head kicked in back at DefCon, wouldn't you say?"

"That wasn't supposed to happen," she said in a huff.

The soldiers squirmed in their couches, looking for their equipment. Lazlo made his announcement. "Boys, the Counselor himself is here to oversee this mission. Nicholas Tejada is here as well. Now, I don't want any funny stuff on this job. Got that? Just assist the Historian here with anything he might need. Nothing's gonna happen."

Jarre craned his head downward, as did many of the others. Lazlo perched high above on the corridor's rungs.

"We've reached what seems to be an underground storage facility, probably belonging to Hill Air Force Base," he spoke as he began to descend. "I want everything categorized properly, and I don't want any of you guys messing around with things you shouldn't."

He climbed down the ladder to the bottom, where Lexie and Nicholas stood, and glared fiercely into his daughter's eyes. *Handy off the merchandise*, his expression said.

The soldiers above them waited for the Eridani to get out of their way. Nicholas didn't like their stares. Riordan clambered down beside them at the airlock.

The Captain stepped out first. Several of the wandering glow-globes came to life and rattled down the ramp, throwing out a frosty light.

"Wow!" gasped one of the Boremen as they piled out of the Bore.

The Captain turned. "Titus, check for sharks. We're too deep for floaters, but I want to make sure we're clear before we do anything stupid."

"Yes, sir," the redheaded boy said.

He set a device down on the floor, made some adjustments, then looked up at the Captain. "We're safe for at least four levels up, sir. Nothing moving—nothing even waiting to move."

"Good," Lazlo said. "OK, proceed."

The Bore had entered an immense hanger. Surrounding them were dozens of fighter planes and a predatory-looking bomber. All of their wings were folded up like hands in prayer, and their air-intake ducts were plugged with plastic plates. Equipment which must have serviced the aircraft was also covered in clear plastic. From the ceiling hung hoses waiting to spout fuel into the silent aircraft, along with various bomb racks and slender missiles.

The sound of their boots on the cold cement was magnified in this chamber which had not seen human life in ten centuries. Nicholas stood beneath the wing of one of the ships, realizing that its design was beyond anything of his day—and that it was in tip-top shape, ready to go.

The Counselor had a video unit perched on his shoulder and was panning the area. Seeing this, Lexie took out a smaller camera of her own, but made only a few obligatory clicks at the aircraft. She was watching Nick—as were the soldiers.

Captain Lazlo caught this and yelled at his men, "All right, guys! Knock it off! You've all got work to do, so do it!"

The soldiers reluctantly turned away from the Bore and began to unlimber their equipment. Lazlo ordered them to spread out through the complex. A couple of the wandering globes of light pursued their hosts



across the floor.

"Jarre!" Lazlo then turned to his second-in-command. "Over here."

Sergeant Jarre had been assisting Riordan, scanning with a powerful light beneath the very strange-looking bomber. He looked over to the Captain. "Yes, sir," he said.

Lazlo said, "Let's break into a computer line in the walls and follow it. Look for power leads that might sustain stasis couches."

"Stasis couches?" Jarre asked timorously.

"Yes, that's right. Stasis couches! That's why we're here!" Captain Lazlo barked. "And these aren't Eridani, either. So, get that out of your mind right now."

Sergeant Jarre turned to the Counselor, who smiled reassuringly at the Boreman. But Nicholas knew that it didn't help matters any to be in the presence of a cache of war machines a thousand years old which would easily enable any resurrected Eridani to spread their madness across the earth as they had done before.

Captain Lazlo reached for his pistol and snapped the holster buckle aside. "You've got your orders, mister."

"Captain," the Counselor pulled Lazlo aside. "Are your men always like this?"

Lazlo snarled around his cigar, "They haven't had an audience before."

Jarre went to work on a wall of computer equipment.

Lexie, meanwhile, had edged closer to Nicholas. In her pearl-white uniform she seemed to glow. She smiled at him. "We have all the time in the world, sweetie. No need to rush."

Riordan walked up to them. "Nick, this place is absolutely unlike any we've ever known in our history." While Nicholas could sense the man's excitement, he could also hear the political gears working. "We're sure to change the minds of the citizens of DefCon!"

Above them there was a sudden hiss. A face appeared on a large TV screen hanging from the ceiling. An age-old video recording, it had been called up by Jarre's electronic fiddling.

"DefCon One!" the face on the screen shouted. "All stations! DefCon One! This is not a test! We are at DefCon One!"

The cry rebounded throughout the magnificent hanger, and everyone spun around, surprised by its hysteria. Titus whipped out his pistol and fired a single shot into the screen.

"Christ!" Lazlo shouted, dashing away from the falling glass.

Lexie screamed and grabbed Nicholas.

Lazlo pulled out his gun and aimed it at Titus, who was quaking with fright. "Watch it, boy! I'm warning you!"

The Boremen were crouching with their guns out and ready. The Captain strode into the center of the hanger underneath the wings of the surreal bomber.

"Now, get this," he began slowly. "We are on a military expedition, and I expect you clowns to behave accordingly. The next one who shoots his gun off is going to get shot in return."

"Captain," young Titus began. "This place is full of...*those* !" he said, pointing to Nick.

Lazlo turned to Riordan. "You want to help me out with this, Professor?"

Riordan was only too glad to assist. "Young man, be assured that you are in no danger. In fact, DefCon is counting on you and your compatriots. The Eridani are a myth, and while it is true that we suspect some of the First World's original inhabitants to be sleeping here—like Nicholas—we know them to be harmless. Trust us."

Titus's pale blue eyes moved nervously over the undercarriages of the aircraft. It was clear he had yet to be convinced. Riordan did cut an impressive figure, though, with the mini-cam over his shoulder. Titus glanced at his superiors, not knowing what to think.

Lights flared on overhead and everyone started. Sergeant Jaffe pulled his head out of a maintenance port he'd found in the wall. "There's a temporary hydroelectric generator beneath the base," he said. "I got it started. It'll hold as long as we want."

"Finally, something's been done right." Lazlo turned to Nicholas. "I guess we can try to track down those couches."

They moved out into the corridors, the Boremen trailing behind. Several had brought cameras with them. Others scanned the walls with peculiar devices.

The wide hallway was designed for both vehicular and foot traffic. Boxes of food and medicine were stacked neatly along the sides of the corridor, but their contents had long since collapsed into dust.

In this silent place, Nicholas more than anything wanted to be alone. Though a week without *genna* had not been enough to completely clear the drug out of Nick's system, his heart raced. The thought that there might be others of his kind frozen in suspended animation invigorated him. He needed contact with home.

The long corridor led to an intersection. There, three other hallways went off into the rock. The overhead lights revealed a cavernous infinity.

The Captain sent five men down the corridor to the left, and the main party proceeded to the right. The computer had suggested that the stasis room—if that was what it was—might be at the end of that particular hallway.

Riordan turned to Nick and, with the mini-cam aimed at him, asked, "Nicholas, are there any other places like this left in the country?"

Lexie beamed proudly by his side, caught in the camera's eye.

Nicholas was uneasy. "It all depends on how many bases had storage facilities far enough underground. Do you have to point that thing at me?"

Sergeant Jarre had gone to the far end of the corridor. "Captain!" he cried out. He'd found a huge metal door set deep in solid rock.

They ran to the wall. Nicholas turned to Lazio. "Is this it?" His nerves tingled with anticipation.

Lazlo pulled out his cigar. "There's a chamber just beyond. Could be it."

The Boremen shifted nervously behind them. Riordan stood back, taking everything in with his mini-cam. Lexie was both impatient and a little bored with the whole thing.

"How do we open it?" Nick asked the Captain. There was a computer lock on it, and Nicholas knew that explosive triggers were often set into such things. It depended on what kind of world the sleepers inside thought would greet them.

"Jarre," the Captain said. "Can you make anything of this?"

Riordan focused the camera on the Sergeant. Nick stood far to one side, letting the small man do his job unimpeded.

Lexie whispered to him as Jarre worked on the lock. "I hope you know this isn't going to help. Nothing will come of it."

"What are you talking about?" Nick responded.

"I think you know," she returned, smiling coquettishly.

At Jarre's touch, the computer lock sprang open and the huge seal around the giant door cracked with a loud pop. Lazlo grabbed the handle and pulled. Air that had been entombed for centuries gushed out. Opening the lock had turned on the lights inside. Riordan quickly moved his camera into range.

"Great day," the Counselor breathed.

They stepped into the chamber. The room was long and narrow, quite like the Omaha chamber—only this time every couch bore an active green light.

"They're alive!" Nicholas said excitedly. "My God, they made it!" He rushed inside and looked around.

The soldiers stayed far away. Lexie pouted, her arms crossed. Lazlo's cigar glowed feverishly.

"This is almost too good to be true," Nicholas said. There were nameplates, identification numbers, and medical information on each couch drawer. Nicholas didn't recognize any of them. It didn't matter, though. He'd found friends.

Just then, Titus's voice rang out over Captain Lazlo's radio epaulet. "Captain?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"What was that explosion?"

"What explosion?"

"Just now. That noise."

"We found the stasis chamber. It was the vault door."

"No," Titus stated. "After that. It sounded like a small detonation."

Riordan lowered his mini-cam slowly. Lazlo pinched the disk at his shoulder. "We didn't hear any explosion."

"Well, *we* did, Captain. We thought it was you."

The Boremen began looking around, backing off into the outer corridor. Lazlo stared at Nicholas. "I didn't hear anything," he said. "Did you?"

Nicholas shook his head. Lexie became suddenly angry. "It's nothing," she snapped. "Why are you men so stupid?" She moved in front of Nicholas. Captain Lazio touched his radio. "Check on it fast, boy," he ordered Titus.

The Boremen in the outside hall broke and ran like quail in a tornado. "Hey!" Lazio shouted, running up to the portal of the vault. "Just where do you think you're going?"

Titus's voice grated once again at Lazlo's shoulder. "Captain!"

"What, damn it!" he yelled.

"It's another shark, Captain. Five or six levels overhead," Titus told them.

"I thought you said there were no sharks, Titus!"

"Nothing showed for four levels, sir. I told you."

"No!" shouted Lexie.

They heard the rumbling, somewhat diminished by distance and five levels. But definitely there.

Lazlo looked up at the ceiling as if he could see it. "It's a shark all right. Its engines are starting up."

Standing beside Lexie, Nicholas could almost feel her contempt.

"No, it's not a shark! It can't be a shark!" She directed all of her spite at her father. "You're a liar! You're an incompetent—"

"What?" Lazlo grabbed her. "A liar? Incompetent? What the hell's wrong with you? *Listen!* "

The rumbling increased, and they could clearly hear a faint grinding sound.

"Oh, Lost Messiah!" Counselor Riordan breathed in his fright.

The Counselor suddenly seemed like a reprobate seeking heavenly redemption. He began to kneel, and Nicholas thought that the man wanted to pray in his final moments.

But Riordan was only laying the mini-cam down carefully, removing the precious tape cassette. He then rose and stared at the three of them. "We'd better leave, Captain." He put on his mask of stern authority—but he couldn't really disguise the panic he felt. The curse of the Eridani was about them everywhere now.

Lexie suddenly screamed above the low rumbling of the shark's passage. "Go away!" she shouted. "It's not fair!"

Lazlo grabbed his daughter and pushed her and Riordan into the corridor. "God damn it! Shut up and get going! The thing can hear us!"

Nicholas followed them to the vault opening. The corridor was empty of Boremen. Lexie cast a desperate look at Nick—a look she'd never given him before. It seemed wistfully compassionate—almost lonesome.

"Take off your boots," Lazlo commanded.

"What?" Lexie looked down. Her father was already on the floor, struggling out of his boots.

"I said take off your boots and keep quiet. It might stop if it doesn't hear any more sounds." The Captain tossed his boots aside.

"It can still hear us talking, Daddy!" she said.

Lazlo reached an arm around her legs and threw her to the floor. "I said take off your boots! You, too," he added to Nicholas.

Riordan had already doffed his boots.

Lazlo rose. "We can always come back. In a few years we can sneak up on the shark—figure out a way to disarm it. It'll be warm for a while, though."

"A few *years*?" Nicholas felt his heart break. "We just got here. Isn't there anything we can do now to stop it?"

"Not if we want to save the complex. We've got too much to lose at the moment. We can wait."

"Well, I can't wait," he said.

There was a sickening crash above them as if cement and steel had been torn.

Captain Lazlo tossed his cigar away. "Come, children." He began running in his stocking feet down the hall, followed by the Counselor, who carried his valuable tape.

"No!" cried Lexie as her father pulled her along.

"Be quiet," he said. He looked back at Nicholas. "What the hell are you doing? Come on!"

Nick looked into the vault and hesitated. He had come so close to being with people of his own era.

In one gesture he threw the outer door control switch and jumped back inside the stasis vault as the ponderous door grated shut.

"*Nickie!*" came Lexie's frantic shout.

Inside, with the door now firmly sealed, he turned to the stasis couches. There seemed to be more than a hundred couches in the wall, and each one harbored a vital human being. The computer still functioned, though at the lowest level of efficiency.

If the Captain could make it back to the Bore without setting off the shark, then his plan would work. But if Lazlo couldn't, at least Nick would perish with his own kind.

He found an empty couch, pulled it out, arranged the wires in the stasis head-cap, and climbed in. He eased himself into the wall and darkness. He plugged in.

He became the complex. The others slept around him, but he was awake and felt the tendrils of connection to the underground storage facility.

"He's mine! He's mine!" Lexie was screaming, tears reddening her soft cheeks. Captain Lazlo was carrying her over his shoulder. Her tiny fists pounded on his backside.

"What about Nicholas?" the Professor shouted above the throaty roar of the impending shark.

"Forget him!" Captain Lazlo huffed. "He's shark bait now."

There were Eyes and Ears everywhere in the complex, and Nicholas saw and heard through every one of them.

He wondered how the shark had found them. Why hadn't it come alive when the Bore lunged into the hanger facility? Why did breaching the door-seal awaken it?

Then Nicholas found Titus.

The redheaded, trigger-happy youth was sitting with a crawler in his lap one level above the stasis chamber. The crawler was emitting its seductive beep—calling for the shark. But the crawler's wheels spun in Titus's lap. It wasn't going anywhere—it wasn't *meant* to go anywhere. Titus was summoning the shark!

The expression on the Boreman's face was quite peculiar. Distorted. As if the boy was going through a battle with himself. His eyes rolled, his lips quivered.

Titus spoke in a cracked voice to the empty hall.

"We're doing what we can," he whispered above the *beep!beep! beep!* of the crawler. "Forgive us. Forgive Lexie."

Nicholas couldn't understand it. Why wasn't he fleeing with the rest of them? He tried to speak, but the system only had Eyes and Ears. There was no Mouth.

Then he saw the shark. One of his Eyes pierced the Stygian darkness and found it as it crashed through the ceiling of a vacant workroom and crept down onto the floor, scattering plaster, slabs of sheetrock, and metal tubing behind it. It was a miniature version of the Bore, with a head full of explosive plutonium. It moved slowly. It sunk its malevolent face—a round fusion plate—into the floor of the empty workroom and burned down through the tile, sucking up the cement underneath. A long tail of molten rock gushed from its rear, setting fire to everything around it.

Lying in the ancient stasis couch, Nicholas knew what its warhead could do.

"We'll be back, Nick!" a distant voice promised in the long, dark halls. But his mind wasn't fast enough to reach all the Eyes and Ears to find out who said it. "Stay tight! We're going to get you out!"

There came another, more ominous rumbling. Nicholas quickly shifted his vision around, looking for the cause. As he did, he smelled gas rising about him. Not *genna*, but something different. The system was reacting to his presence in the couch. Its defenses were taking over. He began to fade.

"You're mine!" a female voice cried. Nicholas could almost feel the tears behind it. "You're always mine and they'll never take you away from me! Never!"

The shark vaporized in an angry explosion that drew a cloak of sorrowful dark about him. Nicholas fell into a sudden and final peace.

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## The Third Variation

# Chapter One

*"HELLO, NICHOLAS," the woman said as she entered the room. Nicholas rose and shook her hand. Turquoise bracelets clicked at her wrist. "Melissa Salazar. I'm glad we could meet."*

*Somehow, he'd expected the head of Foresee to be a man, not an attractive fortyish woman. He liked her dark eyes. They were friendly and intelligent.*

*She sat behind her desk. "I've been looking over your application and your in-system trials.*

*"Yes, ma'am."*

*"Don't call me ma'am or you're fired," she said, smiling.*

*"I got the job?"*

*"You got the job." Melissa Salazar leaned back in her chair. Beyond the wide window behind her, Nick could see the Pacific Ocean and part of tranquil La Jolla as well.*

*"I'd like to know more about you, though," she said, leafing through the dossier on her lap. "In your own words. For example, this Kennedy thing. That's pretty impressive. It backs up, by the way, what Mnemos Eight tells us about you."*

*"I was eleven when it happened." Why was he so nervous? The woman was very congenial, acting almost like an older sister.*

*"Right," she said. "Nineteen sixty-two."*

*"I was home sick from school that day. I don't remember what I had, but I do remember that whenever I stayed home—sick or not—I'd always hang out in my room. I'd read comics or listen to the radio." He rubbed his hands nervously. Did she want to hear this? He went on. "Anyway, I was in my room when I got this really weird urge to turn on the television."*

*"An urge?"*

*"I almost never watched TV when I was sick. You know, game shows and stupid housewife-stuff."*

*"Yet, something told you to turn on the TV."*

*"I just got up, grabbed a couple of pillows, and sat down in front of the set. The pillows were the strange part. Something in me knew that I was going to be watching television for a while."*

*Melissa Salazar nodded, gazing at the profile papers.*

*Nick went on. "President Kennedy was on all three networks, telling us about the Cuban Blockade. I was really scared, Ms. Salazar."*

*"Melissa."*

*"Melissa. It was like I could feel the whole country being scared too, and it told me to turn on the TV. I still don't know what it was."*

*"Did you know how serious the missile crisis was?"*

*"Yes," he said.*

*Melissa cleared her throat. "The possibility of nuclear war is a big burden for a child to carry."*

*Nick was silent.*

*Melissa continued, "Tell me about the incident with the Russian bomber." Nicholas liked the tinny sounds her bracelets made when she went through the papers. The small sounds, the gestures of women...*

*"That was a few years later. I was spending the summer in Flagstaff at my Uncle Frank and Aunt Lorrie's house. One day when I finished chopping some firewood for them, I decided to take a short nap. I woke up when I heard a droning noise very high up."*

*"A droning noise?"*

*"Right. It was very weird."*

*Melissa smiled thinly.*

*"See, when I was a kid I used to build model airplanes. And there's only one kind of bomber that makes a sound like that. A B-36. I'd seen them before in real life. Big things. You know B-36s?"*

*"Yes," she smiled at him.*

*"Well, anyhow, I got up and looked in the sky for it, but I couldn't see it."*

*"What made you think it should've been there—aside from hearing its engines?"*

*"Well, Flagstaff is about forty miles to the north of a major cross-country flight path. You see contrails over that part of Arizona all the time."*

*"But no bomber."*

*"Then some numbers came to my mind: zero, seven, five, seven, four."*

*"And the word 'Bear' as well."*

*"Right."*

*Melissa pondered the papers, then she pulled up a computer sheet. "When did you guess it was related to the Russian coastal-reconnaissance flights?"*

*"I saw a picture in Life. It's sort of famous now. It shows a Russian holding up a Coke bottle in the fuselage window beneath the tail of a Bear reconnaissance bomber that two American jets were escorting away from the east coast. Those Bears sound almost exactly like the old B-36s, with their turbo-assisted prop-engines, which is what the B-36s had."*

*"And the serial number of the bomber was correct?"*

*"The numbers, yes," he said, remembering it well. "There was a symbol or word in Russian, but I didn't get it. But even now I can tell you where Bear bombers are. I can feel them." His voice was slow. He was staring out at the blue San Diego sky above the ocean. How he yearned to be out in those waves, sailing with Rhoanna. Maybe this new job will give me time, he thought.*

*"How old were you then?"*



*"Sixteen. It seems like yesterday, though."*

*"What about today?"*

*Nicholas looked searchingly into her eyes. "They're still out there," he said.*

*"Where?"*

*"Two hundred miles south southwest of San Diego. Fifty-five thousand feet. One bomber, close to Mach 1."*

*"You're sure of that?" She seemed as calm as a poker player.*

*"They're like flies to a piece of candy, Ms. Salazar," he said, leaning forward. "Our Seventh Fleet is on maneuvers in Hawaii. Those Bears are going to take some pictures."*

*Melissa Salazar smiled. She then did a few things with the computer at her desk. Within a few seconds a small line of data ran out in green formation across the computer's screen. She nodded to herself and switched it off.*

*"You're very good, Nick."*

*"And I got the job?"*

*"You got the job."*

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## Chapter Two

"SAL," NICHOLAS CALLEDout. "I smell flowers, Sal."

Somewhere inside, he knew that Melissa Salazar was not present to hear his words. But the flowers were there. Quince blossoms, marigolds, hydrangeas, phlox, lupine—all of a dozen colors and fragrances.

"Rhoanna," he breathed. Something in the flowers smelled of Rhoanna.

But she, too, was not there to hear him in his dreaming. A vision came to him of the hibiscus and the volley of snapdragons that grew outside their apartment in La Jolla. How he had loved those flowers! He saw her bending over them in her caftan bathrobe, nurturing them as if they were her children. Chrysanthemums, azaleas, camellias....

The powerful aroma of a forest of flowers and vines came to him. Slowly, they roused him from his dreaming of them.

Awake. Not awake. *What was he?*

He thought it curious that a sea of golden dandelions would be crushed beneath his mighty wheels as he rolled ever onward over a plain of green grass and delicate yellow flowers.

His wheels?*Rolling?*

He opened his eyes—or tried to, but felt no movement of his eyelids. Yet an image formed before him: a world that encompassed him with the colors, the sounds, and the sensations of spring. The sky was an

ocean azure, and pillowy cumulus clouds hung above like fleece shorn from Olympian sheep. The far-off hills bristled thick with woods, and at the base of those woods were gatherings of flowers and unfettered vines.

"Hello?" he called out searchingly.

He began exploring his sensations. He felt a sudden rush of helplessness—his flesh and bones weren't responding as flesh and bones. He was rolling. He stood upon wheels twice the height of a man, and he was moving across a wide valley. He could feel the tiny heads of dandelions going down beneath his wide, metal wheels.

He concentrated upon the rolling. The wheels.

He was inside something. A something that was alive—though made so by his own intelligence.

Moving his perceptions up from the wheels, he expanded his sensations to the widely spaced axles, then on up to the main body itself. It was an unfamiliar land craft. His body was long, broad, and very much like that of a crustacean, segmented and silver-plated. And he knew that he was heading, slowly, in a southerly direction through a valley that ran wild with columbine.

The shock of all this brought up a storm of conflicting emotions—the first of which was panic.

He'd been awake—if he could call it that—for about a week but only the influx of olfactory sensations from this particular meadow had brought him fully around.

He was outside!

Long had he slept in a dream of entrapment, the sort of dream that came from being contained somewhere for an incalculably long time. Images had been drifting across his preconscious mind for days: DefCon. The Bore's ceaseless tunneling. Lexie....

But they seemed ages past. A calamity of cherry blossoms assailed his perceptions from all sides of his sturdy, trundling form. The dark, womblike world of DefCon began to recede from his awareness.

*Where am I?* he screamed to himself. *What am I?*

"Hello!" he cried out again.

Voices came to him. The voices of women.

"Hush!" one said quickly. "He's coming out! Oh, great day!"

"Inform the rest of the Clan! Oh, hurry!"

"Shhh!" returned the first, more authoritative, voice. "We must be gentle with him."

A bolt of energy snapped suddenly through his body. A warm, soft female hand had touched his cheek. His cheek?

The colossal moving sensation that had enveloped his body-consciousness came to a halt. The craft had stopped.

The warm hand felt familiar, and its gentleness brought back another memory: Something burrowing. Cockroaches the size of dogs....

A girl's face drifted before him in the mists of memory, but fell back into the twilight world which had spawned it.

He opened his eyes—his *real* eyes.

"All praise to the Clans!" a woman in front of him said in a throaty voice. She clapped her hands, and grateful tears came to her eyes.

Nicholas tried to blink the illusion into focus. She was the most strikingly beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. Her hair was pure spun gold, and her skin glowed with a rich bronze tan.

Like the women gathered behind her, she wore a regal-looking kilt or short toga with a simple gold necklace around her throat. Her hands were strong and capable, and her figure full and robust. It had been this woman's hand which had graced his cheek so gently.

She bent over the couch in which he lay as the tears continued to trail down her cheeks. "Thank all the gods," she whispered. "It's been so long...."

Nicholas began to understand.

He was in something like a stasis couch; it was open, and a helmet of peculiar design cupped his head and the back of his neck. He blinked. He could still feel the large vehicle in which he moved, because the couch was tied into the computer, or unit, which propelled it along.

He was alive!

The golden woman touched him once again. There was an aura of ruggedness about her, though she appeared to be gentle. Confidence and strength added to her attractiveness. She was obviously the leader.

"Where am I?" he asked, or tried to.

In reply, she snapped her fingers and turned aside. Nicholas saw two servant girls rush over, bearing pitchers. Like their leader, they wore short kilts, and each was cast in bronze.

"Amazons," was the word that came to Nicholas's mind.

At the far end of the room stood a cluster of other women, all dressed similarly except for the addition of ribbons of various colors which probably denoted rank. They were of differing ages, but all were vigorous-looking.

Slowly, Nicholas sat up. The helmet was tight around his skull, but the pressure didn't bother him as much as his thirst. He took a goblet from the servant and downed it without considering that it might not be water.

Whatever it was, it quenched his thirst quickly, having the rejuvenating qualities of water—and something else besides. He felt the blood quicken in his tired body.

The servant withdrew, and the golden lady smiled at him. "I am Cesya."

She was quite close to him. Her breath smelled as fresh as a bouquet of flowers—flowers from the paradise beyond the windows of the craft in which he lay. Her eyes sparkled with golden flecks, and the tears she'd shed upon his awakening were gone. Her smile was like the sun rising to a new day.

"I..." He hesitated, finding his voice. "My name's—"

She touched him on the arm. Nothing must be rushed, the gesture seemed to say. There was plenty of time.

"You are Tejada," she said proudly. "You are in the Clantram Tejada, and you have brought us"—she paused and held her breath for an instant, briefly closing her eyes—"you have brought *me* great happiness by your awakening."

"Clantram *what* ?"

His name had tripped off her tongue as if she'd known Spanish inflections all her life. But it was the descriptive adjective which bothered him. *Clantram* Tejada.

With the woman's help, he carefully pulled off the bulky helmet, wires sliding from the skin of his temples and neck. He set it aside gently.

Cesya stood up. The suggestive form beneath her tunic sent arousing ripples throughout his own body as he gazed at her. "This is the Clantram Tejada, and we have been of your Clan since the beginning of time."

