

Psychodrome 02

The Shapechanger Scenario

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For Ginjer Buchanan, with thanks

PROLOGUE

It's hard enough being a psycho without having a paranoid looking over your shoulder all the time. The paranoid's name was Coles-at least, that was the name I knew him by. He was good. He was so good, he could insinuate himself into my mind without my even knowing he was there. But I was getting better. So far, I'd caught him at it twice. The trouble was, I didn't know how many times I hadn't caught him at it and that was making me paranoid. Of course, professional

psychos aren't supposed to let things like that bother them. Amateurs generally don't last long in the high-risk scenarios of Psychodrome. Most of them quit after their first round, assuming they survive it. You either learn fast or you die. Or perhaps you only go insane. It depends on whether you're dealing with something that's real or a programmed hallucination. How do you know? Well, that's just the trouble, you don't. Once the Psychodrome computers start interfacing with your mind, all sorts of strange things start to happen.

As a pro, I was still fairly new at the game, though after fighting as a corporate mercenary on an undeveloped planet, being stalked by gangsters of the Yakuza in Tokyo, trailed across half the universe by genetically engineered assassins, and almost eaten by an ambimorph on a quarantined world, the novelty was starting to wear a little thin. Not that Coles really gave a damn. You tend not to give a damn when you're one of the people who controls things.

And Coles controlled a lot of things. At the moment, he was controlling me in a little game that could easily turn deadly and the fact that I had Rudy Breck as backup was no small consolation. Breck used to be a major in the Special Service, or the SS, as they're more commonly called-genetically engineered commandos, created from a matrix of human and animal genetic material, known as hybrids. Conceived in a Petri dish, raised in a creche, and trained for mayhem from the moment they can crawl. Breck had retired from the service to play Psychodrome professionally. Their loss, my gain. I was starting to lose count of all the times he'd saved my life.

Breck was supposed to be somewhere close behind me, in position to move in quickly if the bait was taken. Since I was the bait, I would have felt a little more secure if he were close enough for me to see him. For all I knew, he had stopped off somewhere for a drink. That was the trouble with Breck, you could

never count on him to react quite the same way a normal human being would. His strength and reflexes were far superior to those of ordinary men, but certain things were missing. Fear, for instance. The instinct for self-preservation was not one of the ingredients that went into an SS hybrid matrix. The emotion of fear and the instinct for self-preservation in the face of danger were entirely lacking in him. With Breck, self-preservation was merely a matter of self-interest, not instinct. A subtle difference, perhaps, but an important one. I was getting knots in my stomach and feeling chills running up and down my spine, but Breck was probably strolling along casually somewhere behind me in this rat's maze of screamers, whistling to himself while he checked out the sights. There were a lot of sights to be checked out on the Lower East Side-or the Downside, as the locals called it-and some of them could be pretty scary. Both the sights and the locals.

Almost every major city had a neighborhood where only the truly desperate or the seriously crazed ever ventured out at night. On New York City's Downside, it was always night. Sunlight never penetrated down to the lower levels of the city. Streetlights provided some illumination and multicolored laser signs strobed over doorways you really wouldn't want to go through unless you were a twist, but mostly, there were small pools of light around the street lamps surrounded by large areas of shadow through which people moved like scuttlefish. Jack the Ripper would have felt very much at home here.

I'd spent a few years on the Ginza Strip of Tokyo and I'd also seen the ground level of that city, a squalid, ugly, fearsome warren known as Junktown. I had even spent some time in Tokyo's Combat Zone, a place so wild and depraved that it had been sealed off to keep the screamers in. The seamy side of life was

nothing new to me, so the prickly feeling at the back of my neck wasn't just a sense of apprehension at being in a nasty neighborhood. It was the certain feeling that I was being stalked.

I was moving through a ghetto teeming with all sorts of predators. That would have made the stalker difficult to spot in any case, but there was a good chance that this stalker was an ambimorph, which meant he would be impossible to spot until he-or it, since shapechangers do not have gender-was right on top of me.

I could imagine people tuning in right now, coming home from work and turning on their psy-fi sets, plugging into the net and selecting a vicarious adventure from any one of dozens that Psychodrome was running-maybe even mine-and for a while, they'd be able to tune into one-way telepathic contact with a psycho star and experience a fantasy.

I thought of Stone, who had once performed on the lust channels because she was turned on by the idea of having sex with billions of people at the same time.

The thrill had eventually worn off and she had switched to high-risk game scenarios, searching for a stronger fix. She never really knew what she was looking for. For a while, she thought it might be me, but she had died before she could find out for sure. I wondered if the same thing that had killed her was now stalking me.

The home audience sharing my experience was getting a good heady dose of sudden fear and an adrenaline rush-emotions and reactions that were modulated carefully by the fail-safe biofeedback sensors on their psych-fidelity sets. It wouldn't do to give some excitable old fart a coronary just because my heart was pounding like a trip hammer. For them, it was all show. Shared perceptions with cybernetic safeguards. For me, it was the real thing.

"Coles?" I said.

He could hear me back at Game Control, but the home audience would never hear me say his name. That was because the home audience only knew about the surface levels of the game. They did not suspect that they were much more than spectators. In a way, they were participants, only they didn't even know it. So far as the home audience was concerned, Coles did not even exist. So far as Psychodrome International, Inc., was concerned, Coles did not exist. So far as every government agency you could reach through normal channels was concerned, Coles did not exist. Sometimes I wondered if even Coles knew he existed, if he actually saw a reflection when he looked into a mirror. In any case, he apparently did not exist for me right at that moment, because there was no answer. Perhaps he wasn't there. Perhaps he wasn't as omnipotent as he often seemed. Or perhaps he simply didn't want to talk to me.

"Coles, damn it . . ."

I wished I knew where Breck was. I hoped to hell he was somewhere close. Real close. I felt as if crosshairs were centering on the back of my neck. I had that feeling you get sometimes when someone is staring at you intently across a crowded room. You sense it somehow and you turn, your eyes meet . . .

Yellow eyes. Red-flecked, yellow eyes with vertically slit pupils. Iridescent snakeskin stretched taut across high cheekbones. Upper lip protruding slightly over modified incisors. Tall, spikey crest of feathery white hair streaked with silver, ending in a long pony tail cascading down the back. Sleek, black, metal-studded skinjac with chain-mail epaulets; silver and black lycras and black, high-heeled boots. A cyberpunk. But unlike most of them, whose biomods were merely artifice- trendy weekend monster makeup easily removed when it was time to go to work-this one had gone the hardcore route with cosmetic surgery.

They called it getting "hardwired." He grinned at me and gleaming alloy

hydraulic fangs slid out of his two large, hollowed-out incisors.

Was this an ambimorph I was confronting or was it only some hardcore kid looking to finance his next score? Either one was dangerous, it was just a matter of degree. The safest thing would be to frag the punk, whether he was an ambimorph or not, but Coles wanted a live shapechanger. And that meant there was a good chance he'd wind up with a dead psycho- namely one Arkady O'Toole, yet another casualty of the ratings war.

The cyberpunk and I stared at each other like two competing predators circling before a fight for turf. Neither of us moved as the sea of people flowed around us. I couldn't see Breck anywhere, but I spotted two more cyberpunks slowly closing in from my left and right. One had himself done up as a pussycat, complete with lion's mane and whiskers; the other one looked like something you'd find on a used cyborg lot. Maybe all three were no more than what they appeared to be, but maybe one of them was a shapechanger who, in his cyberpunk disguise, had joined up with a couple of wild boys to take me out. Either way, I was in trouble. Snakeskin started to move toward me through the crowd, his hands in the pockets of his skinjac. I didn't think he was just trying to keep them warm.

I ducked down into a stairwell leading to a doorway below the sidewalk level. A laser sign over the entrance depicting a writhing double helix alternately flashing blue and purple read, "Blue Genes." I paid the cover and walked into a wall of sound.

A band up on the small stage was filling the club with enough volume to poleax an elephant. The lead singer was snarling through an implanted vocoder throat mike, rhyming "insect eyes" with "mesmerize." I didn't catch the rest of the

lyrics. They would have been difficult to understand in any case, since the band's sound engineer chose that moment to switch the singer's throat mike from multiplex-overlay human mode to something that sounded like a mosquito big enough to eat the Bronx.

The rest of the band was pounding out a driving beat that sounded like the screaming inner workings of a giant machine about to explode. The musicians were shirtless, their fingers dancing over keyboards that were hardwired into the puckered, livid white skin of their skinny chests. In addition to getting themselves hardwired for sound, cyberpunk musicians often spent the extra money to hook up their instruments to their pleasure/pain centers as well, obviating the necessity for drugs by giving themselves the ability to orchestrate their own highs. It gave a whole new meaning to the phrase, "playing with yourself."