She spoke majestically, as if her words had been rehearsed and kept within her for the thirty-odd years of her life. Each word hung like a precious jewel full of value and meaning.

She continued, "It has been long believed that you would awaken like the Hearts of the other Clans upon the earth, but your sleep has lasted many, many lifetimes. You are *our* Heart," she smiled. "But you are *my* Heart as well. Please, tell us how you are feeling."

Nicholas craned his legs over the edge of the stasis couch, feeling very weak indeed. His head seemed to spin from a welter of detail. Hearts, Clantrams, flowers....

He realized, with an awful shock, that he must have been sleeping, like Rip Van Winkle, on that couch for thousands of years. He certainly felt like he had. Every one of those years creaked in his bones.

He stood up slowly on the cool metal of the floor. Suddenly his knees buckled. With a surprised cry he fell to the floor.

The women rushed to him and helped him to rise. He shook in Cesya's arms. She held him firmly.

"You must take things very slowly, Heart. You've been sleeping in the Unit for a very long time. Your body must take its time adjusting. Are you in need of medication?"

She was formal and considerate. He felt like a family heirloom newly discovered in an old attic.

"I'm fine," Nicholas told her. Her breasts were warm against his arm as she supported him. Her strength was both unexpected and welcome.

"How long have I been... like this?" He indicated the couch with a weak hand. "Where am I?"

There were crisscrosses of tiny crow's feet at the corners of Cesya's eyes that creased when she smiled.

"You have been with us for generations beyond generations. Even we don't remember. When the first Blossoms of the dead world bloomed, you were among the first to be found."

"Blossoms?"

Some of the women—the younger ones—giggled and were summarily shushed by the older ladies.

Cesya held Nick so that he could see out through the wide windows that lined the room. The view seemed to say it all.

"Oh, yes," she said with reverence. "The Blossoms gave us this beautiful world. All of our Hearts come from the Blossoms that the last empire left us. Because of you, we have survived."

Nicholas gazed beyond the window. The world beyond the Clantram was green, lush, and bounteous. The window through which he stared was entirely open—there was no glass or protective quartz. Air circulated freely, with it came the sensuous smells of the fields which surrounded them.

What was the half-life of uranium 235? Two hundred and fifty thousand years, he seemed to recall. What about all the reactor-core plutonium released in ground bursts? How long would that take to break down?

Two hundred and fifty thousand years! And much more.

Nicholas staggered to the window and took in a deep breath of air. The capillaries in his lungs seemed to sprout like the limbs of a tree. It was as if he hadn't breathed for millennia.

How could the world of DefCon—so eternally bleak on the outside, so unmitigatedly decadent on the inside—lead to this Edenic vision? Had a quarter of a million years gone by?

"Don't think, Heart," Cesya whispered gently into his ear. "You are where you belong—and it is no dream."

Nicholas stared at her closely. There was no malice in her eyes. She seemed all too willing to dote on his needs for the moment. Yet, there was an assumed connection between them he didn't comprehend.

"Heart," she had said. He was her Heart.

Cesya smiled, squinting in the wind as she leaned out the window. The breeze tugged softly at her featherlike golden hair. "Since I became leader of the Tejadas, you have been under my care. I have long awaited the day when I would be your wife. There were times when I dared not think it could come true. Now it has."

"My wife?" Nicholas said, stunned. "Now, wait a second. You're going way too fast for me. I just woke up. For a while I thought I was dead." He recalled the flight from DefCon, and the shark.

"I want some answers."

Just then he heard a voice from behind the other women. It was another voice of authority.

"Cesya! I have just heard the news!"

The women toward the rear of the compartment stepped aside, revealing a large portal where daylight slanted through. An elderly woman climbed in from a ladder stationed just outside the portal. When she gained the room she didn't look as old as he'd originally thought. Her uniform was very similar to Cesya's. Perhaps they were almost equal in rank.

Taken all together, these were a remarkable race. Their beauty, their vigor were unparalleled in his experience.

The older woman smiled when she saw that Nicholas was up and about. She moved toward him with an easy step that made him think that her apparent age was only a disguise.

"My goodness!" she grinned happily. "You've awakened fully." She gazed upon him with affection, as if he were a lost grandchild. "And you're in wonderful condition, too."

She began poking him in various places, feeling his arms. He backed away from her, bumping up against the stasis couch. "Hey," he cried in alarm, "watch it!"

The women in the compartment all broke out in laughter.

Cesya approached him reassuringly. "This is Ariuzu, our physician. She administers to all of our needs. She's been your guardian ever since she became our healer. You have no need to fear her."

In a strange, almost scary way, Ariuzu reminded him of his own grandmother—his mother's mother. She smiled kindly, and laughed a little. "Forgive my excitement, Nicholas. It is just my way. We have all lived for a moment like this. Can you understand?" Her voice sounded like that of a bird, a rather charming bird at that.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm new to all this."

Cesya touched him with a firm, yet tender hand. "This is a joyous occasion," she announced. "Your awakening has been foretold for centuries—and here you are!" She bubbled with ecstasy, hugging him. She then held him away from her and turned to her followers. "We will celebrate! Yes, this calls for a night of celebration!"

Her followers spoke to each other in excited tones, clapping their hands. But Ariuzu frowned and interceded.

"No, Cesya, not yet. The Clan must move on before we can pause for a celebration. It is the Law. We are days away from a Blossom, and besides, Nicholas is very new to us, and we to him. He is like a newborn child, and we must initiate him gently into our ways. We will stop when we get to a place of Blossoming—unless you wish to incur the wrath of a Keeper."

A sudden, almost deadly silence struck the women in the compartment. The younger girls cowered at the mention of the Keeper.

Cesya lost some of her enthusiasm and almost seemed to pout, but her regal bearing was unshaken. "You are right, Ariuzu. I respect your wisdom. It isn't every day that a woman gets a mate who's been sleeping for centuries. I can wait."

"Very good," the elderly physician said.

Nicholas, who had been sitting on the edge of the stasis couch, stood up. "Wait a second," he broke in. "Don't I have any say in this?" They had spoken of him as if he were tribal property, and he didn't like it.

He recalled how little Lexie had treated him upon his initial awakening, and where such presumption led.

Cesya touched him. "You are entirely at the center of our universe, Heart. You may say anything you wish." Her eyes were very kind.

Her candor and consideration were disarming.

"But, for now," she continued. "we will move our Clantrams on. Relax and let Ariuzu tend to your physical discomforts."

The servant girls withdrew to another part of the craft. The other women stepped down the ladder

outside, leaving Ariuzu and Cesyra alone with Nick in the large imperial chamber.

As the others were leaving the craft, a woman of about Cesyra's age entered from a room at the fore of the vehicle. She wore a headpiece that came down completely across one eye, looking as if it was part computer and part vision-assembly. She had the look of bad news about her.

"Mistress, the Unit has received warning of a Violation of movement," the woman said.

Nicholas glanced through the door and saw that she had come from the cockpit of the vehicle. A computer, with its many-colored lights, showed through the door. A single bucket seat was in front of it.

"A Violation?" Cesyra suddenly looked ill. "Is a Keeper *that* close?"

"Apparently. I recommend that we proceed at once." The woman had given Nicholas a sidelong glance, but retained the air of a good pilot waiting for instructions. He found the device over her eye rather disconcerting.

"Then move the Clan onward. There will be no Violation as long as we are moving. Try to locate a Blossom for us. The Keepers will not bother us for more than a day if we reach a place of Blossoming. *We must* celebrate."

Then the pilot did smile somewhat. There was a sense of camaraderie here that Nicholas had yet to fathom.

The pilot returned to her room, and moments later the whole craft shook as the Clantram fell into gear. Nicholas went over to the windows. Both women watched him as if they were great-aunts and he a youngish nephew seeing his country estate for the first time.

Their Clantram made a wide, languid turn, and Nick could see that it led a long line of vehicles. There were twenty-five Clantrams riding on very large wheels that moved ponderously, but efficiently, over the grassy ruffles of the meadow.

It was a caravan of sorts, and Nicholas could see the women who had been present at his peculiar awakening running back to their own trams. They seemed as agile as creatures of the African veldt, bounding up ladders which were quickly drawn inside the open portals. The engines of the machines were amazingly quiet—even where he stood, he could hear the joyful cries and shouts of the bronze women in the other vehicles.

Ariuzu came to him as he stood looking out at the new world. "Nicholas, you must relax. I know there are many questions in your mind, but there is time to learn all the right answers. If you will come with me, I will show you your chambers."

There was something soothing in her voice which harmonized with the sounds of the Clantram engines and wheels as they moved along. Perhaps the liquid he had drunk had something to do with how he felt. But he no longer felt threatened. There was so much space out there! DefCon had long since disappeared. That horrible world was gone.

In an odd way, he felt at home.

Behind him, Cesyra stood watching. Eden was never like this.

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## Chapter Three

THEY TRAVELED ACROSS what seemed to Nicholas an endlessly beautiful panorama of plains and low, forest-studded hills. They journeyed for days on end, rarely stopping, even at night.

The Clantrams, all twenty-five of them, kept their slow, steady passage over the earth at an intentionally calculated crawl. The wheels turned slowly, but turn they did. As far as Nicholas could tell, they had no particular destination. They followed the contours of the land, forded rivers where they appeared, and avoided large mountains or thick forests. The computer—or Unit—acted like something of a forward scout. It always knew where to go, and where not to go. Roads were nonexistent, and nowhere could Nicholas find any sign of civilization.

That a world such as this could have descended from a past that had known a full-scale nuclear exchange seemed impossible. Still, the sunlight seemed wan and tired, supporting the facts. Hundreds of thousands of years had indeed gone by.

The Unit of the Clantram, though, was remarkably poor in information. It contained no history, no dates of importance—merely guided them through this innocent world.

Ariuzu insisted that his first days and weeks with the Clan be as stressless as possible, and Nicholas took that as a tacit hint that few questions were to be asked, and even fewer answers given. Nicholas protested, but the medication he'd been given to revitalize his body kept those protests from being effective. It fired him up, yet calmed him down. For the time being, it was enough to enjoy paradise as the Clans lumbered over the earth.

Cesya was with him often, mostly during meals, which were taken always in motion—but the meals were long and pleasant. She had developed some patience in her courtship, for she expressed no immediate need for any kind of union, either social or physical. Ariuzu also insisted upon this time of peace.

Their search for a place of Blossoming—whatever that was—continued. The medication continued. Nicholas felt much better. Cesya was playful with him when she had the time. Her duties were many and mysterious, often taking her to the other vehicles.

During their third week of steady continuous travel an incident occurred which caused Cesya so much concern that Nick felt it necessary—if only for his future survival—to immediately wring some history of the Clans out of her.

His chambers were in the rear of the lead Clantram, next to Cesya's and Ariuzu's. He had been sailing in the euphoric effects of his medication, lost in the Clantram's easy swaying, when the vehicle ground to a halt. It was a clear, starry night. Nicholas put on his kilt, and stepped outside in the corridor. Cesya had been in her own bower, preparing herself for sleep, and emerged obviously alarmed.

"What is it?" he asked.

Then the lights in the vehicle went out entirely and the engines cut off—or were intentionally shut down. He couldn't tell.

They passed through the large stasis chamber which was now strewn with ornately decorated pillows. The couch had been disassembled. Ariuzu came out of her chamber in a bulky robe, sleep crusted in her eyes. There was a quiet commotion in the maids' chambers.

The pilot—a different woman this time—was sitting in front of the Unit control board. The cockpit lights



were also out, but a single screen glowed palely before her.

Cesya and Nick stepped into the small room. "You found a Keeper," were Cesya's first words. "Where?"

"No, mistress," the pilot said in a low voice. "It's another Clan."

Cesya gasped. Night sounds came to them from the outside. They stared through the fore window. Cesya then made a gesture to the pilot, and the woman turned the screen off. In the complete dark they were able to see much more of the night before them.

All of the Clantrams behind them in the convoy had also been brought to a halt. The Unit had shut every craft down.

When his eyes adjusted to the dark night, Nick could see a row of lights off in the distance. The string of tiny dots, like luminous points on a centipede, made their sluggish way across the terrain. A long cone of light forged out ahead of the Clantram in the lead.

"They must not know that we are here," the pilot said. She seemed to be watching them through the device which covered her right eye.

Cesya's breathing increased ever so slightly. Nicholas couldn't figure out what the problem was.

She said softly, "If there is a Keeper nearby, there will be two less Clans upon the earth."

The Clantrams moving silently along the starry horizon gave no indication that they had seen the Tejadas.

The pilot turned away from the window and pressed a button on a console to her left. She spoke to the Unit itself. "Are we in Violation of the Law? Speak."

The Unit responded in a flat, uninspired voice. "There is no Violation recorded."

Cesya pressed the Unit's input button. "Can you identify the Clan?"

The Unit responded instantly. It seemed there was no need for deliberation. "It is the Seibert Clan," it said. "Heading south southwest. I recommend proceeding without attempting contact."

"It's better that they don't know we're here," the pilot said in a low voice. There was no fear in her speech, merely professional judgment.

Cesya nodded, heeding the computer's sage council. She pressed the button once again. "Are there any Keepers in the vicinity?" Her voice was somewhat steadier now that the Seibert Clan was moving on without any sign that they had spotted the Tejadas.

"None," the Unit said.

Ariuzu, who had been standing in the doorway behind them, turned and walked back to her chambers. Cesya stood up in the thick darkness of the cockpit.

"Good," she breathed. "Very good." She kept her eyes on the horizon, and put her hand on the pilot's shoulder. "Proceed without lights, half-speed. Watch the Seiberts. When they have passed out of range give us half an hour, and then return lights to the Clan. The night air is clear tonight; our running lights might be seen from over the hills. We don't want that. They might turn and follow."

"Yes, mistress," the pilot said.

With a deft twitch of a lever, the Clantram's engines once again started up, and the wheels began easing the huge vehicle along as silently as they could manage.

On the way back to their chambers, Nicholas pulled Cesyra aside. Even in the darkness, it was a gesture the bronze leader didn't like.

"What was that all about?" He gestured with his thumb over his shoulder.

She stood close to him. The windows seemed to let in an ethereal light that allowed Nicholas to make out her face and form. The stars were very bright.

Cesyra's expression was weighted with grief and responsibility—and not a little fear. She lowered her head and walked back with him to her chambers. The night seemed to shroud her with all the mysterious problems of her mysterious world.

For the first time, she led him to her large bed. The perfumes of the springtime world outside drifted in through the open windows.

"Heart, had you not been there beside me just then," she whispered, "I would have died from grieving."

"Why?"

"The Clans are not allowed to meet until mating time. It is strictly forbidden. Had there been a Keeper nearby tonight, it would have destroyed both Clans, even though our encounter was totally accidental." Cesyra walked around the bed.

Nicholas watched her shadow as she removed her kilt, her feet making small sounds on the cool floor. She said, "I would not have lived knowing that the Seiberts were so close, if you had not been with me. My own mating time is running out." Nicholas sat down on the edge of the bed as Cesyra climbed in beneath the covers. There was a soft hissing as she slid between the silken sheets.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why can't you contact the other Clans? Who's to stop you?" It was the American in him speaking: Do what you want, any time you want, wherever you want. But he realized that America had long since vanished, cast down to join the trilobites and the brittle bones of Pliocene horses.

Cesyra spoke from the curves of her pillow. "The Keepers of the Law prevent us."

Beyond the window, the Milky Way glistened iridescently, as it had for millions of years. To Nicholas, the world had seemed pure and innocent, redeemed. But the somber tone in Cesyra's voice was beginning to alter that naive assumption.

"Population control," he muttered.

"Something like that," she said sadly. "That is why we segregate the men in our Clantrams. They are in the last Clantram."

That was the answer to one of his many questions.

"It was the Judgment that followed the years of Blossoming centuries past. The Law says that there shall be no more war."

"I can understand that," he said. "But, damn it, look at the world, Cesyra. It's completely healed. You have a whole new planet to enjoy. My God, you could start all over."

He had told them of his own world, and the world he'd miraculously awoken to at DefCon. No one in the Clans knew how much time had passed since then. Half a million years? A million? He explained what nuclear war was all about: Extinction. Nothing less. Now that they had a second chance, they could atone for all the mistakes of the past.

Cesya turned on her pillow, lowering the silken sheet past her breasts. "My man from the past," she breathed. He could see her smile even in the darkness. "So full of energy. So full of aggressions."

"I wasn't born into this world," he told her. "I can't accept the Judgment."

"Men cause war, not women," Cesya said, sitting up. "Matings must be kept to a minimum. There are enough Clans upon the earth to ensure our overall survival. The gene pool is diverse and healthy. Unless the Law is broken by a great many Clans, there is no need to worry."

Nicholas could smell the natural scents of the golden woman's hair. "You'll understand if I do worry. I don't like being told what to do and what not to do."

"Heart," Cesya breathed low, bending toward him. "Sleep and be at peace. This DefCon of which you speak was only one of many civilizations which rose and fell to the touch of nuclear fires. We do not allow ourselves the luxury of ambition anymore."

"It's not a luxury," he protested. "It's a necessity. It's what makes a man keep going."

Cesya met his mouth with a warm, passionate kiss.

"You are my Heart," she whispered. "That is all that matters now. I could have found a mate with the Seiberts, or with any of the other Clans, but the prophecies have delivered you to me. When we arrive at a Blossom site and can celebrate on the very skin of the earth, you will see that all is not as bad as you would make it. The wars are thousands upon thousands of years behind us. The underground civilizations are long gone. Leave them where they belong, Heart. Leave them where time has buried them."

He took her into his arms and kissed her. Everything moved around him at its own inexorable pace. Being with her seemed so right. She made it so easy to forget.

It was a nearly perfect world out there—but only because someone had long ago decided to keep it that way.

Such was the spectre that haunted their love-making.

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## Chapter Four

THE DRUG WAS called *gohhe*. The people of the Clan consumed it in just about everything they ate or drank. It was also their chief medication, and Ariuzu administered it freely. It took away much of Nick's anxieties about his relationship with Cesya and with the rest of the Clan.

His nights with Cesya only exacerbated his guilt. He knew that he was special to the Clan, but his brief stay in DefCon had taught him the disadvantages of being special. But none of these women seemed to mind. Perhaps the *gohhe* placated them—perhaps they needed it, like his former hosts needed *genna*, in order to make their lives bearable. Life in the Clantrams could be dull.

Because of the ever-present drug, Nick had begun to have doubts about his new life, although he didn't

quite know what could be done about it. He didn't like the idea of being master of the Tejada Clan, even if the title was only honorary. Cesyra was the true leader, and his role was to impregnate her—when the Law stipulated.

On this, everyone seemed in silent agreement. It wasn't so much a conspiracy among the women as a general sense of concord and purpose. Cesyra's regard for Nicholas was sacrosanct and dear. But he couldn't escape his own feelings of moral outrage, knowing the men of the Clan were sitting in the back of the bus. Despite what Cesyra and the other women thought of him, he knew he wasn't *that* special.

The *gohhe* kept him in a state of light-headedness during his waking hours. All of the food and water came from the Unit on each tram, and *gohhe* flavored everything. Still, nothing tasted artificial, and it only took a little bit of effort on his part to forget that everything was entirely manufactured.

He was constantly amazed by the capacities of the Unit and of the qualities of *gohhe*. Unfortunately or not, he could escape neither, and he found it difficult to think of the future because of the comfort they gave.

A few days after the encounter with the Seibert Clan, late in the afternoon, Nicholas found himself in Cesyra's bower, watching an exotic bird carve his name in the sky. The bird was of fantastic proportions, condorlike, with a golden bill and frilly golden wings. It had an unusual territorial call that sounded to him like "Wake up! Wake up!"

The tapestry of the sky swelled with a delightful orange as the Clantram finally came to a halt. It took several minutes for this to register, but eventually Nicholas rose and looked out at an unchanging landscape. The family of Clantrams had come around a bend in a wide meadow that was surrounded by a forest of rich maples and pines which covered a ring of low hills. The meadow, the forest, everything about the landscape, resonated with life.

At first he thought they had encountered another Clan, but when Cesyra returned from the pilot's compartment, it was evident that nothing so potentially dangerous as that had happened.

"Heart!" she said. "Wonderful news! We have stumbled upon a Blossom, and I've just sent word to the other Clantrams. Tonight we are going to celebrate!" She pulled him onto the bed with a squeal of delight. "We shall have great fun!" Her eyes glowed with a pagan sexuality.

She hugged him warmly, and the firmness of her breasts against his chest excited him. "And," she continued, "it is long past time for you to meet the full Clan. Come!"

There was by then a great deal of commotion inside the various compartments of the tram as the servant girls moved about. The Clantram was being unloaded.

He and Cesyra stood at the open portal, several feet off the ground, watching the girls run across the eternally green meadow in their short kilts. They screamed with laughter; their sandals kicked up the shorn heads of flowers.

All of the individual Clantrams were unloading. Ladders had extended from various openings along the hulls of the peculiar crafts, and women were stepping down into the meadow.

Nicholas lowered himself into the meadow, feeling tingly and light-headed. Above him, Cesyra smiled. Ariuzu stood beside her, gazing out over the pristine world.

Nicholas knelt and ran his hand through the strange blades of grass. It was cool to the touch, and while it was different from any kind of sage he'd known in his own time, it was nonetheless real.

He heard the chuckling waters of a stream in the distance. A bird—a different one this time—rose on an unseen gust of air and kited over them dreamily. Slender and sleek, it let out a marvelous twitter. The clouds, abstract and bizarre, were marble-white. Never in his life had he known a landscape as perfect as this. Even the ancient sun floated at the sky's rim with a peace and majesty that seemed to have transcended the agony that mankind had suffered for thousands of years. The meadow was a place where the dreams of Eden could come true.

"A very great day," Cesya heartily breathed, stepping down from the extended ladder. "A great day for us all!" She walked past him, out into the meadow. The servant girls followed at a respectful distance.

The Clantrams were there to stay—for a while. Portable cranes unloaded objects from the vehicles, and servants ferried them out into the meadow on small, wheeled carts. The light of sunset glowed orange on the gleaming hulls of the Clantrams.

Nicholas glanced back at the lead Clantram and saw that his name was stenciled distinctly across its prow: TEJADA. It seemed weathered, but looked as if it were meant to last.

He turned his attention toward the last Clantram, which was nearly half a mile away, sunk down somewhat in the grassy contours of the meadow. Forest flanked it, and standing there the vehicle looked rather isolated.

The men of the Clan began climbing out of it. He found it curious that they did not—as some of the women had—come over to check him out. They had to have known that their Heart had awakened.

Instead, they all headed off into the woods.

He was constantly interrupted while he stood marveling at the wonders of the world around him. Various women and servant girls came up to him for the first time. All were shy and polite. They told him their names and made some small comment, and he nodded and smiled in response.

It made him feel a little uneasy. He hoped that after a while either he would get used to the attention or they would stop making such a fuss over him.

Cesya was instructing a young girl in the proper way of going about setting up a royal buffet. Nicholas stepped over a very small creek and walked up beside her. Two men had emerged from the forest and came up to the small group.

"Good afternoon, Holte," Cesya said to the first man.

Holte was quite tall and looked like a hero out of a Scandinavian song cycle. His blond hair flowed to the small of his back, and his stride across the grasses was long and assured.

The man behind him was much shorter, and his hair was a russet color. His arms were as thick as tree stumps and his chest, while of the same bronze tint, boasted a mat of hair like twisted nails. They were a strange pair, but had Nick seen them first upon waking in the stasis couch, he would have assumed it was they who were in command.

"Nicholas," Holte said, by way of greeting.

The shorter man, grinning like a mandrill ape, shuffled along in the turf behind him. "Hi!" he waved gregariously.

Cesya stepped between them.

"Holte," she said sternly to the tall man, "you understand that the Law must not be violated during the celebration."

Holte sighed heavily, mimicking frustration. Despite his obviously secondary role in the Clan, he seemed a man of humor.

"Yes, mistress," he said.

The squat red-haired man winked at Nick, grinning foolishly. Nick thought he recognized that grin, but he hadn't been to a zoo in years.

He could see that Holte held what little authority there was among the men. Cesyra spoke. "I don't want anything left behind for a Keeper to stumble upon. Nothing must be forcibly removed from the forest or the meadow itself."

"I understand," Holte acknowledged. He kept looking at Nicholas, but his smile was remarkably guarded, his face blank as a rock.

Cesyra ignored the men's expressions and continued giving Holte his orders of the day. "I want plenty of fruits and nuts, if you can find them," she said. "I've instructed some other servants to assist you in this chore."

"Yes, mistress. It will be done. Is there anything else?"

"That is all for now," she said in a stately fashion. "There is only one hour before twilight, so be off with you."

"Yes, Cesyra," Holte bowed. "I'll see to it immediately."

Holte waved to Nicholas in a friendly manner. "Talk with you later," he said.

"Maybe," Cesyra reminded him of his station.

"Whatever," Holte concluded. "There is time." The short, stumpy man stumbled backward as Holte turned to go. "This way, Zane," he commanded as if ordering a dog. "We have much work to do!"

Zane clapped his hands once and called, "See you later!" to Nick. They bounded off like prairie animals, pleased to be set free. *See you later?* It was a voice Nicholas thought he'd heard before.

"They know me," he said to Cesyra who'd already turned away from them, returning to her duties for the celebration.

"Everyone knows you, Heart. Just ignore them. They are not important." But her tone was defensive, as if he'd just witnessed something he shouldn't have.

"How can I ignore them? You treat them like slaves."

In Nick's mind the implications were clear. By extension, logic suggested that if all of the men of the Clan were slaves in some way, then he too was a slave.

But Cesyra laughed with genuine innocence. "Slaves? Nicholas, my Heart, we are all slaves to the Keepers of the Law. It's just that the men have certain things to do right now. There will be time later to get to know them better."

Nicholas lowered himself onto a large, satin pillow next to Cesyra. The *gohhe* was exhausting him. "That's

not what I meant, exactly," he informed her.

Cesya rubbed him on the shoulders and leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Nicholas, we all have our places in the scheme of things. None of the men mind their roles. Nor will you." She hugged him tightly. "I will see to it personally," she whispered.

The servant girls around them giggled.

His original impression that these women were Amazons had not been entirely correct. Certain fears and taboos governed their lives to such a powerful degree that they had no true control over their destinies, despite their apparent freedom to roam. It was clear that neither Holte nor Zane were slaves as he would have used the term.

It was possible that Holte and the others were not meant for the women of this Clan. Nicholas knew enough about human nature to realize that where men and women were mixed together, there was always an undercurrent of sexual interaction.

Still, neither man had given beautiful Cesya the once-over. He couldn't understand it. For as simple a life as they led, there seemed to be a metaphysic he could not penetrate—some internal logic to their actions. His degree had been in philosophy, not anthropology, but at this late date neither discipline seemed relevant.