I threaded my way through the undulating bodies on the dance floor, looking for the back way out. I figured it would be behind the stage, where the musicians changed and the bar took its deliveries. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Snake-skin moving through the crowd, looking for me.

I spotted a door in the back, near the stage, marked "Employees Only." A muscular young man with red and black hair leaned against the wall beside the door. He was dressed in skintight orange and black lycras with a flame pattern. His head was nodding slightly in time to the music. He spotted me heading toward the door and stood in front of me, blocking my way with a hand on my chest. I didn't have time to argue with him and the music was too loud in any case, so I grabbed his arm, spun him around, and slammed him against the door, using his body to push it open. Once inside, I shoved him into a pile of boxes and made for the back door that led into the alleyway behind the club.

I kicked the door open and bolted out into the alley, straight into the arms of the other two cyberpunks. The door behind me opened once again and Snakeskin came out into the dark alley. They'd suckered me. Snakeskin had followed me into the club while the other two had cut around the back. They proceeded to slam me against the building wall a few times to take some of the fight out of me.

Snakeskin grinned, opening his mouth and hissing like a cobra, teeth bared. His trick fangs slid out again, curved and-needle-sharp.

I didn't know where the hell Breck was and I didn't have time to worry about it.

There's only one thing to do when the odds are against you and you can't run away. Attack and attack hard. Of course, running away was vastly preferable, but the cyberpunks had me by both arms and they showed no inclination to let go. I leaned back against them suddenly, kicked out, and caught Snakeskin under the jaw with my right foot. His teeth clicked together and he fell back, blood streaming from his mouth where his alloy snake fangs had impaled his lower lip.

The cyberpunks who held me recovered quickly and ran me at the wall. I barely had enough time to turn my face aside before they slammed me against the brick. It felt like doing a belly flop into a swimming pool that had no water in it.

I was so scared, I didn't think about how much it hurt. I only knew that if I didn't do something drastic right away, it was going to hurt much worse. They yanked me back and ran me at the wall again. I leaned back against them at the last minute and ran two steps up the wall, flipping over backward to land behind them. It actually worked and they lost their grip on me. Unfortunately, unlike all the swashbuckling heroes who always land on their feet after trying such stunts, I went over backward and fell right on my ass.

I rolled and clawed my gun out of its holster underneath my jacket. To hell with Coles and his bring-'em-back-alive instructions. My first shot went wild,

whining off somewhere down the alley, but my second one struck one of the punks right in the chest, exploding on penetration and making salsa out of his entire upper torso. I missed with my third shot and the other punk took off down the alley. I got to my feet, aimed carefully, and squeezed off another round. It caught him in the back and he went down.

Then I heard something move behind me. I spun around, saw Snakeskin lunging at me, and fired. The bullet hit the wall behind him and exploded. Suddenly he wasn't there anymore. He had simply disappeared.

For a moment, it didn't sink in. I stood there in a daze, staring at the spot where he had been a second earlier. Then I realized he must have shapechanged and even as I realized that, I felt something wind itself around my legs.

I looked down and saw the head of the cyberpunk on the body of a serpent thicker than my thigh winding rapidly around my legs, climbing up my body. I froze with horror and then my arms were pinned against my sides, the coils crushing me, the head with its obscene travesty of a human face drawn back, fangs gleaming, dripping poison-

I screamed.

"No, no, no!" said Coles, bending over me and grasping me by the shirtfront, shaking me.

I was still screaming. He slapped me twice across the face, hard enough to make my head ring, but it had the desired effect of snapping me out of it.

"You froze!" said Coles. "You panicked!"

I gasped, trying to stop hyperventilating. My heart was beating like a wild thing trying to claw its way out of my chest. The scan crew was anxiously

monitoring my readouts. They could have helped by inducing a calming alpha state, but Coles wasn't going to let me off the hook that easily.

"You panicked and you died!" said Coles, grabbing me by the shirtfront and shaking me again, lifting me half off the laboratory couch. He grimaced in disgust and let me go. "Damn you, O'Toole, you're going to be no use to me at all if you panic at the slightest provocation!"

I stared at the son of a bitch, hating him.

"Mistake number one," he said, ticking them off on his fingers, "you ducked into that club, putting yourself on the defensive and giving the initiative away.