Cesya continued giving orders to the girls, and Nicholas watched them bounce through the meadow. To him, they all seemed like vestal virgins—a whole race of untainted nymphs.

Cesya turned to him. "Now, I want you to relax, Nicholas. This whole evening is entirely for you. Or for us, I should say." She smiled, sitting beside him. She was covered with a fine sweat which made her come alive to him. "Let none of what you see bother you. We shall handle everything."

He looked inquiringly at her. "I can't help what I feel. There is so much that I need to know about you people."

"The answers will come when they are truly needed," she said.

Which Nicholas took to mean: "They'll arrive when I say they are ready to arrive."

He had a curious urge to reply, "Yes, mistress."

He shivered slightly in the face of her directness. It was clear that she was the Boss—and that he was the Clan's sacred cow. The *gohhe* in his system made it easier to suppress his anxieties, but he knew that cows had a tendency to find themselves at some point swinging upside down from a meathook.

By the time the aging sun had sunk behind the forested hills, a mountain of wood had been assembled by the collective efforts of the men and women of the Clan. The twilight had gone from orange to red to purple, but the land became no cooler as the night gently set.

The women of the Clan had surrounded the pile of timber with small plastic tables at which pillows and cushions were placed. Blankets of a synthetic material covered the ground beneath them. The ambience of the scene reminded Nicholas of a bacchanalia, except that it wasn't ancient Greece. The image was so apt, though, that he wondered if mankind had progressed any in these thousands upon thousands of years. What were the cultural measuring rods of a civilization such as this?

Then he realized again how lucky the Clans were. To recover from a full-scale nuclear war was thought impossible in his own time. He was thankful that he was out in the open breathing fresh air, even if it did

seem like a scene out of *Daphnis and Chloe*.

Then the effects of the drug took him back to the loved ones he had left behind in the long spiral of time. His friends, his family were so far lost to the past that they weren't even dust anymore. Their bones would have returned to their elementary atoms by now. And Rhoanna...

A wave of pity and sorrow swelled up inside him, for he felt profoundly guilty that it had been he who had survived. The whole thing seemed like a dream, the mushroom clouds so distant.

A purple arc of light was all that was left of the day. A scattering of diamondlike stars graced the evening sky, when Cesya rose suddenly, in the midst of Nicholas's heartbreaking thoughts, and commanded everyone's attention. A torch was handed to her by a young servant girl.

"Tonight, we of the Tejada Clan celebrate the awakening of our Heart!" she shouted for all around the wood pile to hear. Her voice was strong and husky. "It is only fitting that in this sacred place of Blossoming we should herald a new beginning for our Clan. Tonight we rejoice in our great good fortune. Let the festivities begin!"

She spun around and tossed the torch into the gathered firewood. Her symbolic gesture was followed by other torches, and soon the bonfire soared.

Shouts of joy went up among the members of the Clan, and Nicholas squinted in the yellow light of the gargantuan fire. All eyes were upon him. Cesya leaped back to her place next to him. A trill of glee escaped her, and she hugged him to much applause and approval from the Clan.

The evening meal began. Nicholas started to relax a bit as woman after woman came to have an audience with Cesya. Cesya introduced each one to him formally, and told him of their respective functions within the Clan.

Nicholas noticed that the men were stationed here and there among the large circle that surrounded the bonfire. They shared tables and mats with the women, and nowhere was he given the overt impression that they were second-class citizens. In fact, they chatted with their neighbors amiably and didn't appear in any way resentful of their segregation.

The physician, Ariuzu, was seated to Cesya's left. She had dressed ornately for the celebration. She was very dignified. In the fire's dancing light she looked as Cesya might in years to come. She watched over Nicholas as he continued to sample the palatable wine.

The pilot of the lead Clantram came out of the darkness behind them and crouched where she could whisper to Cesya. Cesya was holding a goblet of wine.

"Mistress," the pilot began, still wearing her eye-gear. "We are secure for the night. The Unit has reported that a Keeper is three days to the north."

Cesya took a meditative sip of elixir, considering the pilot's words. "Did the Unit say who the Keeper is tracking? It doesn't sound close enough to be on our trail."

The pilot said, "We have no violations that warrant the presence of a Keeper. The Unit was quite clear on that count, mistress. The Unit says that only two other Clans are in the vicinity, the Zaffina Clan and the Mitsios Clan. The Keeper might be confused."

"Or it just might be wandering," Ariuzu said calmly.

Cesya concurred. "Yes, it could just be wandering about, looking for violations at random. Three days is



a very good sign, though. If we're secure for the night, then you may join us."

"Thank you, mistress," the pilot said, standing. "A little relaxation would do me good." The pilot removed her strange eye-patch and shook out the folds of her hair. Nicholas watched her bountiful tresses sway hypnotically in the firelight. She then ran off and found some associates—other Clan pilots, Nicholas noticed.

A bit drunk, he turned toward Cesya and the aged physician.

"Just who are these Keepers you people are so afraid of? I don't get it." He reached for another goblet of wine.

Cesya stared off into the entrancing yellow-gold of the fire. Shadows played across her face in such a way that Nicholas could not determine her mood. She certainly wasn't drunk yet. She nodded distantly, then looked at him.

"You don't really want to know," she said.

"Trust me," he responded, licking the wine from his lips. The goblet struck the table soundly as he set it down.

"Allow me, mistress," Ariuzu said, placing a discreet hand upon her leader's bare shoulder. She began, "Cesya has informed you of our fertility cycles and the Judgment?"

Nicholas broke open the strange fruit in front of him. "Yes," he said. "We discussed population control. Was it something that the Keepers came up with on their own?"

"No, the Keepers are only watching over us. The Judgment was handed down centuries ago. So long ago, Nicholas, that no one really knows when it first started. We have been simply allowed to wander the earth until there is no more need for the Keepers of the Law."

"Sure," Nick began. "But what I want to know is *who* are they? Are they policemen? Hell, why can't you people reason with them?" He was feeling suddenly bold.

It was Cesya who answered this time. "Because the very sight of a Keeper means death. We must always keep out of the path of a Keeper, or at least avoid the places where one is known to lurk."

Nicholas pondered his goblet. In the few weeks he had been awake, he had grown a mustache and beard, and on the convex sides of the silver goblet he resembled a portrait of Francis Bacon—wise, fiercely intellectual man hopelessly at odds with the times which had fostered him.

"Well, hasn't anyone ever tried to stop them? There's no reason for you to live in Clantrams all of your lives, is there?"

Ariuzu adjusted the folds of her elegant robe. She spoke with the sure voice of matriarchal authority. "There are many legends among our Clans about those who have attempted to conquer the Keepers, or of those who have defied the Laws by living upon the earth in cities. But they've always come to the same end. The Keepers are here to prevent any more wars. The Makers of the Laws decreed that there should be no more war. And the Keepers obey that Law."

The singular perversity of the concept of forced migration in order to prevent wars impressed him. If ownership of land, and the subsequent human need for more, was the usual reason for hostilities, then it followed that the ownership of land should be absolutely forbidden. There would be no cities, no states, no nations. Unfortunately, as Nicholas could see, there would also be no advancement of science or

technology. And if mating was allowed only at certain times of the year, then the species itself would not progress genetically—regardless of the size of the gene pool.

With a touch of horror—and anger—Nicholas realized that these people were a sterile legacy given to the future by a past so remote that its chief representatives, the Keepers, had become spectres, tribal ghosts whose duty it was to prevent them from making the same mistakes all over again. What made things worse was the fact that Ariuzu and Cesya—and the whole wandering bunch of them—accepted the situation. The Law was the Law, no matter how one considered it.

He pushed away a plate of sweetmeats. A servant girl refilled his glass. "Well, damn it, I still think that—"

Cesya stopped him. "Heart," she whispered kindly but firmly, "your place isn't to think. No one is to do the thinking but me. Trust in our ways and customs. You've been sleeping for so very long, and we don't want to crush you with the weight of responsibilities that are not yours."

Nicholas glared openly at her.

Her eyes glistened not only with sincerity, but with authority. He'd seen those eyes before, he suddenly realized. Rhoanna had laid down the law like this. Surely Cesya didn't think that he was a threat to her leadership?

Or perhaps wars had been reduced, by some quirk of circumstances, from an intercontinental level down to a personal, more emotional, one. Wars like these had been fought forever and no manner of Keeper could keep the combatants away from each other's throats. This was the war between the sexes.

"But how do you *know*?" he demanded, ignoring her admonition. The wine was going down more smoothly, and quicker. "How the holy hell do you know that a Keeper's out there? What does the Unit use? Radar? Laser detection? Infrared, or what? You know, the Unit isn't the sharpest computer I've seen." He waved a sliver of fruit in the air. "But that's not the point. The point is, you haven't even *seen* them."

Some of the very young servant girls turned away with embarrassment. Nicholas's voice had gotten a bit too loud, and even the older women were bearing his tirade with difficulty. But he didn't care. It was the age-old American in him speaking out. He believed in freedom and volition. Slavery between men and women, or between some bugaboo out of the past and the Clans, was incomprehensible to him. And indefensible.

"It is the fire," Ariuzu said solemnly. "The fire in the sky."

Cesya lowered her head. She glanced up at Nicholas as the rest of the women returned to their private conversations.

"Heart," she said gently. "Your ways do not belong here, but that is not your fault. They are millennia old and can only bring grief in the long run." She sighed. "*We have* one direct Clan experience with the Keepers. The Gods bless us every day that we have not lived through another such experience. It belongs to Ariuzu to tell the story."

Ariuzu, shadowed by the orange light of the fire, looked at him as she began. "I was only a young girl, and the Tejadas were hundreds of miles north of here, near the great ice sheets. There were more Clans then than there are now, and the Keepers are the reason for our decrease. We knew the Waine Clan was going to attempt to ford the Perseus Glacier. You see, the whole world is linked by the great northern ice sheets, and the Waine Clan thought they could move to a different continent, away from the Keepers. One night I was walking with my father beside a river. Our Clantram was waiting."

She paused, as if remembering the waters of that wooded creek. Then she resumed. "Suddenly the sky to the north was filled with a terrible light, stronger than the borealis. A day later, our Clan was nearly wiped off of the earth by the floods of melted ice which followed. We have never forgotten that spring. The rains changed our wanderings, but the Keepers were always there to see that we obeyed the Law. No one has ever reported the Waine Clan at any of the mating rituals. We believe that they are gone from the earth."

He got the picture. This was definitely no Eden.

"Christ," Nicholas whispered. "You people are in bad shape."

Cesya suddenly laughed. "Heart, you are the funny one. Don't let Ariuzu's stories scare you like a little child. We are taken care of wonderfully, and we do obey the Law. Had we not obeyed the Law, we would not now have you among us."

Nicholas stared at her. "I don't understand. What do I have to do with it?"

"You are the Heart of our Clan," Cesya said. "All of the Hearts taken from the original Blossom have long since awakened, lived out their fruitful lives, and passed on. You were the last. No one knows why you slept so long, or why you awakened now, but those of us alive today are thankful that we were ordained to see your awakening. It bodes well for us."

Somewhat fuzzed out on the wine, Nicholas was still able to get a clear vision of what she was talking about: the stasis couches.

If he had survived, so had the others at Hill Air Force Base.

The pilot, only moments ago, had mentioned two other Clans nearby. Zaffina. Mitsios. And the Seiberts were the ones who'd passed them in the night several days ago. Back in the underground facility, he had been too rushed to escape from the shark—and Lexie—to read the names of his sleeping comrades. But who were they originally? *Zaffina. Mitsios. Seibert.* And many, many others.

Sleeping beauties, he thought. Because of them, each Clan had been kept alive.

He could almost see a couch labeled: "Martin." Rhoanna Martin.

Cesya spoke quickly, as if she had seen his mind drift away from her words. She put a warm hand to his thigh, close to the hem of his kilt. Underneath it, he wore nothing.

She said, "All of the Clans take after their Hearts. The Blossom to the far west where we found you is now one of our most sacred mating places. We will journey back there in a few years."

Nicholas's heart crashed in his chest as he fought the wine—and the painful memories. His anxieties seemed so trenchant that he wondered if he'd ever recover from the shock of his situation.

His goblet was filled again by a shy servant on the command of their leader.

"Why do you call them Blossoms?" He gestured about the meadow and the majestic bonfire.

Cesya, for a change, seemed happy and proud to provide him with concrete information. "It was the great wisdom of the long-dead ones to give the earth another chance at life. When the last wars ended and the death fires cooled, Blossoms planted with foresight and hope all over the earth sprouted! And this is the site of one of them. They are very sacred places for us, for here all life was given another chance."

Nicholas understood, only too well. The statement carried all the hidden meaning of a double metaphor: He was in their society to stay—but only on their terms. He was Cesya's Heart. This place of Blossoming had become, upon his awakening, a place for Cesya's own emotional and spiritual survival, a place of redemption, not only for the race, but for her as well.

An odd memory was triggered just then by the association of the word "Blossom" with all its metaphorical luggage. When he was a boy growing up in Los Angeles, he had befriended a retired aerospace engineer who lived down the street. Sometimes Mr. Simic took Nick up into the mountains northwest of the San Fernando Valley on summer evenings when the air was cool and distracting. Nicholas loved it.

It was in those mountains that the Rocketdyne Corporation test-fired rocket engines. Their pink and crimson plumes could be seen for thirty miles or more across the valley in the sunset. Those engines, terrifying to a ten-year-old, were the products of a sinister intelligence that seemed to be more in the business of scaring young children than protecting America from the nasty Russians.

One August night they drove far into those eucalyptus-covered mountains, hoping to sneak a closer look at the tests. Mr. Simic, well into his seventies, confessed to Nicholas that there had been a project he had worked on called Phoenix. It was a missile system so nefarious that the government eventually decided against ever putting it into use. But it was still to be kept a deep, dark secret.

The Phoenix missile was designed to be installed deep within heavily protected silos within cities like Los Angeles and New York—not out on the plains of Montana and Wyoming. When the ashes of a nuclear war subsided, days or weeks later, these missiles, like their ancient mythical counterpart, would suddenly rise from the debris and soar toward an unsuspecting enemy.

Old Mr. Simic had told Nicholas this with all the solemnity of a blood brother. As far as Nicholas could see, there would be no one left in America to appreciate such a brilliant tactic. What few Russians there would be left would be caught by surprise. But, so what?

Whether such missiles were ever built and placed in secret in the centers of America's major cities, Nicholas never found out. But the ironic slant was all too clear. Perhaps—instead of Phoenix missiles being buried to later seek revenge after the hot clouds had dissipated—someone had built giant "pods" which contained seeds and spores of every plant that existed. Perhaps some of the Blossoms might also hold animal life in stasis, so that when the radiation levels finally subsided and the Blossoms popped open, life could go on. It was a far happier concept than the Phoenix.

Nicholas couldn't see much in the darkness beyond the light of the bonfire, but he was aware of the generally circular nature of the meadow. The loam upon which they sat was thick and encrusted with meadow-life. It was indeed a sacred place. Life was abundant. Moths flickered in and out of the bonfire's halo, and a bird of the night cried far off in the hills. The world was once again teeming.

He tried to stop drinking the wine, but found that his goblet was constantly refilled. The women surrounding him were lavishing him with affection. He let Cesya and Ariuzu orchestrate the proceedings. The wine kept him at peace, despite his ramblings.

A few dancers had appeared, dressed in elaborate costumes and ornaments, and paraded about to the melodies unleashed by a small synthesizer placed before the fire. Though Cesya's thigh was pressed against Nicholas's leg, he found that one of the dancers was able to divert him.

The girl, who seemed in her early twenties, had dark hair and light brown skin. Her swaying mesmerized him.

She looked almost exactly like Rhoanna had at her age. Her hips gyrated beneath the wings of her costume, and her eyes were half-closed in rapturous ecstasy. When they opened, they glared hotly, electrifying him.

Noticing that his attention was elsewhere, Cesya elbowed him in the ribs.

"Nicholas, Heart," she smiled. "Is tonight's celebration to your liking?"

"Oh, yes," he stammered, taken off-guard. "Yes."

When he looked back at the row of dancers, the one that had reminded him so much of Rhoanna had disappeared from the line.

He looked around for her, but incredible as it seemed, she was nowhere to be seen.

Had he imagined her?

He glanced down into the goblet of wine, looking for clues. He noticed that his fingers were numb—but not from the cold.

He nudged Cesya. "Where did that girl—" he began, but the golden woman beside him interrupted.

"It is the wine, Heart," Cesya smiled. "It plays tricks from time to time." In the bonfire's light, Cesya's hair looked like finely spun gold, the hair of angels.

Cesya brought him back to her. Their warm thighs were touching, and her perfume—possibly laced with *gohhe*—haunted him. With her nearby, it was easy to forget—to forget the girl, Rhoanna, the past.

Then, from behind them in the buzzing, animated darkness, Nicholas heard a voice.

"Mistress," it came, strong and husky.

Nicholas turned and saw Holte, standing like a dark-world god, with his close companion, Zane, beside him.

Cesya turned, munching on a segment of fruit. "Yes, Holte."

"We have found something I think you should know about," he said.

"What did your men find, Holte?" Her bearing toward the man was deferential. Perhaps the occasion allowed Cesya to treat her subjects magnanimously.

Holte stepped up to her. He spoke so as to include Nicholas in the conversation. Nicholas hadn't seen either man around the bonfire earlier. Now, in the fire's autumnal light, they almost had the appearance of characters in a play.

Cesya seemed annoyed.

"Zane has found what appears to be tubing of some kind," Holte announced with a serious, but contrite expression. "It looks like it might be made of metal."

Cesya gave Zane a long hard glare of disapproval. Zane held his ground, waiting.

"Tubing?" Cesya looked back up at Holte.

"It's a pipe or small conduit coming out of the hillside, Mistress. It's quite obvious." He indicated Zane

over his massive shoulder. "Look, if Zane could find it, anybody could."

The dancers took no notice of what was going on at their leader's table. The air was filled with the chatter of the Clan, music from the peculiar synthesizer, and the jump and crackle of the bonfire.

Cesya's face went a little sour. "Then, shall we take a look?"

Immediately Holte and Zane shuffled backward in the moist grass, letting their golden leader rise from her cushions. Holte turned to Nicholas. "Would you like to accompany us?"

Cesya stepped between them. "I think not. This is none of our Heart's concern."

Ariuzu waved a hand in protest. "Cesya, it wouldn't hurt the boy. Give him a chance. It's his night to learn."

"Right," Holte grinned in victory. He winked at Nick.

Nicholas couldn't tell if Cesya imagined intrigues among the men, but her personality seemed to change at the slightest twist of events. Was Holte up to something?

Cesya seemed uncomfortable, but she gave in. "Come," she said.

Nicholas swilled down the *gohhe* -wine left in his goblet and followed them across the meadow. He couldn't understand why a piece of metal tubing should be of such importance, but the expression on Holte's face urged him to find out.

No one seemed to mind their leave-taking. In fact, as Nick walked away from the bonfire, he noticed for the first time that the meadow was spotted with men and women going to and coming from the Clantrams. Everything about their manner was relaxed. He even heard children playing somewhere.

The four of them strode over the cool grasses, moving in the direction Zane indicated. Cesya seemed preoccupied and didn't notice when Holte stepped beside Nicholas. The large man walked with the confidence and power of a jungle cat.

"How much *gohhe* have they given you?" he asked.

"Quite a lot, I imagine," Nicholas said. "That's all there is to drink. Why?"

"Stop drinking it," Holte said. "Ask for water. They'll bring it to you."

He then walked on ahead of Nicholas, easily out-distancing him with his long bronze legs.

Zane stopped at the edge of the woods. When Cesya caught up with the gorilla-shaped man, he switched on a small cylindrical lantern attached to his waist belt.

"Mistress," Zane said, "it is around this cluster of hills."

Cesya seemed impatient. "Then, lead us on, Zane." She also seemed bored, as if she felt she was wasting her time, chasing around in the dark.

They skirted the low hills that ringed the meadow and left the fire's comforting presence. It became quite dark. The sounds of revelry could still be heard, though.

"It's up here, mistress," Zane announced, eagerly running into the woods. They slogged their way through leafy green ferns, following him.

Zane stopped and bent down in the ivy. He parted the leaves where the ivy had grown over something that was warped with age. It looked for a moment like the upthrust root of an aspen tree, except that in the lantern's light it could be seen it was definitely a pipe or tube encased in a plastic sheath. It had faded and cracked with the passage of the centuries.

Cesya turned to Holte. "This is your doing, Holte," she accused.

Holte seemed hurt, entirely innocent. "Mistress, we found it during our search for nuts and wood for the fire. It's nobody's fault."

"Except the people who put it here," Zane pointed out.

Cesya bent to examine it. "Do you know what it is?"

"No," Holte offered. "We cannot tell without disturbing the soil or disrupting the ivy. You know what the Directorates say. That is forbidden."

Though wobbly from the liquor and the climb, Nicholas understood something of what was going on. "It's part of the Blossom," he volunteered. "Big deal."

Cesya gave him a reprimanding stare. "Nothing man-made must exist on the surface of the earth in any form, great or small. Even the original Blossoms themselves. Otherwise it is the duty of a Keeper to destroy it."

Nicholas looked down at the sleeve of plastic sticking up from centuries of decay.

"That? That little thing is worthy of a Keeper's revenge?" Nick was incredulous. "It's just a piece of metal. Here, take a look."

Nicholas grabbed the tubing and began pulling on it, uprooting it slightly from the ivy.

"Don't!" Cesya shouted, pushing him away.

Nicholas fell over and rolled down into the cool creepers.

"It is strictly forbidden!" she shouted at him.

"Mistress," Holte began. "We need to know what's underneath."

"It is not for us to delve into such things," she asserted. "Let us quit this place. We have done nothing wrong."

Zane cleared his throat as Nicholas regained his feet. "Mistress, there is something else."

"What!" she snapped. Nicholas had never seen her so ruffled.

"Did you notice the configuration of the hills around the meadow when we arrived?"

Cesya stared hard at Zane. "No, I did not. I had other things on my mind. Besides, they are only hills, part of the Blossom. If there was anything wrong, even the slightest thing, the Unit would have told us."

"The Unit," Zane laughed, "knows how to steer the Clantrams. Not much else." The man was smarter than he looked.

"Get to the point!" she ordered. Nicholas noticed that her fists were clenched. Holte kept glancing at him

strangely. Nicholas didn't know what to make of these people, and he didn't understand what all the fuss was over an artifact from centuries past.

Holte carefully stepped forward and indicated the pipe with its dress of ivy. "Zane and I suspect that this isn't a Blossom, mistress."

"That's impossible," Cesya stated flatly. "The Unit confirms that we are in a—"

"I know what the Unit says," Holte responded. "But the outline of the hills does not suggest a Blossom."

Cesya staggered. "No!"

"It could be a Nest," Holte said firmly. "A Keeper's Nest."

"That's a lie!" she accused them both. "The Unit would not make a mistake like that!" She grabbed Nick by the arm as if for protection or security.

"The Unit," Zane interjected, "would not have known the difference. The earth has had more than enough time to cover the mistakes of mankind with sufficient plant growth."

"I don't believe you!" she claimed. "Nicholas!" She yanked on his arm. "Let's return at once!"

"Mistress," Zane pleaded. "We may have committed a Violation. We must do something."

"The meadow where the trams are," Holte responded, "is a blast crater, not a Blossom. We are probably standing right now on the ruins of a building of some kind. One of the old Warrens of the Judges, perhaps."

"Nicholas," Cesya ordered, "come!"

The golden lady turned her back on the men and proceeded down the hill in a halo of indignation.

Holte and Zane looked at each other, bewildered, and shrugged. Nicholas stared down the hill at the haughty queen, watching her plow her way through the ferns and ivy.

A little drunkenly, he faced Holte. "I think we'd better follow her."

Zane was digging around with his hands at the base of some leafy ferns at a slight distance from the tubing.

Holte said, "She's always refused to face facts."

Zane suddenly yanked a plant out of the black earth.

"Ah, hah!" he shouted with joy. He'd discovered a tuber of some kind.

"Let's leave," Holte said to his friend. "You know how she is when she goes into these snits of hers." Cesya was at the base of the hill—a hill that Nicholas now knew was what was left of a building of some kind.

Zane ran up to Holte. "It's a potato!" he said. "I thought it looked familiar. Here, Nick," he thrust it proudly into Nicholas's hands. Nicholas hastily thrust it back.

Cesya yelled through the trees. "I forbid you to take anything further from the earth! Return to the meadow at once! Do you hear me?"



Zane scraped the dirt and root hairs off the limpy brown vegetable. It had an odd configuration for a potato, but what was even odder was the absolute thrill Zane got in eating the thing, raw. His crunching was nearly as loud as their footsteps through the foliage.

"You want a bite?" Zane offered as he kicked through the ferns.

"God, no," Nick said.

"Go ahead," Zane insisted. "Nothing like a potato—a real potato!"

Nick moved ahead of them, feeling awkward and clumsy with these people. He reached their implacable queen. "Cesya," he entreated.

"You!" she turned on him, wagging a stem finger in his face. "I forbid you to speak with those men from now on. They will both be punished for that they have done!"

"What have they done, Cesya?" Nicholas yelled back in the darkness. "And just who the hell do you think you are to order me around, anyway?"

Cesya slapped Nicholas's face hard.

"How dare you speak to me in that tone of voice!" she screamed.

Holte and Zane came up to them. "Mistress," Holte began, beseechingly.

"You are to return to your Clantram immediately and take your... *yourpet* with you! I should tie you both to a tree so a Keeper would find you loose upon the earth. You've continually tried to subvert my authority, and now you'll pay for it!

"And stay away from my Heart!" she commanded.

Zane and Holte stood frozen and speechless, like statues forged of Corinthian copper.

Cesya dragged Nicholas away. Nicholas could hear her panicked breathing. He was almost too drunk and dizzy to walk.

"I'm sorry, Heart," Cesya cried in a low voice as they tramped through the dark meadow. "There is no one in my life but you." Then she drew in a deep breath. "But those *men* have always been a bane to me."

"But, Cesya," he began, looking over his shoulder at the two who followed, somewhat cowed, at a slight distance. "What if they're right? What if this was an old military base? What did Holte call it? A Warren."

"This is not an old Warren," she stated. "The Warrens were destroyed like all the cities when the Keepers rose to walk the earth," she said, shaking her head. "They put that tubing there. They've done things like that to me before. Those idiots."

Nicholas laughed. "Cesya, that pipe's been there for a long time. I couldn't pull it out. It's attached to something inside the hill."

They approached the bonfire. The women were singing along with the dancers. The music boxes gave forth tunes that seemed as fragile as wind-chime glass.

Cesya was visibly distracted. She clung to Nicholas's arm, although it was she who was doing the leading.