Mistake number two, you failed to take advantage of the people in the club to outflank the opposition. Instead, you continued to retreat, continued to remain on the defensive, and you ran right into a trap. Mistake number three, you caved in to pressure and disregarded my instructions by shooting to kill. Mistake number four, you allowed your emotions to overwhelm you and you left yourself exposed. Mistake number five, you hesitated when the cyberpunk shapechanged, a mistake you compounded by freezing when you saw the snake climbing up your legs, thereby giving it enough time to pin your arms. And any chance you might have had left then, you simply threw away by giving in to terror. How many times do I have to tell you? You go on the defensive, you lose the initiative and give up half the battle. You panic, you die."

"Sir," said one of the technicians on the scan team, "the subject's blood pressure is dangerously high. We're registering critical stress levels. I urgently recommend that he be taken down before--"

"Hell, do whatever you want," said Coles impatiently, dismissing me with an irate gesture. "By all means, put him on downtime before he self-destructs. I've got no use for him the way he is right now."

They started bringing me down even before he finished speaking and Coles slowly receded into a dim haze as they eased me into downtime, turning off my mind before it built up a critical mass of stress and started a chain reaction of delusions no one could control. The last conscious thought I had before I drifted off into limbo was that it might be nice if they just left me there, suspended in a thoughtless, dreamless, nearly lifeless state, where neither reality nor nightmare could intrude. Perhaps deep down, that's what every psycho really wants.

ONE

"I heard you died," said Breck, laconically.

He stood looking down at me with a wry smile, his flaxen blond hair in disarray. The cracked-ice intensity of his blue eyes was heightened by his use of bang, a hybrid plant developed from a mutated strain of noncarcinogenic tobacco and an offworld herb called bangalla. Smoking it had the effect of stimulating adrenaline production, increasing visual acuity, and amplifying tactile perceptions. Smoking bang would make an ordinary human being burn out and self-destruct, but then Breck wasn't an ordinary human being. Prolonged use of bang also had the curious side effect of making the eyes lambent. With Breck, whose hybrid matrix gave him cat's eyes to begin with, it had the disconcerting effect of making his eyes strobe when the light hit them just right.

"Shall we drink to my demise?" I said, sitting up slowly and rubbing my temples.

I glanced around at the scan team and noticed that they weren't the same psychocybernetic engineers who were on duty when Coles brought me out of the

hallucinact. "How long have I been down, Cass?" I asked the crew chief.

"About eight hours," she said.

"Nothing like a good night's sleep," I said, though strictly speaking, downtime wasn't really sleep. It was a psychocybernetic trance state. A way to turn people off when you didn't need them for anything. "So what's the prognosis, Miss Daniels? My readings all okay? Nothing in the red? No maintenance service required?"

"No therapy is indicated," she said, consulting my chart printout. "I'd advise against consuming alcoholic beverages, though I doubt you'd listen. At least try to stop short of getting completely intoxicated. It really throws the readings off."

I stared at her and mentally undressed her. She was wearing a loose-fitting white laboratory jumpsuit, but one of the monitor screens behind her suddenly showed her standing there in a sheer black lycra bra and bikini panties, dark stockings and spike heels. I wasn't on line, so the image stayed in the control room, but it wouldn't have been broadcast anyway. Not even psychocybernetic engineers can totally control the output of a human mind—at least, not yet—so there's always a slight delay between the biochip reception and the tachyon broadcast, allowing for some highly sophisticated editing. One of the other engineers cleared his throat softly. She turned around, saw the screen, and raised an eyebrow.

"You flatter me, O'Toole," she said, in a disinterested, clinical sort of tone.

"Unfortunately, I'm not quite as narrow-waisted as you seem to imagine. The result of a sedentary job with too little time for exercise, I'm afraid. And aside from considerations of style, if I were to wear shoes like that, it would lead to serious orthopedic problems."

The image on the screen broke up into snow briefly before resolving itself once more into what I actually saw before me, an attractive and apparently completely humorless young woman in a white laboratory jumpsuit. It's hard to maintain a decent fantasy without at least some cooperation.

"Besides," she said, and for a moment I could have sworn I saw the barest trace of a smile, "you left out my tattoo."

"She isn't normally so personable," Breck said as we were leaving. "I think she rather likes you."

"You think she really has a tattoo?" I said.

"A black king scorpion on her left inner thigh," Breck said, with a perfectly straight face.

I stopped and stared at him.

"Only joking," Breck said, with a smile. "For all I know, it's a snake and dagger on her biceps. However, I would resist the temptation to find out for sure if I were you. Considering her position, she probably knows more about you than you know about yourself."

"That's a large part of what makes it so tempting," I said, grinning.

Breck sighed. "You still have a great deal to learn, O'Toole."

He was undoubtedly right. Compared to Breck, I was a rank beginner at the game.

Unfortunately, novices tend to make mistakes and Psychodrome can be very unforgiving.

My involvement started as an accident. Perhaps even a lucky accident. The jury was still out on that one. I was born on Mars, in Bradbury City; Irish on my father's side, Russian on my mother's. My father was a hard-drinking, hard-gaming, two-fisted wild man named Scan O'Toole. My mother, Irina, was a

long-suffering, self-effacing, beautiful and moody woman who believed that nothing really good would ever happen to her until she hit the afterlife and even then, who knew? My dad was ruled by leprechauns and she was spooked by generations of Russian Orthodox archbishops. A mismatch of a marriage if there ever was one, but it lasted due to equal parts of stubbornness and love. As a result of this somewhat unlikely mixture, I never did get settled all the way. Archbishops and Little People didn't get along too well. The Irish part of me believed in luck, but my Russian half kept telling me I'd never get it.

I came to Earth as a freshly mustered-out serviceman looking for some fun on Tokyo's Ginza Strip. I suppose I must have had some, because the morning after I arrived, I woke up in a Junktown slum with almost all my money gone, a tattoo of a dragon (never mind where), and a brand-new wife who was perhaps all of fourteen. As things turned out, the marriage wasn't legal because Miko and her family were non-regs. If you're non-registered, then you're not legally a citizen and you haven't any rights. How can you have rights if you don't exist? Of course, I didn't know about that then, because on Mars and on the outworlds, people are still too valuable a commodity to ignore. Only Mother Earth neglects her children. All I knew was that I had, as my father would have said, really farted during vespers this time. I've been in straits considerably more dire since, but at the time, things seemed pretty grim. And they proceeded to get grimmer.

I'd always been a hustler, but unlike my dear father-roast his soul-I was strictly small-time. The terrifying prospect of living out the remainder of my days in Junktown, saddled with a child wife and her starving non-reg family, made me throw caution to the winds. I did what any self-respecting Irishman would do when he was truly up against it. I went looking for a game of poker. I

found one. And I made a very serious mistake. I won.

I know it flies in the face of logic, but there is such a thing as a hot streak.

Most gamblers live for it; however, if you're not very careful, it can utterly destroy you. I don't know what causes it, but when it strikes, you know it without the faintest scintilla of a doubt. It's magic. It's as if a ghostly

finger taps you on the shoulder and the voice of Fate whispers in your ear,

"Okay, kid, this is it. It's your turn to be God."

At any other time, I would have known better and exercised restraint, but at any other time, I wouldn't have been there to begin with. Those guys were way too heavy for me. The secret to handling a hot streak and coming out ahead is knowing when to stop. It's a principle that every gambler knows. However, there is a lesser known corollary that separates the winners from the losers in the long run. And in some cases, it separates the living from the dead. Unless you're in a large casino, which likes to have a big winner now and then because it draws in all the losers, don't ever win too big. Engrave that on your greedy little heart. The smart hustler is not a barracuda. He lives on little bites. He just moves around and makes a lot of them. I wasn't smart. I knew that I was on a streak and I got greedy. And I bit off a lot more than I could chew.

The guy who got chewed up the worst was a sore loser named Hakim Saqqara, who just so happened to be a warlord of the Yakuza. If I'd known that when I took his money, I probably would've committed hara-kiri on the spot. It would've saved everyone a lot of time and trouble. If he felt like it, he could have had me killed that very night, but I had pricked his pride and he wanted to draw his satisfaction out a bit. He decided to continue the game, so to speak, away from the table. So he waited. He gave me time to parlay my winnings into a

comfortable life-style. The money I pulled off him allowed me to buy citizen registrations for Miko and her family and loan her enough funds to buy an education so she could get a job. I never thought I'd see it back, but I didn't really give a damn. I'd had a run of bad luck and I had somehow managed to turn it all around. Then Saqqara made his move and gave me an education in major league hustling that I'll never forget.