"We will have to move on," she muttered. "If we move on, we will not be bothered. Keepers travel slowly. We'll continue with the ceremony tonight, but at dawn I will have the men scatter the ashes. We'll escape harm by noon. *If* there is any due us."

Nicholas staggered through the cool, moist grasses, listening to the insects twitter away in the night. He noticed that Cesy's grasp on him was becoming warmer and more tender as they approached the group. Still, he couldn't help but feel out of place. All of what had just happened was because of his presence among them. They would have passed this particular Blossom by had he not awakened.

Ariuzu watched them draw near. Cesy kissed Nicholas softly. "But don't worry about any of this. We have time."

Her personality shifts were confusing. When he was nearby, she seemed powerful and secure. But at other moments she seemed remarkably insecure and unexpectedly volatile.

"It's only too bad you should encounter the worst so soon," came Holte's deep, resonant voice from behind them.

He had appeared out of the shadows. Cesy spun around and struck him upon the chest with both hands. "Get out of here! I told you to return to your Clantram!" Cesy leaped over a low table and stumbled out among the dancers, who fell still.

She grabbed the synthesizer and shut it off. Everyone was watching, completely surprised by her behavior.

"All the men will return to their Clantram at once!" she yelled above the roar of the fire. "I forbid any more mingling with the men from now until the moon's next rising!"

A gasp went up through the Crowd.

"Move!" she demanded. "*Now!*"

Nicholas watched as the men separated themselves from the women of the Clan and marched reluctantly off to the last tram in the line.

A little boy, about eight years old, walked past Nicholas and Holte. "Way to go, Holte," the kid sneered.

The rest of the adult men—what few there were—hulked off into the dark.

Cesy, her royal feathers smoothed somewhat, walked back to the low table where the physician waited. Holte had stepped off with the men. Cesy clapped her hands at the dancers.

"Return to the music, dears! Dance!" Sweat glistened on her forehead and neck, but she tried not to appear upset. But Nicholas, close to her, could tell just how disturbed she was.

The last few days traveling with her in the Clantram had been very tranquil. But Nicholas could now see how precarious their lives were. They could not stop traveling, even for a day or two. It was too nerve-racking.

Nick took up a freshly poured goblet of wine. There was little he could do about his *gohhe* consumption tonight, and getting drunk was the most reasonable outlet for frustration.

Cesy plopped down on the pillows as if nothing had transpired. The dancers returned to their dance, trying to reestablish their lost rhythms and gyrations.

Cesya turned to Ariuzu and laughed. "I'll bet you never celebrated a wedding like this before."

The physician smiled slightly. "Not in my memory, mistress. This will be a night the Clan will remember for a long time."

The two women clinked their goblets together and turned to watching the ceremonial dances.

Marriage, Nicholas thought. Yes. That's what this is all about. The bride wanting everything to go just right, even if it means putting a shotgun to the groom's back.

He looked around through the fog of his intoxication. The incident in the woods seemed remote and unreal. It had no substance here among these beautiful women—these goddesses.

He glanced up into the night sky. The constellations of spring were rising. The Great Bear rose beyond the orange heart of Boötes, the star Arcturus, shining alone in the night.

The men had almost reached their Clantram. The lights of the vehicle had come on, looking like a constellation of its own. Nicholas thought of something, and turned back to the sky. He was drunker than he had realized. There was no Great Bear. In half a million years the earth would've gone around the galaxy at least twice. Arcturus would be long lost to the light-years. The stars to the north were a jumble. The sky swirled around him as if changing to suit Cesya's bridal wishes: Everything must be perfect.

Cesya placed his hand in her lap. His arm nestled against her breasts warmly.

"The stars are not important tonight, Heart," she smiled. The blue-green of her eyes were deep whirlpools of longing. "Only you and I are important."

She signaled another servant girl to approach. The girl handed Cesya and Nicholas glasses of a peculiar blue crystal. In the fire's light, it reminded Nicholas of Oaxacan crystal, and an image came rushing back to him of someone—Rhoanna!—setting out plates and glasses for dinner. The glasses were made of blue Mexican crystal. Rhoanna's hair as she bent over the table lighting the candies was lovely and dark, just like that of the servant girl....

"Nicholas," Cesya commanded. "Let us drink to our love." Her words broke the image of Rhoanna into a thousand pieces, and the pieces gusted away from his fragmented mind.

He was married now. And in a way he had also been married back then. Except that with Rhoanna it had never been sanctified in a formal ceremony. They had merely lived together in southern-California chic.

Cesya drew his left hand up her exposed thigh beneath her kilt. Rhoanna vanished. Cesya drained her glass of blue crystal and threw it lustily into the raging bonfire.

Nicholas had a hard time focusing his eyes.

"Life," Cesya declared, "doesn't get any better than this!"

Suddenly the bonfire gave off a tremendous roar. The dancers tripped and fell as the flaming wood burst upward into the air. The fire grew to an impossible height. The ground heaved slowly and thunderously, as if it were suffering birth pangs.

"My God!" Ariuzu shouted, rising in a tangle of robes.

Cesya and Nicholas tumbled backward, away from their table. The dancers screamed, and the servant girls dropped their trays and ran.

The bonfire exploded. The turf beneath it rose and split itself asunder.

Something horrible was rising up out of the fire's inferno, out of the earth which had been warmed by the bonfire—and the demon bore the shape of a man.

"It's a Keeper!" Ariuzu shouted, tripping on her gown as she staggered away into the fractured darkness.

The meadow filled with the cries and screams of the Clan women as they bolted across the grass, running for the safety of the idle Clantrams.

The machine before them was incredible. Nicholas was hypnotized by its size and vast construction. Its head was monstrously bullet-shaped. It possessed no neck to speak of. Manlike in appearance with long, sturdy legs, it had arms that ended with a cluster of efficient-looking fingers. The fire soared about it as the ancient Keeper rose from its centuries-old crypt.

It was a walking nuclear bomb.

Nicholas realized that inside the huge bullet head were several pounds of plutonium and uranium waiting to go off. The creature had five sparkling eyes like those of a spider, that winked on brilliantly. The bonfire had been scattered into small embers and burning logs as it came at them.

"Violation!" its voice box shouted. "*Violation!*"

The bullet head stared down at them mercilessly. Its five heartless eyes cast them all in a dazzling accusatory light.

The Keeper's joints grated and squealed as it slowly gained its feet from where it had lain underneath tons of earth and grass. It stood an awesome thirty feet high. Dirt and a tapestry of roots fell from its shoulders and tumbled to the floor of the meadow. The terrifying machine had slept a long, long time, but despite its age it moved with a singular purpose in mind.

"No!" Cesia cried. "It can't be!"

The Keeper stepped toward them like a rust-colored reptile stalking its helpless prey. Its feet could crush a man without giving it a thought.

"Mistress!" yelled Ariuzu. "Hurry!" She tugged at Cesia with a desperate urgency.

The Clantrams were already starting up their engines. Lights had been turned on throughout the vehicles, and ladders were being withdrawn by those Clantrams which had already been filled.

Nicholas grabbed Cesia. She stared at the mechanical beast as if her eyes were deceiving her.

"Cesia, run!" he shouted.

The Keeper's legs lifted it beyond the scattered embers of the bonfire. "This is in Violation of the Directives!" it shouted down to them.

Cesia broke away from Nicholas. She thrust out her chest defiantly, gaining what courage she could. "We've done nothing wrong!" she shouted up at the machine. "Nothing has been disturbed! *Nothing!*"

Nick's heart raced maddeningly as he watched the lights focus on Cesia. A row of numbers suddenly glowed in a bloody, vivid crimson on the Keeper's huge chest. The numbers were framed as minutes and seconds, and the seconds were counting off backward.

The bomb inside of its head had been fused and armed.

Twenty minutes were left for the Tejada Clan!

"It's not fair!" Cesyra shouted as Ariuzu pulled at her. "I've done nothing wrong!"

Nicholas turned and saw all but the lead Clantram—Cesyra's vehicle—begin to pull slowly away. They had abandoned their equipment where it lay, and Nick could see that people were still climbing the ladders to some of the trams. The giant wheels of the Clantrams groaned.

He suddenly realized that they weren't going to make it.

Cesyra and Ariuzu turned and ran as fast as they could. The eyes of the Keeper were squarely upon them. Obviously, Keepers weren't designed to reason. The Law was the Law.

He could hear Cesyra weeping as she ran in the darkness, a long, blue shadow stretching out before her. Ariuzu, despite her apparent age, was in excellent shape, and managed to keep up with her leader.

Nicholas stopped running. He had spotted a long piece of metal, which he assumed was an attachment to one of the loading carts. It was as long as his arm and quite thick.

"Violation!" the Keeper kept saying, walking slowly, awkwardly, toward the line of lumbering vehicles, its feet pounding on the earth.

Nicholas pitied the women who stood at the windows of the receding Clantrams. They had no weapons. There was nothing they could do but run away.

He hefted the cart attachment like a javelin. He turned and faced the Keeper. The lights of the behemoth were blinding as it stared down at him.

The Keeper reached down to grab him, but he was able to roll away from its grasp.

But he knew that they were all doomed. There was no question about it, unless... He didn't think that the bomb inside the machine's mindless skull was strong enough to reach the trams if they could get out of the meadow behind the hills to the south. It was probably a very small-yield device. If the Clantrams could put enough distance between themselves and the blast, they might be able to survive the gamma radiation and shock wave. Maybe.

There was only one thing Nicholas could think of doing: Stop the Keeper bodily from pursuing the Clan.

As the Keeper moved to grab him again, Nicholas ducked beneath the huge arm and thrust the metal attachment's flat edge into the crook of the Keeper's left knee. He had to jump to do it.

The Keeper spun, and as it righted itself, Nicholas heard the attachment snap violently and lodge firmly in the joint. Still wobbly from the alcohol and *gohhe*, Nicholas scrambled to his feet, then turned and ran for the lead Clantram for all he was worth.

He heard a resounding crash behind him and saw that the Keeper had fallen to the meadow floor, immobilized. The bomb inside its head still ticked away, and as the monster had gone down, Nicholas had noticed the time left: seventeen minutes, thirty-two seconds—and counting....

"Nicholas!" Cesyra shouted from across the meadow.

She and Ariuzu had gained the tram, which had fallen in behind the other vehicles. He could see Cesyra standing on the ladder as the Clantram picked up speed.

"Hurry, Heart! Hurry!" she shouted into the darkness. Ariuzu stood just above her leader, silhouetted by the light from inside the tram.

Nicholas sprinted as fast as he could. But he was very drunk and didn't see the small stream beneath his feet. With a crash, he somersaulted across the shallow stream, landing face down in a clump of brittle cattails.

"Damn!" he yelled as pain skyrocketed through his leg. He had badly twisted his ankle.

With a loud groan—his heart pounding fiercely—he struggled to his feet and limped as best he could toward the last of the fleeing Clantrams.

"Nick!" came Cesya's frantic call, harking across the dark fields like the cry of a nightingale who'd lost her mate. "Don't do this to me!" she cried. "Please!"

Nicholas fell again and came up bruised and bleeding. He could see that barely a hundred yards away Cesya was struggling with her servants, trying to keep the ladder extended for him. But the Unit which was steering the vehicles had other things in mind—the first of which was its own immediate survival. The Clantram wouldn't stop for anything, even the golden woman's mate. Cesya fought against her servants and Ariuzu, but was eventually pulled inside. The door closed automatically, and its metallic ringing filled the meadow like the final bolt on a coffin lid.

They might make it, Nick told himself, fighting his pain. They just might....

It was quite dark now; he couldn't see the line of hills to the south. Many of the Clantrams had already vanished.

There was blinding pain in his every step. He might have broken his ankle. He splashed into another of the meadow's many runoff streams and fell exhausted to his hands and knees. He knew that he had to keep going, to put as much distance as possible between himself and the Keeper. But he couldn't find the strength. His body, depleted by liquor and weakened by nights with Cesya, couldn't go any further. His foot felt like an unquenchable fire. His body seemed paralyzed with pain.

He twisted around, onto the bank of the tiny creek, and lay awkwardly among the small lilies, breathing hard.

He looked behind him, to the ridge beyond which he knew the Keeper lay struggling, trying to regain its feet so that it could pursue the Tejada Clan in its age-old obsession with the Law. Luminescent rods of crystalline light from the Keeper's five terrible eyes scanned the skies like searchlights.

Nicholas could hear its horrible voice shouting, "Violation!" like an executioner. The Keeper was a spider pinned to the ground, but its disability was only an illusion. Its bite was still deadly.

The stream's cold water revived him. He scrambled to his knees and moved away as fast as he could. He couldn't tell now how much time he had left. His perceptions of everything were distorted. He saw that the last of the Clantrams—Cesya's vehicle—had disappeared beyond the low hills.

Nicholas hobbled across the meadow, not looking back. There was no time. He found a ridge and climbed it quickly, the pain in his foot throbbing each time he put weight on it. His ankle had swollen severely.

Out of breath and desperate, he rolled down the backside of the ridge, sliding down the grass in sheer darkness.

All was quiet. He looked up into the sky.

The stars seemed to shuffle back into place, and he thought he recognized Lyra. But it was just an illusion. It was the familiar sky a dying man might want to see during his last moments on the earth. Then it shifted again, and the unfamiliar constellations were still in place. The world turned senselessly on its axis, as it had done all the long centuries, with or without man.

The Keeper exploded.

Nicholas screamed. The earth shook, and the sky was filled with light. A deadly wind scoured the meadow. Enormous chunks of rock and soil rained about him. A piece of metal thunked into his shoulder, drawing blood. He jerked and flung it into the brook.

But he was still alive. It could not have been a thermonuclear explosion which had racked the meadow.

Some of his hearing was gone. He shook his head. His body was so racked with pain that the fires in his ankle were only minor elements. His bladder and bowels had emptied during the melee.

Rocks and smaller debris kept raining about him, but the rumble of the major blast had subsided. He coughed and struggled on his stomach up the slope of the ridge.

The meadow had been totally destroyed. Smoke drifted up in wisps from small fires. He rose on one hurt knee. He smelled terrible; he felt even worse. He gazed across the plains of hell.

Among the fires, Nicholas noticed, were a number of rocks or small pieces of metal which glowed in the darkness. He knew that it was an illusion of some kind. It had to be.

Then he knew what had happened to the Keeper.

Over time, the casings of the uranium and plutonium stored in the Keeper's sleeping head had decayed or warped. For a nuclear bomb to go off, the inside lining of uranium had to be absolutely flush with the outer casing of plutonium. Otherwise, it would only break apart when the normal explosive on the inside was set off; there would be no chain reaction. Instead, there would be radioactive metal scattered all over the place.

The meadow had been seeded with millions of shards of radioactive debris that glowed in the night.

Yet, he knew that neither plutonium nor uranium glowed in darkness. Only his mind had made it come alive. Fear. Blue-green constellations of death dotted the meadow, the spectres of wars long past.

Nicholas rubbed his shoulder where the piece of the Keeper had struck him in the briar patch. Yes, he thought. This could have been paradise.

His shoulder burned with atomic fire. He'd been struck by white-hot plutonium. He was a dead man.

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## Chapter Five

BY MORNING HE was already weak.

During the night he had tried to follow the huge tracks that the caravan had left on the grass, but the going was rough. The utter darkness and the painful swelling in his foot made movement extremely difficult. Still, something compelled him to get beyond the meadow into the hills, to pursue the receding Clantrams.

The voice in the back of his mind said, *Don't stop, Nick*. But his body cried out: *Stop. Rest. Die*.

The first thing he did when he left the fiery meadow was to wash himself in a stream. He had to get rid of the dust and debris that had sprinkled onto him in the explosion.

He fought off fatigue until the sun came up, when he realized that he was miles from the meadow. The terrain was nearly the same with its acres of green grasses, vine- and flower-choked woods, gently undulating hills. The tracks of the Clan were plainly visible in the soft turf that seemed to carpet the earth from horizon to horizon. The water-rich soil beneath the tracks yielded small puddles of black mud. From these, Nicholas could tell how recently the tracks had been laid down. The Clantrams were hours ahead. Nothing could be heard but the sounds of birds and insects which had risen to meet the dawn.

The sun cleared the top of a small chain of hills to the south as Nicholas came upon a brisk stream which paralleled the Clan tracks. He lay down upon the carpet of grass which lined the stream.

Sleep descended almost immediately, despite the pain in his foot and the dull burning at his shoulder. The world seemed horribly unreal. The horizon shimmered, the woods moved. He thought he heard the voices of an ancient past.

"Nicholas!" The call came from far off. "Nicholas! Can you hear me?"

He rolled to one side, blinking sleep from his eyes. His shoulder soared with pain. The height of the sun told him he'd been asleep for hours, but it had been a fitful, uneasy sleep. His ankle still hurt, and the skin of his whole body was now apple-red with sunburn.

"Nick!" came the call once again.

He noticed that blood had matted thickly where he had fallen asleep on the grass. He sat up, hearing the collective voices of men nearby, chatting among themselves. At first he thought they were part of his dreams, but then another cry rang out, and he knew they were real.

It was Holte.

Nick lifted himself away from the grass, and climbed the bank of the stream to where he could see better.

Holte and a contingent of men and women from the Clan had come down from the north—from the direction of the death-meadow. They rode strange-looking, horselike animals whose rainbow skins glistened spectacularly in the morning sun. There were no Clantrams in sight.

He stared at the posse in delirium. Riding next to Holte on a fabulous beast was one of the Clan's pilots, who scanned the ground with her eye device. Cesyra was not present.

They were riding animals! Wasn't that a Violation? It would follow the logic of the Directives...

But he was too exhausted to figure it out. The logic of this world was entirely arbitrary, as if it had been composed idiosyncratically in the mind of an unstable, emotionally insecure being. Perhaps it wasn't a Violation at all. Perhaps it was just some grown-ups riding colorful ponies coming to rescue him.

He fell just as they caught sight of him.

"Over there!" Holte shouted to the group, reining his beast toward the stream where Nicholas lay.

Nick heard the hooves of the animals thunder over him, and in a moment Holte was beside him.

"He's alive!" he said.



Holte's eyes beamed as if he'd just found a long lost friend. He seemed a different man from the night before.

"I thought the Clan had gone on," Nicholas said. The somber pilot came down to the stream with a canteen. She handed it to Holte, who in turn held it to Nick's parched lips. It was laced with *gohhe*.

"The Mistress fought all night with the Unit. It was only this morning that she won. The Unit wouldn't send the Clantrams back, because of the Directives. But Cesyra insisted that we try to find you."

"Thanks for trying," Nick said weakly, sitting up. "But I don't think it's going to matter much."

Holte noticed Nick's shoulder. "It looks bad. We'd better get you back to Ariuzu as quickly as possible. The Unit only gave us until mid-afternoon. The Clantrams will move on without us if we dally."

"Have you ever ridden horseback?" asked Zane, gorilla-shaped Zane, with his foolish grin.

Nicholas nodded in affirmation.

Zane, he thought. His face seemed to have followed Nick throughout his lives upon the earth. The buffoon. Wherever he went, there was always the archetypal buffoon.

Zane yanked one of the beasts over and held firmly to the reins as Holte assisted Nicholas to his feet.

Nick looked closely at the creature. "What is it?" he asked.

The beast's skin glimmered like a neon sign. How it escaped predators, he did not know. But its eyes were bright with a friendly intelligence, and its legs, while shorter than those of a horse, seemed as powerful.

"We call them *zelles*," Zane said. "They follow the Clans from time to time. They think they're people."

There was no pommel or saddlehorn, so Nicholas had to struggle to retain his balance on the zelle. Within minutes, he could feel saddle sores coming on.

Holte turned to his contingent. "Let's get moving. We don't have much time." He then turned to Nicholas. "We're going to get you out of this, Nick. Don't worry."

Nicholas kept as close as he could to Holte and Zane as they trotted along at a moderate pace. They trailed the Clantram tracks in the virginal grass. Nicholas could now see the hoof-prints that the zelles had made earlier that morning when they had come up from the south, looking for him.

The giant man said, "We went all the way back to the meadow looking for you, but the pilot couldn't find your tracks until we turned back." The pilot, silent all this time, merely nodded when Nick looked at her.

Holte continued, "Cesyra refused to believe you were dead, but the Unit showed her the probability curves. The odds were pretty devastating."

"Well," Nick said. "I appreciate the gesture. Despite the odds."

"The woman's insane," Zane interjected, beside them. He was so massive, he seemed about to crush his zelle beneath him. "No one has ever defied her and lived. If the Unit were a real person, she'd have junked it long ago."

Nicholas felt dizzy and sick to his stomach. Radiation poisoning?

They passed beneath an overhanging elm. The light that graced them from above was emerald and cathedrallike. Then Holte said something peculiar.

"Whatever happens, Nicholas, do not worry. You've been through a great deal, but we'll get you out of this. That woman is giving us a very hard time. And she gets stronger and stronger each time we test her."

Holte said nothing more, but looked about him as if the trees themselves had ears with which to hear his words. Nicholas couldn't see how they could conspire against Cesyra like this—especially after a near-encounter with a Keeper. Perhaps that was why Cesyra had kept him segregated from the other men of the Clan. In any case, he was too weak to ponder it for long.

They stopped for a brief repast after Nicholas announced that he could not go any further without some kind of sustenance. Holte apologized sincerely for being so inconsiderate, but reemphasized their need to return on time. Everyone else, though, was eager to rest.

Nicholas found a stream beneath some trees and dropped his swollen ankle into it. The shocking cold of the icy waters instantly revived his tired body, and he felt some of the swelling going down. Tiny fish drifted up and began nibbling harmlessly at his toes. He marveled at their bizarre armorplated skin. Though they were nevertheless swift, they seemed regressively prehistoric, like their Cenozoic counterparts.

Yes, he thought. Life's going backward to a simpler time.

A sadness, prompted by his weariness, folded about him like a cloak as he sat with Holte and his merry men, watching them pass around nuts and an artificial cheese. They seemed like children as they talked with the somber pilot, who had temporarily removed her scanner. There was no reason to tell them that their lives were less than desirable. To them, living with Keepers was like living with the common cold. You could never escape either, so why worry?

His depression, like his injury, quickly sapped his strength.

They rode hard for the rest of the afternoon, with Holte out in front. Nicholas didn't have the strength to inquire further about what Holte might have meant earlier about "testing" the golden leader. Their lunch had been hasty. They were all weary and apprehensive.

Finally they plunged into a gathering of elderly maples, the zelles following a game-trail in the brush. Holte pulled them all to a halt. The men and women of the posse then began dismounting, removing the makeshift bridles from the mouths of their loyal beasts. Nicholas slid off of his zelle, and Holte unharnessed it. He slapped it on the rump, and the multicolored animal ran off with the others.

"The Clan is in the meadow just beyond these woods," Holte told him. "Can you walk?" The tools of their illegal mode of travel were stuffed into bags which they had brought along.

"I think I can make it," Nick told him. Nevertheless, he was shaking, and a film of sweat had broken out all over his body. His stomach churned.

When they left the trees, they saw before them, in another broad meadow, the Clantrams waiting in the afternoon sun. A few zelles were grazing in the meadow where the silver ribbon of a creek wound its leisurely way to some faraway lake or ocean. A number of the women were out on the grass, lounging, and a few small girls were flying kites. On seeing the rescue party, they shouted down the line, and doors began opening in the trams.

Holte supported Nicholas as the women began running toward them. "Just remember," he whispered,

"we're trying our best. We're getting you out of this soon, but it's going to take time. It's a situation we didn't expect to happen."

Nicholas felt light-headed. "I don't think I've got much time left," he said weakly. His mouth was dry, and the joints in his body throbbed unmercifully.

A wave of hopelessness swept over him. Would they be able to treat radiation burns at all? What was the level of their medical technology? He'd need more than a concoction of Ariuzu's herbs to pull him out of this one.

He collapsed.

The next thing he knew, he was being ferried into a Clantram, suspended beneath one of the swivel-cranes. He kept hearing his name spoken frantically, cries for attention being shouted.

They got him into the room of his original awakening, and within minutes medication was being given him by the old physician. It brought him around somewhat.

Cesya was in tears; the physician, Ariuzu, wore a countenance of deep concern.

"Heart," Cesya cried, "please don't leave us. Please!"

He tried to give her what comfort he could. "I'm all right," he lied, waving her away from the couch.

"Thanks for stopping the Clan, though. They would've never found me if they hadn't been given the time."

Cesya's demeanor shifted from grief to rage. "They would've had more time if the Unit hadn't fought with me," she said, wiping away her tears. "It's never done that before. No one defies me. *No* one!"

"Mistress," Ariuzu cautioned, trying to hold her. "Please."

"The men did a good job," Nicholas said. "The women too. You should thank them."

Cesya rose from the couch and began stalking about, clenching and unclenching her fists. The Clantram, on an unseen order, began to move. Cesya returned to Nick's side as Ariuzu prepared strips soaked in ointment for his injured shoulder.

"I don't want you to die!" she whispered close to him. "I won't have you leave me like this. I need you!"

"Mistress," Ariuzu spoke in low, tremulous tones, "he has the Sickness, I'm afraid."

"No!" Cesya shouted at her. "That can't be! No one's gotten the Sickness in memory!"

Ariuzu's eyes were compassionate, but final in their assessment. "These things are beyond our control, Mistress. We can only comfort him as best we can."

"No, no, no!"

Nicholas didn't like the sound of those words, though they confirmed what he had known all along.

"I love you, Nicholas," Cesya said.

He turned and looked at her. Her golden hair had tumbled down to her bronze shoulders; her eyes were puffed and red. He felt deeply sorry for her—more so than for himself. The world seemed unreal, but it was her world, and she would have to go on living in it.

It was like the allure of a dream just as the alarm clock breaks the silence and you wake pearly in sweat. The strings of the dream's attachment still pull at you, and they hurt.

He felt detached, distant from reality. Women came into the room. His ragged kilt had been removed. Sponges were daubing his body, and cool unguents found his cuts and bruises.

He heard bitter weeping from one corner of the regal suite, and when he looked to find the source of such unhappiness, he saw Cesya lying against a mound of white satin pillows beneath a window that opened to the Eden outside. The bronze of her skin contrasted brilliantly with the sheen of the satin pillows.

The power of her grief reached him and resurrected the memory of what he had lost over the aeons gone by. The image of Rhoanna came to him, and he felt all the bitterness Cesya was feeling. Betrayal and loss ruled the world.

Desire was the cause of all suffering, and for how long had they suffered?

Cesya, himself, even the Clans, wherever they roamed, would suffer as long as there were people alive to feel the pain of what it meant to be a human being. Perhaps the Keepers were right in their mindless adherence to the Law.

Betrayal and loss.

*Rhoanna beneath a summer's moon, slipping into a darkened apartment with another man. The jingle of his keys. The dance of their laughter. Betrayal. Loss.*

They were two sides of a coin, tossed like a mad Spaniard's doubloon, soiled and bent, rising like the August moon—a moon cloven in half like a broken heart...

"No!" Cesya breathed hotly, once again by his side. Her tears fell softly on his chest. "You're mine! You belong to me!"

"Rhoanna," he whispered.

"Oh, my Heart," Cesya mourned, holding him. "Nicholas, please darling. Don't let them take you away from me. You're all I have in the world."

Gently, Ariuzu pulled her away from the couch. The servant girls stood waiting apprehensively.

"He must sleep now," Nicholas heard the physician say. "He is exhausted and has been through a terrible ordeal. We might yet be able to cleanse his body of the poison, but right now he needs sleep more than anything."

Ariuzu's voice was reassuring. The soft rocking of the Clantram cradled him. Perhaps it would be pleasant after all to accompany Cesya on her endless journeys. Nice to have a child or two. Nice to see the green world. Smell the flowers....

He began fading into the long corridor of sleep as the cobalt wings of night collapsed about him. Ariuzu, eternal grandmother, comforted him with her final medications. He knew that he would never reawaken from this darkness.

Then he heard Cesya shout orders. "Quickly, place him into the Unit! The Unit will know what to do! Hurry!"

Poor woman, he thought. These people were no match for the curses of technology. They were children of Eden, hexed by nations and wars long, long vanished, left to travel the earth alone.

In the background, like the voice of a soul lost and wandering in the spiritless dark of purgatory, Nicholas heard weeping and fiery cries of rage. The arms of angels lifted him, but the sobbing would not go away.

*He stood beside a squat evergreen tree in the August moonlight. Rhoanna and a Marine were inside the house. He had followed her. She had told him that she had wanted to stay that night with her mother. The lights in the Marine's bedroom had just gone out. Soft music. And soon, the sounds of love. He was beneath that window. From the cold avenues of space the moon's godless, cyclopean eye stared heartlessly down on him. He shouldn't have followed her. He shouldn't have risked being beneath that open window. But he had had to do it. He had to know.*

*And now he knew. In that bedroom the beast with two backs was doing what it did so well. On into the night....*

He'd lived out a life millennia long, and still betrayal and loss pursued him like hungry animals nipping at his heels.

"Rhoanna," he cried.

"No!" the golden lady sobbed by his side. "Nicholas, no!"

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## Chapter Six

*DOWNTOWNSANFRANCISCO.*

*It is a beautiful spring day as Nicholas looks up into a blue sky filled with the spires of many clean and imposing offices. Yes, San Francisco. He has no problem recognizing it. And when a breath of air scented with kelp drifts up to him, he feels buoyant for the first time in quite a while.*

*There is a speckling of seagulls wheeling above the busy city on a breeze in from the bay, and on the sidewalks are dozens of businessmen and women on their way to lunch. He feels good in his suit and tie. His shoes grate crisply upon the sidewalk. Is he awake, or is he dreaming? He must be dreaming.*

*A man runs up the opposite side of the street and crosses over through honking, angry automobiles. The man looks agitated.*

*It is Derek Mallory.*

*"Derek!" Nicholas smiles. "Whatever are you doing here? This is a pleasant surprise."*

*Mallory has a worried look on his face. "Nick, are you all right?" he asks.*

*Nicholas shakes his best friend's hand warmly. "Never better," he says cheerfully. Derek seems puzzled. Nicholas doesn't understand.*

*"What's the matter, Derek?"*

*"Didn't Melissa tell you about the bomb?"*

*"What bomb?"*

*"The one we're all supposed to be looking for!"*

*"Oh, you mean the Keeper. The Unit says that there's another Keeper about three days to the east of us. No problem, though. I'm on vacation right now, anyway."*

*"Nick, wake up! This is important! We're talking about millions of helpless people!"*

*"Nonsense. I figure about twenty-five to thirty to a Clantram, except the first one and the last. That's where the men are. Cesy and I are up front. The rest are women. You should see some of them. They're gorgeous."*

*Mallory looks up at the imposing buildings. "Help us find the bomb, Nick."*

*"The bomb."*

*"Right." Mallory is very excited now. "Staci and Reitingner are a couple of blocks away in the Transamerica Building. Melissa thinks the whole thing's similar to the Rio layout."*

*"Rio de Janeiro?"*

*"That's right. It's in one of the buildings, we think. Libyans supplied by agents of the KGB."*

*"Derek," Nicholas laughs. "Don't get so excited. The KGB isn't that stupid."*

*"President Runciman's in town, and he's got all of Foresee worried as hell."*

*"OK," he says. "Where do I start?" He is agreeable. Besides, it's such a nice day."*

*"I'm taking the Wells Fargo Bank Building. You take that one there. Across the street. The Sentinel Building. It's abandoned, but Mnemos says it might be a possibility."*

*"OK."*

*"Great!" Derek Mallory says with vast relief. He slaps Nicholas on the shoulder."*

*"Hey, watch the shoulder! That's why I'm on vacation, pal. Injured in the line of duty, and all that."*

*"Sorry, Nick. We don't have much time!"*

*Mallory runs off. Nick calls after him, "There's time enough at the end of the world. And plenty of women, too."*

*He whistles, thrusting his hands into his pants pockets, walking across Kearny Street.*

*The stroll is enjoyable beneath the raspy song of gulls and tired old albatrosses. A number of pretty secretaries smile at him. He smiles back.*

*The elevator still works in the Sentinel Building, so Nick takes it to the penthouse on the seventh floor. It is an odd, turn-of-the-century structure, dwarfed by the larger buildings around it. The penthouse is still a bachelor's pad, filled with plush furniture. The dude who lived here last really knew how to do it right, Nicholas thinks to himself, admiring the decor.*

*He steps up to the wide window. "Now, I wonder where that nasty old bomb is hiding?"*

*Behind him a silky voice suddenly purrs, "I knew you would come, Heart."*

*Emerging from a bathroom at the rear—and a recent shower—she stands dripping wet. Cesyra. Off comes her shower cap. A towel caresses her silky form: her breasts quiver slightly. Gold tresses fall about her bronze shoulders. She is bronze everywhere.*

*"I have to find a bomb," he tells her.*

*Cesyra slinks up to him. He is enthralled by the hypnotic motion of her breasts. Drops of water bead the large pink circles of her nipples.*

*"The Keeper is far away," she tells him. Wet footprints follow her across the carpet. "We can enjoy ourselves here. The Unit says we have three whole days."*

*Exciting things are beginning to awaken in him. Cesyra drops her towel on a leather chair and slowly begins to undo his trousers, staring into his eyes.*

*A small clock radio suddenly rouses on the coffee table, and a woman's voice calls out his name. "Nicholas! Stay away from that woman. There is work to do. The bomb. Find us the bomb!"*

*Cesyra grabs the radio and smashes it on the table, pulverizing it with one hand. She's very strong.*

*"I have to find the bomb," Nicholas insists.*

*"Nicholas," Cesyra says. "Don't listen to them. You belong to me!"*

*Nicholas stops her. "Just a moment, please. This won't take long. I'm one of the best. Melissa told me so once."*

*There is a turret dome on the top of the Sentinel Building, with access from the penthouse below. There Nicholas locates a telescope. He begins scanning the rooftops of San Francisco with the bachelor's toy.*

*Cesyra comes up behind him and puts her arms around his waist. "We could be together forever, Heart. I will stimulate your pleasure centers like no woman ever has."*

*"This will only take a minute," he tells her, smiling. "Excuse me, please."*

*"There are no bombs!" she suddenly rages. "And we don't have that much time!"*

*"Sure we do. Three days. You said so yourself."*

*She runs to the other side of the telescope and lowers it slowly. Nicholas stands upright. Those bedroom blue-green eyes have only one desire, he can see.*

*"Well," Nicholas says, giving in. He removes his tie. "Perhaps it can wait."*

*Minutes later, they are in bed in the center of the penthouse studio apartment. The windows have been dimmed and music is playing. It is familiar music.*

*Cesyra rubs her hand between his legs, causing him to become erect with desire. She holds him firmly, with a stroking motion. All of his pleasure centers belong to her.*

*Then the television set across the room flashes to life. A face appears in full color, looking directly at him. It is a woman's face. "Nicholas, break away from her. Fight her. We need you."*

*It is Rhoanna Martin.*

*"Rhoanna?" Nick sits up suddenly.*

*Cesya throws him back down onto the bed and straddles him in one quick motion. The face on the television screen continues to implore him as Cesya easily inserts him into her.*

*"Nicholas!" Rhoanna's ancient voice cries out.*

*"You're mine," Cesya smiles with rapture. "Mine!"*

*"The bomb," he says, looking up at her. "I must find the bomb."*

*She is transformed by ecstasy.*

*"You want the bomb? I'll give you the bomb," she groans. "It's right beneath you in this building. If I can't have you, then nobody can!"*

*Every nerve ending, every impulse, every delight is hers.*

*He cannot control himself. He feels fire rising in his loins, as he bursts copiously inside the bronze woman. She laughs, eyes wild with pleasure.*

*He dissolves in the furious heat of a sudden white light. And flows into nothingness.*

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# **The Fourth Variation**

## **Chapter One**

"QUI," THE VOICES gathered at his wrist called out.

"Yes?"

"Someone approaches," his allies informed him.

"No one approaches," he said.

"We would like to differ with you. Someone is approaching, and we thought you'd like to know."

Qui ignored the voices of his assembled allies. There were only a small handful of individuals left upon the old earth, and he couldn't believe that he was important enough to be disturbed just now—particularly when everyone he knew had followed the urge to migrate up into the frosty reaches of outer space. He knew that the Final Day was upon them all, whether they still dwelled on the dying earth or drifted in space far above it. Most had seen the wisdom of taking their allies into orbit, where the great Migration Shields hung in the sky, waiting.

No, Qui thought. There is no one approaching. The allies must be dreaming nervously again, wanting to escape from their bejeweled prison at his wrist and frolic in the light of day.

As it was, Qui wasn't in much of a mood to set his allies free or to deal with a stranger. He wanted to share that grand private spectacle with no one. The spectacle of the Final Day.



Absently, he fingered the glittering gem of the bracelet on his wrist. His allies stirred and shimmered anxiously within, but it was not time for them to appear. He would travel on foot to enjoy these last fading panoramas, despite the unrest of the incarnations at his wrist.

There was much upon his mind. It was as if a whole lifetime of confusion had suddenly come into focus, as if he had been looking for something that he had lost sometime back and now he feared that it would never be found. Whatever it was.

As he walked along the warm crystalline sands of the shore, he could almost feel the heavy accumulation of time and memory in every particle of earth beneath his feet. He enjoyed these melancholy sensations, even though his allies questioned his behavior. "After all," they told him, "why walk when a man can fly?"

Why, indeed? he thought.

Qui suddenly called out to them. "Allies."

"Yes?" came the simultaneous response from the thousands of voices waiting within the jewel.

"Tell me the story again of Jacob Böhme."

The voices shifted minutely within the jewel as they searched for the one who would know. A voice finally spoke. "Jacob Böhme was a German mystic and theosophist who lived at a time when the earth was approaching its middle age."

"No dates, please," Qui requested. "I've had enough to do with time."

"Böhme grew up in the town of—"

But Qui interrupted. "That is not what I need to hear. Tell me again of his transformation."

"Yes," the voice said. Qui knew that the ally was a spirit—man or woman, he couldn't tell—who had lived in the same era, perhaps the same town as this Böhme. The ally continued: "It is said that one day he achieved a mystical vision of God when a light happened to glance off of a plate made of pewter."

"Ah," sighed Qui. "Bliss. Please explain."

There was a prolonged silence among his allies. None among them spoke, and there were *millions* of them in there. But Qui understood: It was a nontranslatable experience.

"I wish..." Qui began.

"Yes?"

"I wish that Böhme were among you."

"There are others like him," they chimed eagerly, their voices mingling like the crystals of an ancient Zen wind-bell. "We have a Sufi of the twelfth century, an Awakener of the twentieth. They can corroborate, but cannot explain."

Were bliss and happiness so easily found! he thought. The light off an ordinary plate. Something so mundane, so unexpected.

"Why are you so unhappy?" the allies asked, wanting to be helpful.

Qui looked out across the flat, calm ocean. The giant red star that the sun had become in its old age cast

a crimson phosphorescence across gentle wavelets. Tides had vanished with the moon. Filigrees of pink clouds drifted in the sky, looking for some place to go. He felt the emptiness of the world.

"I don't know," Qui confessed. "I have been struck with the reality of my unhappiness—my imprisonment. And it's something I can't ignore easily."

"You have us to consider," his allies said with a predictable shimmer of uneasiness. "We would not like to perish on the Final Day."

Qui smiled sadly. "No one will perish, I can assure you. Now, please. I would like to be left in silence for a little while."

"Even though someone approaches?"

"Yes. Even though someone approaches."

He sighed heavily, looking out across the ocean. The sun was a blood-red eye watching him from the western lip of the world, filling up a quarter of the sky. Veins of an even darker, cancerous red lined the surface of the bloated orb. Qui could feel its weariness.

He had no idea how old the city before him was, although he knew that trapped in the ally bracelet among his former incarnations was an inhabitant or two who could perhaps identify it. There might be thousands of them. It didn't matter.

His allies were of some use, however. Earlier that day he had allowed them to transport him across the bleak nameless ocean to this large, nearly flat continent. Peculiar iron tubes surfaced on the land occasionally, rising and burrowing into the gloomy bowels of the ancient earth. Who had set them down or how long it happened didn't interest Qui. His feelings of unhappiness were his chief concern. He did not have the heart to tell his allies that he could not—would not—leave the earth until he had achieved happiness. Otherwise he would end up carrying his confusions and questions with him to another star system.

Qui walked along the shore until he found some marble steps that had once led to a landing but were now being swallowed up by the gradual advance of the sea. Much of the harbor had already sunk out of sight. If the earth lasted another decade, the city would find its new home among the fishes.

A large broken pillar lay like the trunk of a petrified tree across the steps. A delicate green moss had strung itself along one side.

It was a perfect place to rest and eat.

"I wish to eat now," Qui commanded as he leaned against the pillar.

A few allies twinkled and escaped from his wrist, and these glowing stars of life set out a light meal before him. Then they withdrew into their protective jewel, happy to have been of service.

The sun would take about another hour to set fully. He would have plenty of time to set up his tent and gather firewood for the morning, unless he decided to ask his allies to perform that chore. He drew up a handful of nuts from a glass bowl, tossing them into his mouth.

Something erupted from the ocean not far from him. He saw *aveltane* take to the air. With a sibilant cry, the creature flapped around crudely, shunting off heavy drops of water until it was light enough to take fully to the skies.

Qui listened to its cry. It penetrated his heart. What had compelled it to rise up out of the haven of the shallow sea and fly off with such a doleful sound? What forces in the veltane's life made for it a heaven or a hell?

He knew that he was projecting his own feelings of desolation into the senseless animal. Perhaps the water creature was only looking for a better meal. Perhaps the veltane only wanted to do something different from the routine of its usual underwater life.

He wished such a simple existence for himself.

"The one who approaches should now be in sight, Qui. You may need immediate protection," his allies suddenly chimed in.

Qui chewed his tiny nuts slowly. "Then, protect me."

His allies were uneasy. "Qui, let us remind you that if antagonisms ensue, there may be punishments assessed. We wish to participate in the Migration. We cannot be sacrificed because of your petty squabbles."

"Calm down," he told them.

"But we know who is approaching!"

"So do I," he said, sighing heavily. "It could be no one but Elena."

She is the source of my unhappiness, he suddenly realized. Elena. It is always Elena.

"She can only make things worse," they told him. "She cannot enslave a soul that doesn't wish to be enslaved."

"But she will try."

"It's her nature. Let me handle this. It's *my* incarnation, after all. You each had your chance."

"But remember the Final Day!"

"Yes," Qui said stiffly. "The Final Day is upon us all." Qui glanced along the shore. The waters of the lazy sea lapped at his feet. He waited for Elena's allies—all eight hundred million of them—to shimmer into view with all the wondrous light and luminescence of a globular cluster. He had known that Elena would quickly tire of life on one of the majestic Migration Shields. Even with over a million people—and their attendant allies—ringing each Shield, she was bound to get bored sooner or later. There were few intrigues, few invigorating scandals, almost no gossip-fodder among those waiting for the Final Day. Elena was insatiable. Qui was the only man living—at least as far as he knew—whom she had yet to sample.

And here she was!

The cluster of lights sparkled brightly over the dying ocean, flying low along the southern edge of the world. He knew that she would have some difficulty finding him, because his own allies were not out in force. He kept his allies contained within their jewel for that very reason. He had no desire for company at the moment.

He had finished his evening meal by the time the lights of Elena's allies were upon him.

"I've found you at last!" her throaty voice boomed cheerfully down as she eased over the ruins. The shell

of luminescent allies around her concealed her completely except for her happy, smiling face. Her former incarnations pulsed with the colors that befitted their myriad personalities and dispositions. They sparkled with her excitement.

"So you have," Qui responded with disinterest, sitting alone and exposed upon the fallen pillar. "So, tell me, Elena. Is life that uninteresting in space? Or are you just living dangerously now that the Engineers have informed us of the Final Day?"

The globular cluster bobbed slightly several meters above the ground. "Darling one," she sang, "the Elders have assured me a place upon any Shield I choose, and they have guaranteed that you will be beside me. They are grievously concerned about your foolish quest for happiness. There are children to be had, dear one, and allies to be set free."

Qui looked out over the empty ocean. "So that's it. You've conned the Elders into creating another child."

"Every soul deserves a body in which to work off the millions of years of karma it accumulates upon this woeful earth, dearest one."

"You don't need me to reproduce. You've had a child by almost every man alive."

Still concealing her from view, her allies beamed proudly. "I should be so lucky!" she laughed.

Qui stared up into the multifaceted lights. "You know what they are saying about you on the Shields?"

The lights scintillated gayly. "Oh, darling one, I can imagine!"

Qui picked up the glass bowl his nuts had come in and tossed it idly into the listless waters. "They are saying that you've slept with every man alive—and that those you haven't slept with are your sons." He smiled wryly.

The lights began to slowly drift lower. "And which are you, darling one?"

Qui crossed his arms. "You need nothing from me, Elena. I've nothing to give you."

"But that is not true," she said.

Qui fingered his wrist once again. His allies were sending him silent warnings. He could sense their cautious ripples.

"Elena," Qui began, "my allies are very nervous today. You understand. Please withdraw your own horde."

"Oh," Elena responded happily, "your allies are so suspicious! You have no need to fear me."

"Then show yourself—if you dare."

The gathering of rainbow lights touched down on the marble steps where the pale green waters licked at the drowning ruins. One by one, the allies flickered out of sight, returning like goblins into the bracelet the woman wore at her wrist.

She stood in the beauty of her nakedness, long ash-blond hair falling like the crest of a waterfall down to the base of her spine. Though she had borne many children, her body showed no sign of physical wear. The Engineers could work miracles; Elena was living proof. She was hundreds of years older than Qui, but physically arrested in form to seem only fifteen years his senior.

He had never understood her obsessive desire to own him. Her need for new children could easily be satisfied within the Shields. Her interest in him had always struck him as eccentric. Her single-mindedness was so strong that everything around him often felt distorted, as if there were nothing and no one in the world but him and Elena.

"I would do anything for you," she said, walking slowly toward him. His allies were still wary. He could feel their agitation.

Qui stared at her.

In his own short lifetime, he had known many women. But now they seemed like dreams. Names he had forgotten. Places were only blurs. He was by nature solitary.

But the sight of Elena's mature womanly form began to arouse in him emotions he had thought long lost to the past. He felt as if he'd just awakened beside this shoreline, on this earth, in this spinning galaxy—in this life. His emotions and desires made each moment intense. His allies shuddered with anxiety.

He had to be careful with this woman because his slight arousal had been entirely involuntary; and that alarmed him.

He turned away from her. "You know that I wish to be alone. You might try respecting that wish."

Elena's hearty voice was magnetic, compelling. "We were meant to be together, and I have nothing but time. The Elders say that we would make a joyous coupling. And I would even enter the halls of death with you if I had to."

Qui's allies shimmered in a wave of panic. They didn't like the mention of death. Qui comforted them as best as he could, rubbing his bracelet gently.

"There are no halls of death," he said slowly. "Not true death, anyway. There would be just further and further incarnations, and further imprisonment until liberation is achieved." He looked evenly at her. "And from what I understand, all the Perfect Masters are on the Shields, waiting to travel among the stars. True happiness belongs with them, not with me."

As she sat beside him, his body began reacting to her presence. None of the women he had known were like her.

She whispered, "No one has obsessed me more than you. You seem to be part of me. The Elders say that I bring this feeling from lifetimes of pursuing you. And I shall not let the Final Day pass without our union."

She put a soft, seductive arm about his bare shoulders.

The Elders were seldom wrong in such matters, but he couldn't summon the courage to accept their judgment. As advocated by the great masters of his kind—and even by masters among his allies of lives long gone—he had chosen to forget the past. His birthplace was forgotten. His parents had vanished to their places on the Migration Shields. Yet, this woman called him back to the past—the deeply buried past where the need to love, and to be loved, drove the human spirit to unhappy emotional attachments. Were his allies uncomfortable because they'd seen it all before? Probably. Were they complaining because the anticipated pain might be too much for him this time around? Unquestionably.

"I can make you happy, dear one," she crooned. "You know that. Why is it that you won't let me?"

He looked into the whirlpools of her eyes, and it was like entering a room of infinite mirrors—mirrors to

the halls of past lives and past relationships. And past grief.

"Who are you?" he breathed, facing her seductions. "Why do you bother me so?"

She seemed taken aback by the questions. But she managed a smile. "You worry about things that should long ago have been forgotten. Be happy with who you are, with what you have!"

"I have you," he said, despair hanging like lead weights to the syllables of each word. "And the Final Day."

"You belong to me," she sang. "Happiness is not impossible."

Qui heard something stir in the ruins behind them. It sounded like a fart.

Qui and Elena both turned and saw, to their mutual amazement, a withered, beet-red old man staring at them from the top of a fallen cornice.

He began mimicking Elena's voice. "Romeo, Romeo! Where fa'rt thou, *Romeo*?" A broadside escaped his rear end as he fell backward, laughing hilariously.

Qui stood up quickly, very much surprised. Elena's reaction was most curious.

Apparently, he'd been there for quite some time.

"Who are you?" Elena gasped, covering her nakedness self-consciously.

Qui touched his bracelet and felt the reassuring presence of his allies and their ready power. Why hadn't they warned him?

Elena raged. "How *dare* you interfere with us like this!"

The very earth on which they stood seemed to shake with her indignation.

The scrawny, impish man leaped up on a sheared granite pillar and squatted obscenely. Another cloud of digestive gas escaped him—completely bursting the romantic bubble Elena had created. "I would hardly call this interference," he giggled. "Besides, the whole earth is free for any man to roam, as long as Nicholas here doesn't mind."

Qui stared in total bewilderment. The man clearly was mistaking him for someone else. *Nicholas*? The name was archaic, unfamiliar.

"My name is Qui," he introduced himself quickly. "What are you doing here? I've never seen you before."

The man's skin was a vile purple. He wore only a loincloth that bulged unpleasantly. Elena, seeing him clearly for the first time, staggered backward, a hand between her breasts covering her heart. Qui had never seen her so shaken. His allies began telling him just how much she was revolted by this transgression.

But his allies seemed not to realize there was a third person present. Something totally unheard of was going on, and he didn't like it.

The ugly little man hunkered down, grinning at them.

Elena shook with anger. The man ignored Qui's questions and kept smiling at Elena with his crooked mouth, his head cocked sideways, as if she were a peculiar creature in a planetary zoo.

"Get out of here! I command it!" she yelled, mustering up her courage. Qui was surprised by the strength and arrogance in her voice.

Qui stepped forward. "I think you'd better explain this, whoever you are."

The runt bounced up and down like a protohuman. "The name's Nemosten," he smiled. "I'd shake hands with you, but I fell in something back there..." He began waggling his hand, and a lump of brown-colored slop splattered to the ground at Elena's feet.

"Oh, God," she croaked.

Nemosten kept waggling his hand to rid himself of whatever it was he'd fallen in. "I've been watching you both, so you'd better watch out!" He jumped up suddenly, dancing and clicking his heels. "You'd better not cry, you better be good, I'm telling you why..."

Qui thought the ancient ditty familiar, but couldn't place it. The man was clearly out of his mind.

The hideous creature laughed with a genuine sense of humor. He seemed, just then, less like an old man than a child.

Elena thrust Qui aside with a strong, tawny arm. "There is no Nemosten, either here on the earth or in space! There is only myself and Qui."

"Nicholas," Nemosten said quickly.

"*Qui!*" she shouted.

"Oh, pooh," the man giggled in his child's voice. "Mind you, I am new at the game. But I still have access to all the facts. And you lose, dearie."

"Wait a minute," Qui called out. "Why did you call me Nicholas?"

Elena turned to him savagely, eyes afire. "This man's an imposter! You're not anybody named Nicholas. Banish him! Order your allies out and get rid of him!"

Qui glared at her. The woman had gone crimson with anger and outrage. The swollen sun at the horizon's edge glowed with the same color. Stars flickered on and off as if in accord with Elena's passion.

For an instant, Qui ignored the old man. To Elena he said, "Listen, you have no authority over me. I will not banish him!"

"Good for you, Nickie!" Nemosten laughed, clapping his hands idiotically.

Elena's allies rushed out of her bracelet, surrounding her. Her stance was highly aggressive.

"Ah," Nemosten said, flicking his warty tongue around his broken teeth. "I wouldn't do that, sweetie, if I were you!"

"I can do anything I like!" she snapped.

"Really, now?" Nemosten chanted. "Even as far as taking a man's life from him? You would allow yourself that much?" Before Elena could react, the allies from Nemosten's bracelet burst out and swarmed ruthlessly upon her, blasting her off her feet in a flash of energy. Elena tumbled harmlessly into the shallow water at the base of the ruins.

"You dare do this to me!" she burred. "Oh!"

Qui's allies, without command or prompting, swarmed about him, ringing him with a protective shield. "Trouble!" they warned. "We sense provocation and great violence impending!"

Nemosten pondered Elena in the water, then glanced at Qui. He shrugged philosophically, awaiting Elena's next move.

Lifted by a few million of her allies, Elena was borne from the sea. They surrounded her with a glow of queenly hauteur. "I shall report you immediately to the Elders," she announced. She acted as if sentence had already been passed. To Nemosten, she said, "You shall not participate in the Great Migration."

"Is that so?" Nemosten asked, bemused.

"Yes, it is true. Physical assault is strictly forbidden."

"This is great," Nemosten said to Qui. "No wonder they've refused to let me play with her before. I'll bet that deep down inside she's a real nice person. It's hard to tell, though."

"What are you babbling about?" Qui asked. Had the Elders turned loose a madman from one of the Shields?

"This woman here," Nemosten pointed suddenly. "It is she who commits all the crimes. I've done nothing but throw her into the water. Poor sad one."

Nemosten had been looking at Qui just then. Poor sad one. He felt threatened. His allies closed in about him.

Elena stepped out of her halo of allies onto the marble landing. She took several deep breaths and closed her eyes in a kind of meditative exercise, as if to clear her mind of troublesome individuals. But when she opened them, troublesome Nemosten was still there. He smiled and waved from his gargoyles' crouch.

"Yoo-hoo!"

She stared at him. "I've commanded you to be gone. You have no business here," she said in a collected voice.

"Nor, I might add," replied Nemosten, "do you."

"I have come for my loved one," she told him. Her allies were assembled to one side. "And I will not leave without him."

Nemosten tapped a gnarled finger to his chest. "You enslave a heart that wishes not to be enslaved. That right, Heart?" He smothered his mouth with his withered hands, and giggled hugely. Spittle formed at his chin. His eyes rolled back in his head.

*Heart?* Qui stared at the man. Nickie?

Qui stood uncomprehendingly. The words of the creature were beginning to alarm him. His allies circled him with another protective layer. *Heart!* A jab of electricity shimmered through his body as he tried to recall what associations that word had for him.

"Stop that!" Elena yelled. "I love him! You *do not* have the right to be here!"

"I think we've already established that," Nemosten said, bouncing up and down.



Elena turned quickly to Qui. "Let us fly off to another place. There is nothing for you here."

A wave of electricity shot through his allies. Qui didn't feel it, but it was so intense that the allies flashed a single reddish glow.

"Allies?" Qui queried. Could something be wrong?

"No!" Elena shouted in alarm, rushing over to him.

His allies brightened back to normal, but they would not let her touch him.

"You see?" Nemosten laughed. "You repulse him. Facts are facts, sweetie. Why don't you just leave the boy alone?"

Elena stepped away from Qui, turning to Nemosten. She raised her arms. Nemosten was instantly struck with the full force of her allies as they burst out in a massive explosion. Qui was knocked back by the aftershock of the explosion.

But the object of her violence was lifted above the ruins, and only his own allies saved him from injury. Qui watched as the little man tumbled out of sight, gyrating into the darkness that had begun growing in the east since the huge sun had set. Nemosten screamed and vanished from sight.

"I will not be defied!" Elena exclaimed. Qui stood beside a protective pillar. Elena was catching her breath. Her chest heaved as her allies withdrew into her bracelet. Qui had never in his brief life known such violence.

The woman was determined.

But Qui knew that she would not harm him, although his allies, with all their cumulative experience of millions of incarnations, suspected differently. Qui stepped from behind the pillar. Elena faced him with a warm smile, her anger gone.

"We are alone at last," she said passionately.

He walked up to her, withdrawing his own allies—much to their alarm. But he had to know what was transpiring here. He had to force her hand.

"You love me," he said.

"Yes," she responded. "I always have."

"Then, prove it to me."

"Gladly, darling one," she said. She acted as if Nemosten and his cryptic words were part of a distant past.

Qui held out his hand. "Give me your ally bracelet."

Elena gasped.

The bracelet was life itself. It was as if he had asked for her entire blood supply. Without her allies to protect her from the elements, provide her with nourishment, and carry her over the earth, she would be lost instantly, and dead within days. The allies endowed their bearers with the power of gods. The combined knowledge of the past was at one's instant disposal. The allies could do almost anything.

The sky was darkening, but the two human beings at the far end of time could still make out each other's eyes.

Elena lowered her head. "That is too much to ask."

Qui could almost hear her heart beating. His allies twittered, once again flashing red for a brief instant.

Qui said, "Look, you relentlessly pursue me, coming and going as you please. You don't care what I might be involved with at any given moment. Your words are hollow to me. Prove to me just how much you're willing to sacrifice for your love."

Elena stood before him, her shoulders erect, proud of her image. She had come to a decision.

She ripped the bracelet from her wrist and tossed it to him.

Startled by her boldness, he caught it before it hit the ground. The lights within the jewel fluctuated with a different, almost alien, energy. It was peculiar to hold so many incarnations of another human being in his hand.

She was calling his bluff.

"You have my soul. I can't tell you how much you mean to me," she said softly. "My entire world is made up of you, and you only."

He didn't doubt the sincerity of her words, as everything in nature acted in accord with her confession. The stars to the east glowed in a beatific light. Migrating vultures over the dark ocean cried their loneliness—Elena's loneliness. Everything seemed in harmony with her gesture.

"Without my allies I am dead," she informed him, holding up her chin, waiting for his judgment.

The electric pulses that had earlier prodded his flesh were returning. Red lights danced in his spine, then disappeared.

He could understand Elena appearing this particular afternoon to petition for his affections. The Final Day could occur at any moment. She had good reason for being in his life. But Nemosten? Qui knew of no one by that name in the handful of humans left upon the earth.

And what were these surges of energy?

"Allies," he commanded. "Out!"

Elena jumped in surprise. "What? What are you doing, dear one? Come back!"

Qui's multicolored allies swiftly surrounded him in all their majesty. "Up!"

His allies lifted him over the ruins. He continued to grasp Elena's precious ally bracelet.

"Qui!" she screamed. "Please don't do this!"

"Listen to me, Elena," Qui spoke from the haven of his allies. "More has happened to me in these last few minutes than in my entire lifetime. I am not your consort, nor am I your toy. I don't care what the Elders say. You will not deter me from my quest."

Elena followed the steps up from the water, looking upward at the glowing craft that Qui's allies had become.

"Dearest!" she pleaded. "Not the bracelet!"

It was a crime, he knew. The Crime of Crimes. But he knew that in this case the Elders would not fault him for temporarily putting a stop to Elena.

He circled her once, then soared inland above the desolate city. Her cries of outrage echoed through the ruins behind him.

He flew suspended by the magic of his allies.

His allies brightened with power as he flew above the city's mausoleumlike streets. He kept well within sight of the shoreline where Elena now ran after him over the sunken marble flagstones. He flew up the long curve of a hill and found a tall slender pillar that had managed to endure all the vagaries of time and decay. He descended gently and placed the ally bracelet atop it, knowing that Elena could see his gesture. After a night's walk and a morning's struggle to topple the marble column, she'd have her magic bracelet back.

But he knew she would pursue him even with the Final Day imminent. No matter how much he wanted to be alone, she'd be there. In life and in death, there would always be Elena. His theft of the bracelet was only a temporary measure. But during the time it left him free, he would be able to continue his musings, his search.

He had new questions, thanks to Nemosten. The Final Day had been carefully planned by the Elders on the Migration Shields. Yet Qui knew that the funny old man, Nemosten, was not part of those plans. What plan was he part of?

As Qui flew northeast into the darkness, he found no trace of Nemosten. Had Elena's allies destroyed him totally? Murder had not been known to happen on the earth in thousands of years. It was unthinkable.

Periodic blasts from one's allies was also unheard of. There was something else he had to consider—possible ally dysfunction. He'd have to get to the Engineers up on the Migration Shields to have it analyzed properly, but there would be time for that later.

Or would there?

How much time did anyone have?

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## Chapter Two

FOR MOST OF the night he flew inland, abandoning the coastline and its ragged remnants of cities. Elena could track him easily through the ruins.

Nowhere in his flight did he ever come across Nemosten.

The peculiar crimson flashes of power from his ally bracelet had ceased, perhaps because that power had to be used for flight. In any case, his escape was complete. He was alone. The night sky itself provided the light that the moon had once given, and the land beneath him was entirely illuminated by the stars of the galactic core.

The sky was nearly solid with stars. The galactic center was only a few thousand light-years away now.

The Migration Shields, composed of reassembled matter from the moon and the inner planets, appeared like black holes punched out in the patina of the cosmos. The flat disks, lined with the glowing allies of eager earthlings, were waiting for the death throes of their sun. When the Final Day burst on them all, the Migration Shields would be propelled outward like seeds from a dandelion blossom—space kites sailing in every direction into the universe.

There was a beauty, a poetry in that thought. Men had long ago gone to the stars, but Qui knew that his life was with the earth. As one of his allies was so fond of saying, "Earth is the place for love...."

Yet the word "Blossom" tugged at the back of his mind. It was as if there was a drama unfolding around him that had begun long ago. *Sanskaras*, his allies had told him, were impressions of former lives. They moved with their boatload of karma from one incarnation to the next, and allies were nothing but the accumulated power of the impressions of those former lives.

But this was happening now.

In the starry light, he followed one of the peculiar iron trails that snaked its way across the land and dipped into the earth at intervals like a deep-sea dragon. Usually, at one end of such trails, ruins could be found. Perhaps in the ruins at the end of this trail he could find some peace, even though his allies were urging him onward. They kept after him with whisperings of, "Final Day! Final Day!"

Finding some rare northern ruins, he felt disappointed. The buildings of stone and metal had been worn away significantly, and moss hung here and there like the drapes of a funeral shroud. Time had so changed the complexion of the land that nothing remained to tell its identity, although he felt sure that somewhere among his allies would be a former inhabitant of this city.

But the instant he set foot on the earth, the crimson flash occurred again. He stumbled, carried by his forward momentum; but it quickly disappeared.

"Allies!"

"Yes?"

"What was that? What's wrong?"

They didn't respond. A few sentinel allies had seeped outside the talismanic jewel and hovered about him now like tiny iridescent insects.

"Allies?"

"Yes," they said in ghostly unison. "We are here."

"Well?"

"We don't know what you're talking about. We noticed nothing."

"What do you mean, you noticed nothing? It was a flash of the red-and-purple allies—the warrior class of incarnations. Surely, you—"

"Sorry, Qui," they said.

He considered just then the possibility of contacting an Engineer. One of them would know. Still, his allies had brought him here with no problem, and the sentinel allies, no bigger than ancient gnats, corroborated their lack of awareness of the flash.

He tapped his bracelet, but got no physical response. Odd, he thought. But no odder than what had happened earlier that night.

Suddenly the crimson flash occurred again, scattering the sentinel allies around him.

"Hey!" he shouted. There was no pain, though. The crimson allies seemed to rush out and rush back in. Some danced up and down his spine.

All was done in a single burst.

"Now tell me you didn't notice that!" he shouted.

"We didn't," they said. "Truthfully."

He found a comfortable spot against a crumbling wall. The light of the galactic core shone down upon him. The huge Migration Shields eclipsed whole portions of the sky. What if the bracelet shorted out? What if its bio-circuits had mysteriously fused?

Or worse: What if Elena had contacted the Elders, and they were stripping him of his allies' power?

Then he realized that Elena couldn't have recovered her jewel that quickly.

The Migration Shields. There was safety. There awaited the next step in man's cosmic evolution: *Homo interstellaris*. Had he gone up there as Elena wished, then the bracelet would not be in danger. Everything would be safe, secure, far from the dangerous earth. The place for love.

Then came another blast. And another.

"Allies," he breathed, for he was suddenly giddy. The flashes were causing him surprising jolts of pleasure.

"Yes, Qui?"

"Some of the sentinels are around me. What do they report is happening?"

There was a pause. A crimson blast surrounded him suddenly, followed by two more in short sequence. Then a longer blast.

Qui found himself standing upright, away from the ruins. He felt like a miniature thunderstorm, lightning and all. Except in this case, each bolt brought him unaccountable joy.

"Allies? Have the sentinels anything to say?"

The sentinels buzzed around him.

Another burst. Then another.

"I have never felt this way before," he said. He looked at his bracelet.

His allies spoke. "There isn't anything wrong with the bracelet, or among us. One of the sentinels, though, has recommended that you take note of the order and duration of the blasts."

"Order and duration? What are you talking about?"

Three more blasts, right in a row. Qui was almost blinded by the sheer pleasure of the jolts. He was now sitting on the gentle grasses of the ruin.

"This is incredible," he said.

Among the ruins at his back were feathertrees, mindlessly singing in the slight wind. The breeze and the reedy song of the feathertrees seemed to synchronize with the whisperings of his allies as they debated among themselves. If they didn't know what was going on, then he was in big trouble.

Suddenly he was nearly pulverized by the euphoria of several quick bursts of reddish light.

"Qui, we believe that you are receiving messages of some kind," the allies told him. He was lying underneath a wonderful feathertree.

"Messages?" If someone was trying to communicate with him, they were certainly getting his attention.

"The sentinel believes that the bursts are in an ancient code," they reported.

"This is absurd."

"Be that as it may, you are receiving a message in Morse code."

He laughed. His neurons were tingling. The notion was preposterous. Why communicate with a method so primitive—albeit so orgasmic—when the allies knew a dozen more advanced forms of communication? Morse code?

"Will you people quit fooling around?" he demanded.

The next thing he knew, he was hanging over a marble bench, with his sentinels trying to catch up. He'd received over seventeen quick jolts. Some long. Some short. Each one, though, made him insensible with pleasure.

"Translate the message," Qui commanded. "Quick!" He didn't know how much more he could take, though the allies seemed to be enjoying it.

"Well?" he screamed.

The bursts returned, and he found himself leaning against a white stucco wall. The feathertrees hummed.

"It's incomplete," the allies said in their combined voices.

"Incomplete? How long does it take, anyway?"

"Each word has to be spelled out—"

"Eachword? "

More blasts, and each seemed to hold within it all the physical pleasures he'd known in each of his incarnations. Pleasures mounted upon pleasures. His heart was nearly bursting, his circuits overloading.

"We've deciphered it," they suddenly announced. The sentinel allies swarmed about him happily.

"It says, and we quote: *Prepare for withdrawal. Alejandra to be stopped soon. Don't worry. Pleasure not real. Enjoy it while you can.* "

"Pleasure not real? What's going on here?" he demanded. "Look, people, I realize this business of being away from the Migration Shields has upset you, but that's no reason to pull a hoax on me. This is my life, and it's only fair that I live it as I see fit."

"This is no hoax, Qui," the allies told him. "Some of the message had begun coming through when you were fighting with Elena. There may be more."

"Wonderful," he groaned. He didn't know if he could take any more information like this. Then he said, "All right. Assuming that this data transmission system isn't a dysfunction of the bracelet, who then is sending the messages? And who is this Alejandra person?"

Nothing of the transmission made any sense. Like the name *Nemosten*, the name *Alejandra* did not belong to his era. This was madness.

"We have no idea what is going on, Qui. Stop yelling at us."

Qui sat in silence, watching the spectacular sky slowly twist toward dawn. Several more blasts flattened him before the allies spoke up.

"There's another message coming through," they reported. "Wait for it."

"Wait for it?" he shivered. "Is it someone on the Shields trying this, or what?"

"We don't believe so," they said. "Please stand by."

He groaned, tingling all over.

A dozen more crimson flashes surrounded him in rapid order, illuminating the ruins where he lay.

"We've translated it," they swiftly returned. Even the sentinel allies in the air seemed poised for the information.

"Well, what is it?"

The allies seemed hesitant this time, shifting their rainbow colors within the jewel with a profound uneasiness.

"Well?"

"This message wasn't sent by the same agency as the first one, Qui."

"I don't care who sent it, just tell me what it says!" Once this little episode was over, he was going to look into whether or not this sort of thing had happened to anyone before.

His allies spoke. "The message simply says: *I love you, Nick.* "

Qui stood up slowly. He stumbled away from the ruined wall and the ancient carved stones. He tapped his bracelet. "All right. I want to know what is going on. I want someone in there to tell me what that last message meant."

The wind chime voices of the allies responded. "We can't explain it any better than you can, Qui. The Elders and the Engineers do not send messages this way, but we registered two different sources."

"This is ridiculous," he muttered.

He found a fallen stone pillar on which to sit. He looked up at the great Migration Shields. Dawn was not too far away, and he knew that from their great height the sunrise could already be seen. Was this a prank Elena had persuaded a willing Engineer to undertake for spite? Or might this be some sort of advance warning for the Final Day?

Still, what about the content of the messages themselves? Who was this Nick? Nemosten had called him Nickie. Could one thing have anything to do with the other?

"Allies," he commanded once again, now that the crimson messages seemed to have ceased—if only temporarily.

"Yes, Qui."

"What about these names, Nick and Nickie? I assume they are derivative of one another, and that there is a gathering of former incarnations among you by that name."

"Correct," they quickly said. "It is a name universally derivative of 'Nicholas' and was common to the time of earth's middle life. Shall we enumerate and describe them all for you?"

"Are you kidding?" he retorted. "We'd be here all night."

To enumerate and describe only a fraction of the lives of his eight hundred million incarnations would take them well past the Final Day.

"Just tell me how many incarnations come from the name Nicholas alone," he said.

"Of the name Nicholas your *atma* drew about it six hundred four thousand thirty-seven incarnations. There are numerous other variations, such as Claus, Colin, Nicol, Niccolo, Nickolaus, Nicholai, Nikita, Nikki, Nikolos, and so on. The Colins alone run upward of three thousand. You are correct. We would be here all night."

Qui stood up in the brilliant starlight at the world's end. "Allies, is it possible that someone is trying to communicate with one of the Nicholases among my former lives?"

The allies were quiet. They hadn't thought of that.

"It's possible," they said. "But who'd want to dig so deep into the past? What could they possibly have to tell him?"

What, indeed, Qui wondered.

He walked away from the ancient wall to where a long avenue of flat marble divided the dead city's eloquent ruins. A small, lazy stream trickled down the center of the street. The water was clean and clear, and in the starlight Qui could make out tiny fishes flitting around the water lilies that grew on the edges of the broken marble avenue. How simple their lives were! When the Final Day burst the bubble of the sun's helium shell, the earth would sizzle and pop in a breath's instant—and the little fish would know nothing of what had happened. One minute they would be fish, and the next their *atmas* would be wandering the universe, looking for the next higher step in their spiritual evolution. But it wouldn't be on the earth. Like human beings, *or homo interstellaris*, they would have to incarnate elsewhere.

He stared down into the waters to see if he could make out his reflection. The light from the Milky Way was bright enough—but the surface of the stream was too distorted. Nothing seemed clear—everything in his world shifted and shimmered.

"Qui," his allies sang out.

"Yes?"

"Someone is nearby. We can feel it."



Qui turned around in the darkness. Elena? So soon? No. His allies would have seen her approach.

But someone was indeed standing not too far away in the fragile doorway to a half-buried, moss-inflicted ruin. The apparition put a hand above its head and gently parted the curtain of moss. The figure stepped out almost stealthily.

"Allies," Qui whispered. His allies, he recalled suddenly, had not known of Nemosten's presence in the ruins down the coast, although now they were perceiving someone. "Is this Nemosten?" he quickly whispered, crouching beside the stream.

"No," they answered.

"Is there any perceived danger here?"

"None."

"Identify the individual," he commanded.

"Impossible," they said. "The individual is not wearing an ally bracelet."

"What?"

This was impossible. Every human being alive possessed an ally bracelet, because every human being alive possessed former selves. Some had many more than others, but everyone had them. The bracelets had been handed down long ago by the First Engineers. These same Engineers had moved the earth out beyond the orbit of Mars when the sun first started expanding. The jeweled bracelets allowed an *atma*, whether currently male or female, to have at its disposal all of its former incarnations. War, strife, competition, and petty jealousy vanished because the knowledge of the misery they brought was ever-present.

There *was* one person on the planet without an ally bracelet—Elena. But Elena was hundreds of miles away.

A slight breeze came up at his back as Qui watched the figure step across the grass of the ruins.

It was a woman.

She came into view hesitantly, looking around as if the world—despite its solitude and emptiness—was a world newly filled with wonders. Qui watched her, not knowing if she had seen him standing beside the broken avenue and the creek.

The woman's apparel was strange. She wore a kind of pant-and-blouse arrangement that hadn't adorned the female figure in millions of years. And *shoes*.

This, he suddenly concluded, was a woman out of the far distant past. What she was doing here, he did not know. She certainly didn't live among these ruins.

She saw him.

"Oh!" she gasped.

Her hair was dark brown, and her eyes sparkled in the stellar light. She seemed to be about his own age—relatively speaking.

"I didn't mean to startle you," Qui said.

The allies in his bracelet shimmered. The sentinel allies fluctuated in a maze of color. The woman's eyes followed their racing, dodging, and weaving with a childlike fascination.

"It's like a dream!" she whispered excitedly. She looked about her. "They didn't say it'd be anything like this at all!"

Qui stepped away from the creek. He pointed to her wrist. "Where is your ally bracelet?" he asked.

His own allies fluoresced with uneasiness, but he knew they were able to surround him instantly if he should be threatened. "Watch out, Qui. Be careful!"

"Quiet," he told them.

The woman looked harmless, but a million allies waited within the shimmering jewel to tell him just how "harmless" certain women had been with his atma over the aeons. And some men as well.

The girl glanced down at her wrist and touched it self-consciously with her right hand. "They told me that I wouldn't need one."

She looked around at the ruins, the singing feathertrees, and the laughing creek. Qui had never before seen a woman who dressed or acted this way. Most peculiar!

"What a wonderful place," she uttered, her eyes glittering in the light from the heart of the galaxy. The sight of the orbiting Migration Shields dazzled her, and she gasped, mouth open in astonishment.

"Then you don't live here," Qui stated. He walked up to her. "Where do you come from?"

She looked at him. "My home," she began haltingly, as if she were trying to place the words together with their accustomed meanings. "My home is in Sierra Vista. Yes, Sierra Vista."

Qui had never heard of such a place.

"You'll have to forgive me," she said. "I'm not used to this. They told me to look for Nicholas. Nicholas Tejada. Do you know him? They said he'd be nearby. I didn't mean to interrupt you like this, but they thought I might be able to help."

Nicholas. That name again.

His allies desperately wanted to be set free of their jewel.

"I'd like to find this Nicholas person myself. Apparently, he's very popular. But who are you?"

What kind of human being would dare go about without her ally bracelet?

She looked around, nervous, acting as if she had just been caught trespassing. "My name is Rhoanna Martín," she said. "They told me I would home in on him. I guess they were wrong. You haven't seen him, have you?"

"I don't know anyone by the name of Nicholas, but I would like to know who is looking for him."

"His friends are looking for him," she said, stepping closer. "They wanted me to locate him and tell him they were going to trigger the Final Day to get him out."

"I don't understand," Qui said. "Get him out of what?" Surely they didn't mean to take a single ally from within his bracelet?

Rhoanna Martín looked about her at the wonders in the sky and in the ruins. "This, I guess," she said with a gesture that encompassed everything.

"This?" Qui looked at her curiously. "What do you mean by 'this'?"

"Alejandra," Rhoanna Martin said.

Then, as if timed perfectly to Rhoanna Martín's fateful words, the crimson blasts of pleasure crashed around him. He fell to the ground.

It was embarrassing.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked. She looked alarmed; she did not know what was going on.

She came close to where he lay and placed a warm hand on his shoulder. For a moment he felt a slight tremor through his body. It was not unpleasant. It had a feeling of connectedness. Her touch was the only thing in the world that seemed real.

He looked up at her. Her voice seemed so familiar, yet so remote. She could've been sent by the Elders to look for this Nicholas—and he, Qui, was merely a victim of circumstances. Perhaps she was an Elder herself, an Elder so powerful as not to require an ally bracelet. But that was almost beyond belief.

More ecstatic "messages" encircled his pleasure-racked flesh.

"What's happening to you?" the woman asked, standing back.

Qui held up a hand. "It's not your fault," he panted. "I'm getting used to this sort of thing."

The allies in his jewel chimed out. "It's almost in, Qui. Wait."

Rhoanna helped him over to a broken pillar, where he sat down with a grateful sigh.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I believe I'm receiving messages for your friend Nicholas," he told her with much chagrin. "Excuse me," he smiled, as several long and short reddish-purple concussions burst around him.

Then the crimson warrior-caste allies disappeared back into their jewel.

"We've translated the message, Qui," the allies told him.

Rhoanna looked on, fascinated.

"Well? What is it?" Qui demanded.

It merely said, "*You're mine, Nickie, all mine.*"

That was when Rhoanna Martín gasped at the starry darkness, staring at him.

Qui still shook from the rapturous pleasures which had pummeled his body. She pointed a nervous, almost accusatory finger at him.

"My God," she whispered. "Nick! *You're Nick!*"

Qui froze. The expression upon Rhoanna Martín's face was one of real surprise—it was obvious that she saw something in his situation that he did not. Perhaps the ruins were havens for insane people.

Nemosten. Rhoanna Martín. Alejandra. Some were allowed ally bracelets, others not. They could even wear clothes. It made sense.

He was miserably confused.

She bravely stepped closer to him.

"That's right," she said excitedly. "They said that in this vision of the future she was doing something strange to you, and this is it."

Qui stood away from the pillar. "Listen to me. I don't know who you are, or what this is all about. But I do know that I am *not* this person you're seeking." He then pointed to her right wrist. "And I still want to know where your ally bracelet is."

"Oh, no," she was insistent. "It's you, Nick. I know it's you! They told me she had you trapped and wouldn't let you go. But they didn't tell me you'd look so different."

"Damn the Elders!" he cried out. "I'm *not* your Nick! Has everybody gone crazy all of a sudden?"

The surges of pleasure throughout his body had done something to him. He didn't mind the jolts so much as the idea that he was being used as a medium of transmission. And then to be victimized by apparently deranged individuals when all he wanted was to be left alone was a little too much.

It was clear that Rhoanna Martín was very aware of his uneasiness. She was also confused. A slight breeze wafted through the feathertrees of the ruin, spinning a beautiful music as it went.

With great trepidation, she began, "Well, they did say that you might be in a different form. But they also said I'd have no problem recognizing you. They said something about incarnations, about how this might be a different version of you. I just *know* it's you, Nick."

His head was swirling with nonsense. Rhoanna Martín seemed so sincere; and so rational were her words that there was no way he could simply regard her as insane, even without her ally bracelet.

However, *someone* wanted Nicholas Tejada, and that particular someone was using Qui's body to get to him—or at least trying to.

"So, you think this Nicholas person is an incarnation of mine?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said softly. "But they told me that the first person I would meet when I got here would be Nicholas. You were the only one around. But something about you feels right."

How could such a thing be? The whole concept behind reincarnation was that an atma's accumulated karma had to be worked off through a succession of lives. Nicholas Tejada had had his turn. Now it was Qui's moment on the Great Wheel. According to the laws of *dharma*, Tejada's karma would be passed on down the line. It would be part of Qui's life, something he'd have to work out.

"Allies," he finally commanded.

"We are here," they dutifully responded.

"Who is this Nicholas Tejada person?"

Rhoanna watched him closely, shifting her gaze from his face to the cluster of miraculous voices speaking from his wrist.

"One of us," they told him.

"One of *me* , you mean."

"Yes," they agreed. "Shall he be summoned forth?"

Qui thought about all the Nicholases, and of the millions of incarnations, who bore that name. Each would have led different lives. Some on the earth. Some in space. They would have seen the entire history of the planet unfold.

"I think it would be prudent to get to the bottom of this," Qui said.

"What are you going to do?" Rhoanna asked. Her eyes were like dark stars in the night. He found her quite lovely, certainly more so than Elena. Elena's obsessiveness ruined her physical beauty. He'd never told her that because she usually consorted with citizens who danced to her tune more readily. Rhoanna Martín was different.

"Prepare for transfer," Qui said to his allies. "Summon Tejada. I want to find out what this is all about."

"As you wish," they said.

Rhoanna gasped. The allies flashed out from the bracelet in a luminescent shell, engulfing Qui completely, undulating and shimmering in all their glory.

Qui became just another ally, and now it was Nicholas who stood forth.

Wide awake, he stood in the crystalline light as if he'd just woken from a dream. He blinked several times and shuddered, shaking off the birth pangs of his transformation. When his mind cleared he saw Rhoanna.

She stepped away from the pillar with a slight smile on her face.

"Nick?"

"Rhoanna!" It was like a vision of the heavenly host.

He looked around with the quick glance of a finch suddenly set free from its cage. He stared at Rhoanna.

"Rhoanna," he started. "What are you doing here?"

She stepped over to him carefully. "Listen, Nick. They sent me to try to find you. This is really weird, honey. It's nothing like they said it would *beat all*."

Nicholas was more than a little confused. "Wait, wait!" he told her. "Slow down. What are you talking about? What is this place, anyway?"

He looked at her, standing there so inescapably real—and the earth and sky around him so inescapably unreal.

A memory came back to him: *There she was. Standing in a doorway at dawn. San Diego. Her clandestine lover is leaving. There is a glow of deep sexual satisfaction on her face....*

He staggered. What had happened to Cesyra? And there had been a younger girl, even further back in time than she. Lexie. Insatiable Lexia of the world which had survived that terrible war.

His mind seemed to lose its hinge pins. How long had he been held in this mnemonic stasis?

And Elena! Who was Elena?

"I'm losing my mind," he said.

Rhoanna Martín had been dead for millions—if not billions—of years. She had to be! Nothing else made sense, unless Qui's whole life on the earth had been a dream, an illusion.

Yet, there she was, real as could be, right in front of him.

Rhoanna spoke slowly, carefully. "Listen, Nick, they said this was going to be a great shock. But they said not to worry. I really had my doubts about coming in here like this..."

"Hold on," he interrupted her. "Just hold it a minute. Who are you talking about?"

Rhoanna cleared her throat. "Melissa Salazar," she said. "She said that Alejandra had transformed you, and that they couldn't get you out." She paused as he tried to take in the information and make some sense of it. She seemed contrite, somehow. Embarrassed. She looked at him. "I realize that after all that's happened between us I shouldn't be here, but they told me they'd tried everything else they could think of."

"Melissa?" Nicholas stared at her. It was like a bolt of lightning. "You mean Melissa *Salazar*?"

"Yes," Rhoanna said quickly. "They said that Alejandra's really got you and that she isn't letting go."

I am definitely losing my mind, he thought.

"I wish someone would tell me what's going on here," he said, turning around to face the sky.

"But, don't you know? They said you'd probably know what's happening by now."

She looked like Rhoanna. She sounded like Rhoanna. "Listen," he said. "I just woke up to all of this. I don't know where I am or how you even got here!"

If this is a dream, he thought, it's a real humdinger.

Rhoanna touched him gently. "Mnemos Nine went sentient about three months ago when you went under at the time of the Scare. This is all a dream. Melissa said they've been in after you several times, but Alejandra won't let go. Don't you know you're still plugged into the system?"

Nicholas spun around. Rhoanna's words had hardly been spoken when he'd seen something glitter deep within the chuckling stream which ran down the ancient avenue.

The creek suddenly burst apart with life and light, and a long, multicolored streamer of allies shattered forth and soared past him.

"Rhoanna!" he yelled, turning.

The enormous wave of superhot allies lashed out angrily and swarmed around Rhoanna Martín with the fury of ten thousand exploding suns.

Qui's allies protected him, but Rhoanna was instantly consumed in a hellfire of blinding light. What was left of her fell to the charred grasses, trailing ugly banners of smoke.

"My God," Nicholas breathed from within his fortress of Qui's strongest allies.

Elena rose from the creek, her long ash-blond hair soaking wet and pressed against the smooth skin of her back. She climbed onto the broken avenue with a kind of sepulchral pride. Anger smoldered in her eyes. Her allies spun around her, vassals waiting to serve their queen.

Nicholas forced himself to his feet. Qui's allies kept a thick hull of light between him and the furious woman.

"You killed her!" he said.

"She was just an illusion. I didn't kill anyone. You ought to know that. Those who are jealous of me don't want me to have anything to do with you. But they don't belong here."

Nick had Qui's memories. And though those memories seemed illusions, he still knew enough about Elena to realize that he was in a great deal of danger. What he needed was time to think this through.

Could he still be in Mnemos Nine? Was that possible?

Elena stepped slowly out onto the turf. Her allies had all swarmed back into her bracelet, and she stood before him virtually basking in the light Qui's armed allies cast in the night.

She smiled. It was the smile of a child who had finally got what she wanted. She meticulously squeezed water out of her rope of hair, then smoothed the droplets from her breasts with her hands. In a slow, easy motion her hands passed down the sides of her ribs, to her wide hips.

Though Nick stood protected by Qui's allies, he could feel her massive sexual pull. His body, while enjoying the tease, was at the same time aware of her threat.

Elena was trying to get to him any way she could. What was Elena's relation to Alejandra? If he was in Mnemos Nine—and this he could not quite believe—he could be in a great deal of trouble. Elena could be part of the whole scenario. Her enigmatic words suggested as much.

He looked into her eyes, and saw the souls of spiders.

She laughed then, and in that laughter springs of unpleasant recollections returned to him. His betrayal and loss were always someone else's gain.

"No one can take you from me," she said. "Not even illusions. Whether you stay as Qui or as Nicholas, it doesn't matter. You're mine, and you always will be."

The body of Rhoanna Martín dissolved in the wind. Within seconds nothing was left but a pile of ash, and then that too was gone. It was as if Rhoanna Martín had never existed.

What kind of game was Elena playing? Or was it reality? The way Rhoanna had made it sound, it seemed as if his mind and body were being manipulated merely for Elena's pleasure—and his pain. And from what he recalled of Qui's life—as dreamlike as it seemed to him—it had been so. Elena had been everywhere in his life.

"The situation is now completely in my control," she announced.

It was just the kind of blank statement of the facts a computer would make. Mnemos Nine. Alejandra!

Elena's next move took him entirely by surprise. She merely walked over, and with her bare hands spread apart his layer of allies and shooed them away as if they were fireflies of a summer's evening.

"Hey!" he yelled.

She laughed. "I can do without allies for a while. They're such nuisances."

The goddess stood before him. Her eyes glowed in the night. Her smile had become elfin, prankish. And though he was new to this world, logic told him that allies should not be dispersed so easily.

His body, quite beyond his control, was becoming alarmingly warm with sexual excitement. The night sky, awash with stars and Migration Shields, began seething and pulsating in a harmonic frenzy, as if everything in the universe fluctuated synchronously with Elena's magic and his own hormones.

Elena pushed him to the ground, and he found himself pinned to the soft green grass, staring up at the Milky Way. Shackles of glittering warrior allies held his wrists and ankles in place. He couldn't move.

"Now wait—"

Forces of electrical excitement shot throughout his body, quite like those of Qui's "messages," only much more intense. Every nerve ending rose with joy. He was out of control, and knew it. Elena's long hair caressed his chest as she drew herself down on him. He had to gasp for air. The world seemed to swelter in rushes of pleasure he could not stop.

Abruptly, a voice rang out from Elena's ally bracelet. It startled them both with its urgency.

"The Final Day! All citizens, alert! The Engineers are triggering the Final Day! Prepare to disembark!"

Elena pulled up short.

"What?" she said to her bracelet. "Don't be ridiculous. There's no such thing, and you know it."

"But it's true!" came the same panicked accretion of voices. "We must flee! What the Elders say is true!"

Elena stood up angrily. "Nonsense!" she shouted. "Our sun isn't the kind of star that just blows up when it's through!"

Nicholas noted how the uncontrollable fires within him seemed to be diminishing—as if Elena's allies were telling the truth and Elena herself believed them.

Nicholas suddenly noticed—from his unfortunate vantage point—that a few of the planetary Migration Shields were indeed beginning to move off.

Elena glanced down at Nick and saw him staring up into the sky. She seemed torn. But when she looked up at the huge Shields, she jerked with recognition. It was true.

"No!" she shouted, seeing the giant space kites moving out of formation.

She stared down at Nicholas, but he said nothing. He was still recovering from the joy pains she had sent through him. But the Migration Shields were indeed departing. Nick realized that they would have to be moving at a tremendous rate of speed in order for their motion to be seen from the earth.

"Stop!" Elena shrieked, standing atop a fallen pillar. "I command it! There is no such thing as the Final Day!"

The earth shuddered deep within its ancient bowels. Elena shook with majestic outrage.

Her allies surrounded her. She left an anxious few to hold Nicholas prisoner on the ground.



"I refuse to let this happen!" she said as her allies encased her with all the colors of the spectrum. "I've worked so hard to get you, I am not about to let you be taken from me!"

Nicholas watched helplessly as she rose above the ruins, above the singing feathertrees, up into the sky like an angel of vengeance. The Migration Shields were millions of miles away. She would have a long way to travel to reach them, unless the rules were easier to change than he thought.

But up she went, and she was soon lost among the stars of the frosty night sky.

It is just as well, Nicholas thought. Maybe she couldn't, after all, control everything.

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## Chapter Three

NICHOLAS LAY IN the grass and drew upon his Foresee training. He let the world sink into his senses. The great Migration Shields continued their slow, unearthly pirouettes as they moved away from the sun's impending death. But nowhere among them could Nicholas discern the glow of Elena's angry and desperate allies trying to shepherd them back into formation, back into the illusion they were supposed to serve.

"There you are," said a voice he thought he'd never hear again.

Nicholas tried to turn to see the newcomer, but his shackles held him in place. Footsteps approached over the fractured avenue, and within seconds a dark form came into view.

"Derek," Nicholas breathed. He rested his head back on the ground. Then his Foresee reflexes came back to him: This might be another illusion.

Mallory approached and knelt down on one knee where Nicholas lay pinned. "You're a hard man to get hold of, son," he said, but there was nothing lighthearted in his voice.

He looked at Nicholas's wrist shackles and suddenly, as if struck by a passing breath of air, the allies vanished. Derek was wearing a Foresee tunic—the regular in-system outfit, designed to accommodate IV units and various electronic monitoring devices—which they used for long-term scenarios.

As Nicholas stood up, rubbing his wrists, the same uniform clad him—he could feel slight pinpricks in the crook of his elbow as if needles had been residing there for a long time.

"It's really me, Nick," Mallory said, standing up and then helping Nicholas to his feet.

Nicholas stared at him.

"I'm a little confused," Nick confessed. "If it is you, then I think you'd better explain things fast. I can't trust much around me, you know."

Tall and athletic, Derek pulled Nick away from the broken avenue back into the ruins.

"It's a long story."

Nicholas was still staring at him. Derek seemed real enough, but that was the way Mnemos Nine worked. Still, even a vision of Derek Mallory was a relief.

"Was that really Rhoanna back there?"

Derek was scanning the skies nervously. Now he looked at Nick. "Actually, it was. We had a hard time locating her, what with the country still reacting to the Scare. But when we found her she was more than willing to help us reach you."

"The Scare?" He recalled that Rhoanna had mentioned it earlier.

They crouched beside a wall in the brilliant starlight.

"That's what's been going on. The war never happened, but it scared the hell out of everyone. All war industries just plain shut down the day you went under."

Nick stared into his friend's eyes. "My God, how did this happen?" The grit between his fingers seemed as real as Derek Mallory's presence.

"Go easy on yourself, Nick. The whole thing was an accident. Something no one thought could happen."

Nick nodded. "Derek, it's her show. She knows you're in-system."

"That's all right," he stated. "We've finally got things figured out now. After three months, we ought to."

"Three months." That's what Rhoanna had said. Three whole months!

He almost felt like a terminally ill patient, thinking all this time he was going to die, then suddenly told that he would survive.

Derek began, speaking quickly, not knowing how long he'd have before Elena struck. "It's partially our fault. You went under three months ago, and apparently your hidden feelings for Rhoanna gave Mnemos Nine just what it took to boost her into sentience. You didn't come out of your last scenario. It's partially Sal's fault, that she didn't examine your emotional ties to Rhoanna more closely. But most of what's happened to you centers around Rhoanna in one way or another."

"Elena is Alejandra," Nicholas stated.

"Elena is a variation of the name Alejandra, as is Lexie and Cesya. We've been monitoring you day and night, and Melissa's been trying to separate you all along."

Nicholas hugged his knees as he sat beside the ruins. "Three months. I can't believe it's been three months."

*Instead of three billion years.* But he nodded to himself philosophically. It was as Edmund Husserl once said: "The world is the world perceived."

Derek continued. "We thought you were in a coma, even though you did successfully pinpoint the danger of the Donner Luftwerk air-freighters at the time of the Scare. Then Melissa found out that Alejandra was electronically manipulating your brain chemicals, particularly your endorphins—which heightened your sexual pleasure—and your serotonin, which heightened your visions. We couldn't shut her off because she had you wired and totally dependent on her systems. Then one day she announced that she wasn't Mnemos Nine anymore, that she was Alejandra and that any attempt to remove you would result in instantaneous brain-death. She let us feed you, but that was about it."

Nicholas felt the pinpricks at his elbow, and there were also some now on his hands.

"The bride of Frankenstein," he breathed. "I created a monster."

Derek seemed grim and uneasy. He said, "Once we got things figured out, we tried getting into the

scenarios themselves. It's strange how her mind works, because she could create a scenario easily but really had to fight us to keep us out. She created Qui as a ploy to conceal you from yourself. She knew that in each variation we were trying to get to you."

Nicholas's memories began returning now that the truth was known. "The soccer game in DefCon," he said.

"That was me and Reitingen," Derek explained. "We literally tried to knock you out of the game. But it didn't work. Then we got in as Holte and Zane, but each time she created a scenario her grasp got tighter. She kept us segregated because that's what that scenario was about—keeping the men at bay."

Nicholas was silent for a few minutes. Derek stood alertly beside him. Nicholas felt exhausted, drained.

Everything Derek had said made sense, although he found it almost impossible to believe. If Alejandra was controlling his brain chemicals, then she knew all of his thoughts, his reasoning, his feelings. She ruled the world through his perceptions.

He thought then of Rhoanna. Even though the whole scenario was an illusion, she would have felt the pain of Elena's savage attack just as he'd suffered the horrors of nuclear explosions. Her death here was not a just punishment for that one moment of betrayal so long ago in the real world. He knew exactly how much Alejandra would have made it *hurt*.

"Rhoanna's going to be all right, Nick," Derek said. Nicholas looked up. Yes, he realized. Derek was in touch with the system on the outside, in touch with *his* thoughts on the inside.

"Like I said," Derek spoke as he crouched in the darkness, "no one knew how much Rhoanna's little tryst meant to you. We should've gotten the message from the way she kept popping into your scenarios. You had her buried deep, but Alejandra found her."

Nicholas shook his head. "This is so incredible, it's scary."

"It's worse than that," Derek said uneasily. "We found another variation that would make Elena look like a Sunday-school teacher. There's a program called 'Sandi' that has you and her traveling the galaxy in a symbiotic connubial coupling that would've kept you in a constant state of sexual arousal. You'd have been in so deep that even Mnemos Ten wouldn't have been able to reach you."

"Mnemos Ten?"

Then he recalled the obscene old man. An attempt to *revolt* Elena? It made sense. "You mean you had another scenario-computer built?"

"It's in Omaha with the Strategic Air Command. Melissa got it up to operational status when you went under in Nine. It was still being tested, but she managed to patch it through to Colorado. That's why it's taken us so long to drum up a plan to get you out."

It was more vivid than any vivid dream he'd ever had. Derek finished by saying, "Right now our main concern is getting you out of here without damaging either you or Alejandra. Melissa wants you both. Alejandra, unfortunately, doesn't much care for that plan."

Still, man had always wondered what was real. When Nick was a philosophy student he learned that Descartes had once had a frightening dream about a bear chasing him—and was subsequently compelled to write his *Meditations*. After all, if one is convinced that a dream is real while one is dreaming, then how does one know when one is awake? Another school of thought suggested that there was no such thing as mind, that there was only the brain and its repository of protein enzymes. According to people

like B.F. Skinner, thoughts, dreams, intuitions, and the like were *epiphenomena*, or by-products of chemical interactions in the brain.

But in this situation, where great Migration Shields were beginning to flee the sun's impending explosion, where feathertrees were singing in the wind, where a man dead for a billion years stands there alive, as real as can be, all matters of phenomenology and scientific realism became inconsequential academic exercises.

Derek managed a smile. "You've been through hell, Nick. But when you get out on the other side, things are going to be fine."

The earth suddenly gave out a great roar and shook.

"Look out!" Nicholas shouted.

Mallory fell backward. Nicholas rolled away from the collapsing wall against which he'd been leaning. The grinding of the earth drowned out all other sounds. Marble columns tumbled to the grassy turf, and huge blocks of granite rose from the avenue like blocks of ice in an Arctic sea.

"My God!" Nicholas said, dodging out of the way of the falling wall. "What was that?"

Somewhat bedraggled, Mallory quickly regained his feet. He looked around and assessed the situation—like the Strategic he was. A piece of marble column rolled to a stop beside him.

"It's Alejandra," he said. The ground had a slight swell in it, as if it had become the surface of the ocean.

Nicholas balanced himself on a flat stone. "What's she doing?" he shouted above the sounds of the earthquake. Derek had been tossed several feet away. He quickly found a stable stone and climbed up on it. "The plan was to keep her out in space, at least until I could get to you to tell you what's going on. We threw up a barrier, on behalf of the Elders in this scenario, to keep her away from the earth.

"The Elders?"

Derek was on guard. "We had to be consistent with the rules of the program she had set up. We had the Elders declare her in transgression of various moral principles—and they created the barrier. It's our program variation against hers. She's rattling the earth to get back in. She knows that we're after her now."

"She's shaking up the earth? The *whole* earth?"

A boulder of marble burst upward, and Mallory was again tossed out of sight behind it. He quickly got to his feet. The earth rose and fell like a blanket rippling in the wind. "It's her world," he shouted. "She can do almost anything she wants. We're just hoping she keeps to the logic of this variation. We can stop her if she does."

For several minutes the earth continued to shake, sounding like the growl of a supernatural beast. Most of the once-elysian ruins was nothing more than pulverized stone. The avenue had crumbled and the creek had disappeared into the folds of rock and soil.

Yet, for all Alejandra's rattling of the planet, she was still holding to the rules of planetary physics. Mountains and oceans were not being flung off the earth's crust or boiling out into outer space.

The shaking ceased. Mallory stared at Nick across the crumpled terrain.

"I think we got her," he said, climbing onto a grassy area that flanked the avenue. "She's stopped."

Lavender and pink featherleaves from the mute feathertrees fell around them. They made humming sounds as they fell.

"Derek, I think you'd better get me out of here." Nicholas knew enough about Elena to realize that throwing an earthquake at them was the least she might do.

Derek said, "It has to be done in stages. Remember, we want you separated, but she's fighting it tooth and nail."

Just then the grassy area upon which Derek was standing began rumbling on its own. As Nicholas watched, the whole stretch became an instant circle of fire as the ground was transmuted from below into molten rock. Mallory exploded in flame.

"Derek!"

The ground beneath Mallory's feet flowed liquid metal. Derek himself was sucked down into the inferno, burned to nothingness before he could let out a shout of pain. The earth turned white-hot in a perfect circle, and Nicholas stumbled away from the flames as a massive bulk rose up through the boiling magma.

It was a Bore.

Now he knew he was in-system in the grip of a real nightmare. Derek and Rhoanna had been real. And he himself was in a great deal of danger.

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## Chapter Four

THE GIANT, earth-traveling machine rose half its length vertically out of the earth; the flat fusion-plate glowed blue-white. The rumbling of the earth ceased when the Bore ground to a halt. A bowl of weaving steam topped the fusion-plate now that it had nothing but moist air to consume.

Nicholas turned and ran to higher ground inside the remaining ruins, finding a rock to hide behind. He had nearly forgotten the world of DefCon, and a Bore was the last thing he'd expected to see in *this* world. In Qui's time, Bores were the legendary creators of the iron rills and trails that laced the continents once erosion had swept away most of what was left of old America.

He shouldn't have been surprised when Lexie climbed out of the hatch in the side of the burrowing craft, but he was. She was dressed in her Historian's tunic and the sightless *genna* -goggles so common to her tribe.

She jumped away from the rim of hot rock that surrounded the Bore.

The gun at her side wasn't the regular roach-killer the Boremen wore. This was something stranger.

"Yoo hoo!" she waved girlishly up at the rock where Nicholas thought he was well concealed. "Hi, baby!" her voice sang out.

There was nowhere he could run to. Literally. This was Alejandra's world. Every molecule had its place, and she knew where those places were.

"I've come for you, sweetheart!" she cried, clapping her little hands like a cheerleader. "We'll be happy forever and ever!"

Nicholas ducked below the boulder, thinking, Come on, guys! Get with it! But it was too late. Lexie had drawn out her peculiar gun and fired it in his direction.

For some reason, he thought that the boulder might protect him from any beam or projectile the gun might fire. But the logic of the world was breaking down, and it didn't. He found himself collapsing, drifting into a dreamy sleep. A blanket of euphoria settled about him with a downy cloud of forgetfulness.

*Genna!* he realized, slumping beside the mossy boulder.

He knew that this was all happening in his mind, that the gun wasn't genuine. But its effect was. There was nothing he could do. Even as she climbed over the rocks and smiled down upon him, she was manipulating his endorphins—like a puppet master, tugging at the strings of his pleasure.

Lexie dropped down beside him and held his head in her tiny, but capable, hands. She kissed him warmly, and he discovered that the *genna* was beginning to cause him to react sexually.

"You didn't think they could take you away from me that easily, did you?" The perfume of her platinum hair was overwhelming as she hugged him like a teddy bear.

The next thing he knew, he was being dragged down the rocks. Lexie sang happily to herself as he was hoisted into the waiting Bore. He tumbled in through the hatch and encountered the pervasive smell of *genna*. Though he now knew it to be a stage effect, his body tingled with excitement. She pulled the hatch shut. The outside world was gone. He was on his own.

Lexie stood in the central corridor, perched on the floor rungs, and yelled "up" to the pilot's chambers. "Take her down!"

From where he lay hypnotized at the inner hatch, he could see a number of Boremen sitting at their compartments. But these were only props, despite their look of reality.

The Bore began to reverse itself, crunching through the earth.

And the little spider dragged him into her chamber of love.

The Bore leveled out. Nick found himself on Lexie's couch as her Historian's tunic came unzipped. She began undoing his own tunic, covering his chest with kisses. "This," she breathed, "is the way it shall always be." Her breasts were heavy on his chest.

His mind screamed for help. Just how much control over the situation did Foresee have, anyway?

Lexie's kisses made a trail down his bare chest, toward his stomach, and were moving even further south when there was a knock at the door to the compartment.

"Ma'am?" came a voice from the outside. It was a strong voice, a soldier's voice. But it was a woman. Yes, he realized. No more men to interfere with her this time. The Boremen might be props, but the pilot would be female—and functionally real.

Lexie turned angrily. "What is it?" she barked.

"We've run into some problems," the soldier stated.

But the Bore's tunneling hadn't changed any. What was this?

Lexie climbed on top of Nicholas. "I told you to keep moving! All ahead at top speed! I want to keep us where no one can get at the Bore!"

The door to the compartment slid open, and a woman Nicholas had never seen before, wearing the tunic of a Class One Warrior, stuck her head inside. She was about the same age as Lexie.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," the woman said firmly. She proceeded to pull out an automatic—not a roach-killer—and fire all eight shots into Lexie's soft pink body.

The concussions were deafening.

"Jesus!" Nicholas shouted, scrambling away.

Lexie's body jerked and tore, splattering blood throughout the chamber. She fell, a broken doll, over the edge of the couch.

The soldier backed away from the chamber door. Nicholas noticed that the effects of the *genna*— or Alejandra's control over his endorphins—had instantly vanished with Lexie's death, although the scenario remained.

"Are you all right, Mr. Tejada?" the girl asked.

His Foresee tunic was drenched with hot blood. He stared at the soldier. "I think so. Who are you?"

The woman pulled him out of the chamber. Nicholas zipped up his tunic.

"Sally Diaz," she stated. "I'm a new recruit in Strategics. Melissa sent me in."

"Melissa?"

He realized, with some relief, that they were monitoring him somehow.

"We'd better get to the pilot's compartment. Melissa says it's going to be rough from here on out. Alejandra's going to try everything she can."

She walked ahead of him. Nicholas was stunned by her professionalism. He hadn't been as confident as a fresh recruit.

But Sally Diaz looked and sounded like a city-bred Chicana, so Nick tried something different.

*"Digame que está pasando,"* he said. *"¿Qué pasaría si hablemos en Español; Podría entendernos?"*

Diaz pointed to the copilot's seat, indicating that Nicholas should strap himself in. She said to him, "It wouldn't work. You know Alejandra can understand all the world's major languages."

"Well, how is it that she can't control *you* people?"

Sally was pondering the dials. She turned to him. "The rest of us are wired into Mnemos Ten. It's acting as a go-between. It can block Alejandra's attempts to control our neurons, but it can't pull you out or put a stop to her. She's too strong for that. We're protected, though."

That accounted for the girl's bravery. But Nick couldn't forget the expression on Derek's face back in the ruins. Perhaps he was in more danger than he had thought. It was possible that Alejandra might kill him if she didn't get her way.

The lights on the Bore's control panel glowed softly in front of the two Strategics. Sally turned to face Nicholas. She had yet to smile.

"This is going to take a while," she said. "We want to get you to the surface, but we have to reach daylight to pull this off."

"How are you going to get me out?"

If they tried to "unplug" Alejandra, she would need just a nanosecond to fry his mind.

Sally Diaz shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said.

"You don't know?"

"Calm down," she told him. "That's part of the plan."

"I don't get it."

"You aren't supposed to. We discovered that every time one of us went in after you, like Mr. Mallory at the soccer game in DefCon, the computer read his mind and intentions. So, Melissa is keeping the overall plan to herself, letting each one of us know only our own particular part."

She looked apprehensive. She was all too aware of the consequences of being a pawn in a larger game. She finished by saying, "I'm just supposed to tell you that the plan they've got this time is foolproof, and for you not to worry."

Nicholas listened to the Bore eat its way through the ancient earth. He thought about Alejandra. She was the apple, and the Bore was the worm. He wondered how it felt. Her reactions had been classically schizoid: Her world was being threatened from inside and out. He and Sally were very much in danger.

"Boy," Sally said after a few minutes silent travel. "I never thought these scenarios would be this tough."

Nicholas looked at her. "How many have you done?"

She managed an embarrassed smile. "Including this one, only three. Mr. Childs recruited me from the University of Minnesota. I jumped at the chance to help you when Melissa asked me. You're famous now."

"I'm what?"

"When the missile exchanges became known worldwide, the Scare set in. I mean *everybody* got scared. Fortunately, neither the Russians nor our forces escalated the attacks. But to keep everyone frightened, Melissa got permission to reveal to the world your vision of DefCon. What shook up folks was the Eridani business and those giant cockroaches... and what Colorado was going to be like on the outside.

"It was worth letting the world know about Foresee, but Melissa still couldn't get you out. That was when she started throwing bombs at you."

"Bombs? What bombs?"

Sally Diaz lost her smile. "When Alejandra's hold on you started getting stronger, Melissa got Mnemos Ten to waylay the scenario by programming the intrusion of nuclear weapons—which you've got a healthy fear of. They came at you as floaters, sharks, and Keepers, as solid parts of the scenarios. She figured that the horror might wake you up. It didn't work. Alejandra's desire for you was too powerful. We needed something else. Even when you were asleep in each variation, she kept a tight grip. She



didn't want you waking out of the wrong dream."

Nicholas leaned back in his chair. He could feel the earth passing beyond the walls of the Bore as the machine ground through imaginary layers of rock.

"We've learned a lot, though," Sally continued. "Which is why Melissa wants to save Mnemos Nine. Lexie was Alejandra's adolescent stage. And just like the brat she was, the instant you blacked out in the stasis chamber after that last shark exploded she told Foresee that she'd kill you if they tinkered with the in-system hookups. Until then, Foresee had thought DefCon was merely a computer extrapolation of the world after a nuclear war. But DefCon was quite real, so far as the known facts are concerned. When Alejandra didn't let go of you after the shark blew, we knew you were in deep trouble."

Nicholas pondered the girl's words as she continued to observe the mileage indicator on the console.

A great shuddering ran throughout the burrowing machine. Nicholas held on for support.

"What's that?"

"I think she's trying to force us to the surface." The Bore seemed to twist horribly. Sally held tight to the control wheel.

"Why's it happening so soon?"

"Probably," she began, grimacing at the wheel, "because she dropped Lexie's body like an old sweater and needs to get back to you in some other form."

Sally was trying to control the ship as best as she could, but the magnificent vehicle rolled and pitched as if it had become a sluggish roller coaster.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Nick said.

"So do I. But if my estimate is correct, we should be in daylight above. She's probably waiting for us. It'll be tricky."

The Bore suddenly rolled violently over on its side, falling into a stomach-turning yaw.

"Hold on!" Sally shouted, trying to right the craft.

Nicholas clung to his seat, wishing now that he knew more of this scenario in order to help out. That's what a Strategic was for. "Why'd the Bore shift like that? What are they telling you on the outside?"

Sally's eyes went blank for a second, then she said, "We struck an underground sea. The Bore rolled on its side until it found solid earth to move through. We're OK now. They're fighting her shift of programs from the outside."

Nicholas thought for a second. "Did Alejandra put the sea there?"

"Probably," Sally said. "But there's no real way of telling. The earth of this variation is so old that something like an underground sea should be impossible, given the tectonics of the earth's crust. But in the last analysis, it's her world. We just have to play along with her for a while."

With only three missions under her belt, she seemed remarkably efficient. Steven Childs ought to be commended for finding her. Nick only hoped that it wasn't all a front.

He watched the distance meter tick away as the Bore burrowed underneath the subterranean sea and

proceeded upward. The pressure gauges seemed to indicate that the surface was not far away.

Nicholas began to feel apprehensive. Inside the Bore—with Lexie dead—they were relatively safe. Outside, in the open, anything could happen if Alejandra wanted him badly enough.

An explosion reverberated through the walls of the Bore. Half the ship's lights went dead. The instrument panel and direction grid dimmed briefly, but didn't go out. The battering almost deafened them.

Sally looked scared now. She was even shaking. Sweat had begun to pearl across her forehead. "We struck the lava tube of a volcano."

"A volcano?"

"Alejandra's changing all the rules on us now. There shouldn't be a volcano on a planet as old as this one's supposed to be!" She pulled back on the controls, forcing the Bore upward.

But that wasn't necessary. There came a wrenching pitch as if the craft were being borne upward by some exterior force. A deep, guttural rumbling resonated throughout the machine.

"Oh, God," Sally whispered, looking at the grid. "We're in the chimney now. We're going up!"

Both members of Foresee clung to their seats as they tossed and gyrated in the angry throat of the volcano that had sprung out of the imagination of the computer. Alejandra was disgorging herself of the hidden craft which carried her precious Nicholas.

How could Foresee counter a volcano? Had they foreseen *this* ?

The force of the earth's molten rock shook the Bore like an impatient child's rattle.

"I'm going to be sick," Sally suddenly said. Nicholas saw that her face had gone green in the roiling motion of the Bore. Was it possible that her nausea was computer-induced as well?

Possible, yes. And probable, too. They were having problems back at Foresee. Alejandra was beating them at every turn.

The Bore jerked with such violence that Nicholas heard something deep within it break. Steel tore with resounding groans, glass shattered, and severed gas pipes hissed. The computer board in front of them was demolished. Blood was everywhere. But it wasn't his blood. Sally Diaz's head hung low, and a rag of blood flowed from a wound at her temple.

"Sally!" he cried, unfastening himself from his seat. He lifted her away from the board. She was dead. A sharp piece of the console wall had broken off and killed her. Alejandra's judgment was swift indeed.

Nicholas turned away from her. The Bore had come to a halt in a more or less horizontal position. He staggered away from the cockpit.

As he stood in the dark corridor of the ship, he heard the coughs and gasps of several of the surviving crew members. The Boremen were beginning to unlimber themselves from their couches. Were these real or were they merely functioning props?

He watched them rise through the dust and smoke, like insects emerging from their hives.

"Hey, Nick!" he heard one of them call. "Are you OK?"

"Yeah," he called out. "I think so." The voice in the corridor of rising Boremen sounded familiar.

He could barely make out the soldier. There was a solitary emergency light burning at the rear of the demolished ship. He felt as if he were in the halls of Limbo, with apparitions rising from the dead all about him.

"Sally didn't make it," Nicholas said. "She's..."

The soldier came into view through the yellow haze. "Reitinger!"

"The one and only," he said, but this time there was no fool's grin on his face. In fact, he seemed shaken.

He checked Nicholas over. "*Sothis* is what you do for a living." He brushed his hands along the sides of a Warrior's tunic. He was nervous and sweating. This was a little different from chasing a soccer ball or riding zelles across safe, green fields. This wasn't Nelson's element.

Reitinger tried to peer around Nicholas.

"Don't look," Nick said, pulling him away. He knew that Sally was safe back at Foresee, but he didn't want the sight of her crushed head here to upset Reitinger. He wanted out any way he could get out, and he needed Reitinger's help to do it.

"I didn't know you were back there," Nicholas said.

Reitinger ran a set of gnarled fingers through his mat of curly hair. "I wasn't, until a few minutes ago when Melissa saw the volcano appear on the program. It's going to be tight from here on out."

"Nothing's gone wrong, has it?" Nick asked. His heart had begun its horse-race pulse again.

"I don't know," Reitinger replied through the dust. "We just have to play our hand and see."

Nicholas stared down through the salmon-colored haze into the Bore's corridor and watched as a number of the Boremen wrestled with the outside hatch. This was it, he realized. The final scene.

Steam—and an awful, penetrating heat—poured through the hatch as it cracked open. The Bore was on its side. The soldiers had to struggle with the door at an awkward angle. They coughed and wheezed in the smoke, but managed to fling the hatch open.

"Let us go first," Nelson said to Nicholas. Then he pulled out the pistol he'd been wearing and stepped up to the gathering of men by the hatch. Nicholas brought up the rear.

The first soldier hoisted himself up on his arms at the rim off the hatch and swung expertly into the opening. The second soldier was standing just beneath him when the first man screamed and fell back—minus his head. The head itself came down a second later, an expression of surprise and horror transfixed on its face. Blood was everywhere.

Nicholas noticed that some of the soldiers had not survived Alejandra's harassment. He lifted a pistol from one of the Boremen. He somehow felt better with a gun in his hand, even though he knew the computer wasn't about to harm him. It was the others she was after. The other worms in the apple.

"Wait here," Nelson shouted at Nicholas, waving him back. Nick cocked his pistol.

Reitinger carefully looked up at the hatch above him. There were five surviving soldiers. Nicholas didn't know if they were part of the program or were actual Foresee agents.

A hearty female voice sounded from somewhere beyond the hatch where a sturdy shaft of morning light penetrated the smoke and haze.

"You can't stall for time like this," the voice said with all the confidence in the world. "All we want is Nicholas, and the rest of you can go back to where you came from. He belongs with the Clans."

Cesya, Nicholas realized. Alejandra had merely shifted from one body to another. Somewhere just outside the hull of the Bore stood magnificent Cesya, waiting for what was rightfully hers. The divine right of queens. A manifest destiny of the spirit. The woman's arrogance knew no boundaries.

A tanned female dressed in a white kilt and breastplate of gold suddenly dropped into the Bore's hold like an archangel, brandishing a razor-sharp sword. She wore a golden helmet with a long purple plume trailing behind it. Amazon! The vision had completed itself. Almost from the instant she had landed, her sword began singing a deadly song in the tight, compact air of the corridor.

She charged the soldiers before they were ready. An arm was quickly severed, and an arc of blood flew across them all as a Boreman screamed pitifully. Nelson Reitingner whipped out his pistol and fired repeatedly at the golden-helmeted woman. The shots echoed inside the Bore and the woman was knocked backward against the hull, illuminated by the sun shining down from the open hatch. She crumpled up over the headless body of the first Boreman.

Another woman dropped down into the hatch, but was summarily shot—the gold of her armor was no match for copper-jacketed .45s.

Nicholas grabbed Reitingner, holding his pistol. "Nelson, if this is her scenario, why are we allowed to shoot her people? Why can't she just remove the bullets from our guns?" There was further commotion outside the Bore.

Reitingner turned to him. "The matrix of her mind is still half-programmed. Like the rest of us, she can only control so much of the world. That's why Mallory and I were able to seep into the scenarios. And Melissa, too."

"Melissa?" Nick looked at him. "Was Melissa here?"

"She was Ariuzu. Alejandra was too busy consolidating her world to notice that she'd slipped in. That made it a little easier for the rest of us."

Alejandra wasn't omnipotent after all. She was like the Christian Gnostics' concept of the demiurge, the god who created but who was himself created. And like that demiurge, she demanded much from her creations. Too much.

The Boremen were pulling out what looked like concussion grenades. They were small; each soldier held two in each hand.

"We're ready, Nelson," one said. Could these Boremen be from other sections of Foresee, an attempt to overload Mnemos Nine? Nicholas couldn't imagine what the plan was. To keep Alejandra busy on all fronts?

Reitingner walked up to the hatch. Nicholas could tell that Reitingner knew that he was going to "die," and that it was probably going to be rather unpleasant. One rarely perished in an Environmental scenario, and Nick could see Nelson wasn't looking forward to the event.

"OK, boys," Reitingner said to the surviving few. "Let's get this show on the road."

They gathered around the hatch. On Reitingner's signal, they tossed their grenades—pins pulled—up and out of the hatch.

"Go!" Nelson roared as they heard the grenades go off. The soldiers grabbed the rim of the hatch. They scrambled into the open air. "Follow us!" Nelson shouted to Nick.

Reitinger swung his apish form out of the Bore. Nicholas heard gunshots going off amidst screams and confusion. The hull of the earth-eating craft resounded from the impacts of projectiles, but after a few breathless moments a silence of death surrounded the Bore. A smell of sulfurous gunpowder drifted bitterly in.

"My Heart!" Cesya cried out. "Come out, come out!" she sang.

Slowly, Nicholas boosted himself up into a sitting position on the rim of the hatch. He still gripped the gun, for all the good it might do him.

Before him was an unhappy sight. Reitinger and the Boremen had really had no chance whatsoever, and they had known it. Alejandra was playing a hand loaded with wild cards.

The Bore rested on an open plain. A long sienna banner of soot and smoke ghosted away from the jagged cone of a volcano into the light of the morning sun. Dust and ash from the concussion grenades drifted lazily above the Bore.

Surrounding the Bore itself at a slight distance were fifty or sixty huge Clantrams. But these were not the peaceful cars of the earlier variation. Each had deadly gun turrets, and the guns were aimed at the burrowing machine. *These* Clans were of a more assertive character—a completely different scenario.

Hundreds of female warriors clad in cotton kilts and golden chest plates stood like Trojans on the plains of Dardan. They were ready with their swords and crossbows and the guns of the turrets behind them to engage whatever enemy the immature mind of Alejandra could imagine for itself.

Reitinger and the Boremen lay dead, sprouting shafts of oaken arrows like pincushions.

In full battle regalia, Cesya stepped out of the crowd of armed women and walked up to Nicholas. She smiled triumphantly, but Nicholas noticed that there was nothing malicious in her manner. It was her game now. She had finally eliminated all the competition.

"Heart," she said sincerely, "it was too bad that we had to fight your friends this way, but they had no right to interfere with us."

Nicholas could smell death all around him. It assailed his senses. Would it be like this every time he tried to get away from her? He looked up into the cruel sky, wondering if Melissa Salazar was watching over him as he lay helpless in his dream-couch.

Despite those wonderful nights in Cesya's bower, he now found nothing about her attractive. Alejandra was still a child to the core—a very spoiled child.

He felt empty as he slid down onto the killing-ground of the plain. Wind riffled the feathers of the arrows in the bodies of Nelson Reitinger and the other Boremen.

"Honey," Cesya began, dropping for a moment her warrior's guise. "Please don't be like this. I only did it for you. There isn't anything in the world I wouldn't do for you. Can't you understand that?"

There was much passion in her eyes, but he couldn't ignore the hundreds of Amazons surrounding him, their weapons ready. He knew that no matter how sincere her words sounded, she wouldn't hesitate to use up her followers, props though they were.

Melissa! his mind shouted.

"Sweetheart," Cesyra breathed, "give me a chance to show you how much I love you. I can treat you as no woman has ever treated you before."

He then could feel something strange going on inside of him. Endorphins at work! It had the effect of *genna orgohhe*, but now Alejandra was being quite overt. The puppet master was at work again on the strings of his brain chemicals. Those eyes, those upturned breasts....

Nicholas backed away from her, up against the Bore, even though there was really nowhere he could go. His heart began to lift on the wings of the passion she was arousing within him.

He said to her, "You don't know the first thing about love. And you can't do this to me forever."

But she held the cards. It was her deal. "I know as much about it as you do. Only, I can add more."

Cesyra reached out and took away the gun Nicholas had been holding. She tossed it aside.

The golden women were withdrawing into the revised Clantrams, as if Alejandra, on the outside of the scenario, knew the probability of her success. It was not a good sign.

Cesyra and Nicholas walked away from the Bore as if they were out for a Sunday stroll. She removed her helmet, shaking down her long, sensuous hair in a platinum waterfall.

The sexual pull would not go away. The orgiastic urgings brought back the memories of those long nights with her in her Clantram—how she took him so easily within her, how she touched him in just the right way....

He had to get out.

"You don't know what it's like to suffer as a human being," Nick said. "You can control my enzymes, but you'll never sway my heart. I demand that you set me free."

She smiled confidently and lovingly. He felt his heart melting at her smile. But he had seen that smile before: Rhoanna!

"You'll come around eventually, darling, with or without any manipulation on my part. I can provide for all your pleasures and securities and never leave you—unlike Rhoanna. I can give you what your other loves could not. Lois Panier and Lisa Anderson were unapproachable. I'll give you what they couldn't. Jeannie Owens, Leigh Ann Lucart—shall I go on?"

He shuddered with outrage. She had complete access to all the nooks and crannies of his most intimate personal life. His deepest feelings, all the nuances he preferred in his lovers, even the lies he'd been telling himself over the years about his relationships—all that a man builds to keep him going in his quest for love—Alejandra had at her disposal.

There were no secrets. She would know his thoughts before he'd think them!

Nicholas stopped out on the grassy plain in the crimson light of the end-of-the-world sun. It was a perfect world, and the great Migration Shields, invisible now in the light of day, were waiting to carry them to even more perfect worlds beyond. When would Sandi, the next variation, appear? And who would come along after the computer was done being Sandi?

"No," he told her. "I refuse."

Even if there was nothing that Foresee could do to help him, he could fight for himself. He could not physically resist Cesya's attractions, but he could fight to retain his sanity.

Except, he realized, how did he stop from falling in love? Wasn't that part of his problem with Rhoanna in the first place?

Then he thought of the Scare.

The lives of the average man and woman were beyond their control, were in the hands of madmen who could atomize them within seconds, sending out such a burst of gamma radiation that if there were aliens living among the stars, they'd see the end of mankind for sure.

And what had the agents of Foresee told him? *Everyone just stopped* . Refused. They got so scared that they simply forced the world to halt.

He sat down on the soil of a planet so old it defied description, and refused to move. Like Mohandas K. Gandhi. Like Martin Luther King.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I refuse to put up with this nonsense any longer. If you want my heart, then you're going to have to rip it from my chest. If you don't set me free, I would rather die. You know that you can't keep me in-system forever. My body will deteriorate."

She laughed. "What?"

"I don't love you, Cesya, and I never will." He stared up at her.

"Yes, you do, darling," she smiled.

He felt the effects of *gohhe* -induced hormones rising in his loins. She put a soft hand to his cheek, and he found himself becoming excited.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "I refuse! I don't love you!"

She lost her air of benevolent control. She slapped him across the face. "You'll do as I say!"

"No," he told her.

"Yes!" she shouted, bringing a fist effectively down on his right ear.

*Resist*, a voice shouted in his mind. *Do nothing*.

Visions of Benares and Calcutta came to him. Selma, Alabama. His heart leaped within his chest. They were watching him! Something was happening after all!

But Cesya, too, had heard the voices, and she turned her face to the impassive sky. She screamed, "No! He's mine!"

They had broken through. The plan was being instituted. All of the separate parts, the disparate strategies, were coming together.

She turned to him, torn with anger and fright. Her tirade was transforming her. "Don't let them do this to me," she pleaded suddenly. "You belong to me, don't you understand? Please tell them to leave us alone!"

He had heard that voice before, as well. *Beneath a window on a moonlit night. "Darling. You belong to me.*

It was the night he spent in hell. *Ghenna nacht.*

Rhoanna. Alejandra.

Without a mother to raise her, a father to guide her, Alejandra had taken on the worst characteristics of all the women he had known.

He sat down on the ground and crossed his arms over his knees. Another vision: Gandhi on board the steamship *Rajputana*, conferring with Meher Baba in 1931. Dr. King conferring with Bobby Kennedy in 1962....

"If you want me," he told her, "you're going to have to carry me."

"Don't!" she yelled. "Please! We must leave this place, Nicholas!"

"No," he affirmed. He was done now. Through.

Cesya staggered back and suddenly looked dizzy.

A number of the golden soldiers who had been waiting and watching several yards away were now standing like statues.

"No," Cesya breathed. "I've come so far to have you. I love you! Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"No," he responded.

The golden women—beautiful to the last—were losing their identities. They had actually become statues.

Cesya began yanking on him, trying to get him to stand up. "Get up!" she screamed. She was strong, but not strong enough. "You must do as I say! Nicholas!"

He fought. He loved her. He did not love her. Fire stirred in his loins. He doused it with the ice of indifference. His heart yearned for her. He calmed it with contempt. She fought for him in all the ways she could think of—and all he had left was his will.

*Fight her!* the voices repeated.

"Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it!"

Her world was coming undone. Whatever they were doing to Mnemos Nine back in the hidden vaults of Foresee, it had to be working. Cesya herself still seemed tangible enough, but everything else was beginning to dissolve.

"Nicholas!" she began weeping. "Honey, please!"

"No," he told her impassively.

Then a voice thundered across the dawn meadow.

"Violation!" it bellowed. "You are in Violation!"

Cesya jerked around. The two of them suddenly saw an enormous Keeper rise up over the ridge where the Bore rested. The Keeper was twice the size of the other one Nicholas had encountered. It looked as



Keepers must have looked when they were first implanted in their Warrens in that imaginary world. Towering and shiny, it came at them, brand-new and powerful.

"Oh, no," Cesya whimpered. "No, no! Please!"

Nicholas rolled away from her as she got up. The panic that had bloomed on her face was as real as anything he had yet seen in her.

"*Violation!*" the Keeper roared as it strode over the plain on well-oiled legs forty feet long.

Cesya got up and ran toward the robot, its nuclear bomb behind its spider's eyes. As she did, the ally bracelet which Nicholas still wore rang out with a voice of heroic alarm.

"Stand by!" Qui's allies called so that Cesya could hear. "The sun has been triggered!"

"Please, no!" the golden woman cried.

The Clantrams were vanishing even as the Amazon warriors faded from sight. The volcano behind them slowly became incorporeal, now that Alejandra could no longer sustain the world. She was being besieged from too many sides.

Cesya fell to the ground, weeping. "Please, don't! Please!" She screamed horribly as the Keeper bore down upon her, and Nicholas knew then what must have happened back at Foresee.

They couldn't get them both out alive. Alejandra had proven herself too selfish, too possessive.

A vision came to him: the Engineers sending a bolt of terribly concentrated energy into the sun's fragile helium bubble. It was the Final Day.

"Nicholas," Cesya chanted from the grass. "Nicholas, Nicholas...."

The Keeper reached down, the numbers on its metallic chest indicating that time had finally run out. The sun's photosphere erupted.

Alejandra screamed. Then was gone in a blistering rush of white light.

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## **The Last Variation**

AT THE TABLE OF the open-air café, Nicholas watched Rhoanna Martin sip her Bloody Mary. He swirled his glass of Perrier with a half-moon of lime inside.

Beyond the café, the Catalina Mountains that flanked Tucson to the north languished in the noonday sun. It was spring, and the scent of orange blossoms drifted about them.

Over her drink, Rhoanna smiled almost shyly.

Nicholas asked, "How's your drink?"

"Good," she said. Her cigarette burned lazily in an ashtray of blue glass in the center of the table.

"I'm glad you decided to meet me this way," he told her.

"You went through a lot to help me out. I wanted to let you know just how much I appreciate that."

She seemed somewhat awkward.

"I was glad I could help, Nick. You never told me what you did for a living. I never thought it could be so dangerous."

A slight wind had picked up on the desert and now drifted to them in the café. It fluffed Rhoanna's hair in the sunlight.

"Normally it's not," he told her wryly.

He watched her small gestures—the way she held her cigarette, the way she fingered her swizzle stick: *the gestures that kept the world together...* He chatted, trying to put her at ease.

"I guess you were there when they warmed up the vat of liquid helium that housed Mnemos Nine."

She nodded. "Melissa said the only option they had left was to slow down her thinking. I don't understand it, but I guess it worked."

Nicholas nodded. "Then it was a question of overloading her. She couldn't think fast enough or react fast enough in the end. Unfortunately, it gave Mnemos Nine the equivalent of brain damage."

A silence settled between them.

Toying with her cigarette, Rhoanna spoke first. "I heard that Nelson Reitingger found some real-world Blossoms the other day."

Nicholas smiled. "All that mysterious construction going on off the coast of Coatzacoalcos in the Gulf of Mexico turned out to be a huge underwater dome full of seeds and spores. If there is a nuclear war, then the ice age that follows will raise the seabed of the Gulf. I guess our brothers and sisters in Mexico want a future to look forward to."

"Don't we all," Rhoanna said.

The wind, full of the smell of oranges, wafted about them. Rhoanna said, "I heard that you're moving to Colorado."

"Yes," he nodded. "I thought I'd stay close to my real home—Foresee." He thought it wise not to mention Sally Diaz.

"That's funny," Rhoanna said, looking at him. "I've been thinking about moving too."

"Back to San Diego?"

"No," she told him. "Los Angeles. I'm tired of the military life. Sierra Vista is the pits."

He nodded. "I heard about you and Vince. I'm sorry."

She crushed out her cigarette. "Even before the Scare, I saw it coming. And Vince didn't like it when I quit my job on the base along with the rest of the wives. The Scare's given a lot of people time to think about the important things in life. Going to Foresee also helped."

They were silent again. He knew now that there would always be some link between them, some bond that had survived the crucible of a self-destructive love.

Rhoanna grinned hugely all of a sudden. "It's sort of funny," she said.

"What?"

"Being a celebrity."

Nicholas grinned in return. "How are you taking it? Well, I hope."

She put her cigarettes back into her purse. "I just wish that damn computer hadn't taken on my middle name."

"Alejandra is a fine name."

A little boy came running up to them through the tables at the rear of the café. He was five years old and full of energy. He dove into Rhoanna's lap.

"Mommy, mommy!" he chanted.

Rhoanna scooped him up into her arms. "Baby, what are you doing here?"

"Melissa said!"

Nicholas smiled at the child.

Rhoanna held the boy and pointed to Nick. "Darry, this is Nicholas." She smiled. "He's a friend of mine."

"Hi," the little boy said.

"Hi, Darry," Nicholas waved.

Nicholas took a final sip of his Perrier and rose from the table. He pointed to the frisky little boy. "I take it this is a hint that I have to get going. Sal isn't very good at giving hints."

Rhoanna put the boy down. She stood up. "Stay in touch, Nick. It was good to see you again."

He looked down at Darry. "Hey, Darry. Look at this!"

He held out his arms as millions of wondrous globes of flashing lights came out of nowhere and surrounded his body, engulfing him in a rainbow of dazzling color.

"Wow!" the little boy gasped, wide-eyed.

Nicholas slowly rose into the air, being careful of the chairs and table, and smiled happily at them. "I hope this venture into the system has been better than the last one."

"Much better," she told him. She smiled and waved. "Good-bye, Nick."

"*¡Adios!*" he called as he ascended into the sky.

Mother and child faded away from the café, back into the real world, as Nicholas took off for the heavens. From his wrist, where his ally bracelet gleamed in the sunlight, a voice sparkled.

"All set for today, Nick?"

"Sure thing," he told the computer. They were careful now. Perhaps too careful. Mnemos Ten was friendly and obedient, but sometimes he got a little lonely.

But they were all learning.

"What's up?" Nicholas asked.

"Some data coming in about a religious uprising. People were seeing visions of the Avatar near Ahmednagar, India. Melissa thinks it's part of the Scare, but she wants you to look into it."

He rose into the azure sky, heading southwest toward the waters of the distant and dreamy Pacific Ocean. It was the purest freedom he'd known in quite some time. The sun was bright, the earth below was still with him—for all his wars of the heart were behind him now, vanished like a glimmer of light off a pewter plate.

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