By the time he was finished with me, I was so well and truly on the hook to him that when he snapped his fingers, I was in the air before he finished saying, "Jump." He took me for everything I had. In the process, I learned a bit too much about him, so when he decided I had nothing left to lose and could be no further use to him, he told his boys to drop me in the bay. Without a doubt, I would have wound up fish food if the leprechauns hadn't delivered a miracle.

My number was selected in the Psychodrome lottery.

Now Psychodrome was never my idea of entertainment. I found reality challenging enough, thank you, I didn't need fantasy tripping. I hadn't even bought the damn ticket. Before we parted company, my wife Miko once mentioned picking up a couple of tickets for us and I had forgotten all about it until mine was drawn for the grand prize—a chance to play an adventure game scenario with a couple of Psychodrome's hottest stars. There I was, trying to hide out from Yakuza assassins and the next thing I knew, I was famous. All I wanted was to go someplace where no one knew my name and suddenly everybody knew my name. I didn't have a lot of options. I was broke, without even enough money to buy another meal. I had been all the way up and down the scale. I'd gone from an ex-serviceman with some money to burn to a pauper down in Junktown to a high roller on the Ginza Strip to a stockbroker in Hamamatsu. And then the downward slide had started as Saqqara wrapped his tentacles around me and in five short

years I was right back where I'd started, no worse off than before, except for one slight detail. There was a contract out on me. Psychodrome was a way out. If I had known back then what I was letting myself in for, I might've stayed in Tokyo and taken my chances with the Yakuza.

There were different levels to the game known as "the ultimate experience." Some of them provided harmless fantasies built around luxury and pleasure. Whatever turns you on. Others provided adventure, challenge, and great risk. Players rich enough to afford the entry fees could choose their own scenarios from the adventures Psychodrome had to offer. The less fortunate could buy tickets in the lottery, with the grand prize being the chance to play. However, there was a catch. Winners of the lottery didn't get to choose their game scenarios and they had no control over their experiences. In that respect, there were two levels to Psychodrome; one in which wealthy players got to use the game for interactive, exhibitionistic entertainment and one in which the game got to use the players. Those who fell into the latter category were generally diehard thrillseekers, gamblers, or desperate individuals. In other words, people very much like me. And there's never been a shortage of such people.

Players about to embark upon "the ultimate experience" were taken to the headquarters of Psychodrome International, the megacorporate entity which operates the game. There, the prospective player was given a full medical and psychological examination and a definitive player data base was assembled. The player was then taken into surgery, where a special semiorganic, psychocybernetic biochip was implanted into the cerebral cortex. Permanently. You couldn't take it out even if you could afford psychocybernetic surgery. The chip grew directly into the brain matter like a rooting seedling. It gave the

player the ability to interface directly with the Psychodrome computer banks, as well as with Psychodrome's playermaster satellite network.

The game began when the players were transported to a selected, location where they were supposed to interact with people and situations they encountered in order to achieve specific game objectives. It was possible to win, but still more possible to lose. And losing could mean death. Which made for great entertainment, you see. The game scenarios could be located anywhere on Earth or on another world or from a fantasy hallucination devised by Psychodrome. In other words, it could be real or a programmed hallucination. Only the playermaster knew for sure.

As the players pursued their game objectives, the playermaster was capable of interfacing with them to provide guidance or game clues, but never direct assistance. If you got into a jam, it was up to you to figure out how to get out of it. And the fun part was that the playermaster satellite network enabled instantaneous tachyon transmission of your experiences to Psychodrome Game Control for broadcast on mass media psych-fidelity entertainment channels.

People using their psy-fi sets at home could follow the adventures of their favorite players and experience the game with them by plugging into the net.

Psy-fi entertainment systems allowed them to achieve an electronic sensory link with the players. Each player's experience was broadcast on a separate channel of the system. By switching channels, the home audience could switch players, vicariously "becoming" those players. Sort of like renting someone else's body to have a fantasy adventure, sharing all the sensory experiences from the safety of your living room. Or bedroom. Like I said, whatever turns you on. And if things got a bit too hairy, the fail-safe biomonitors built into the system would protect you from becoming too excited.

Home viewers were also capable of some limited interaction with the players by voting on selected game options. The vote was electronically tallied and the results instantaneously transmitted to the players via tachyon beam. The players then had the option of following the advice of the home audience or not.

However, since ratings were important, there was a certain amount of pressure on the players to please the audience. And they could be a bit bloodthirsty on occasion.

Realized game objectives resulted in fabulous cash prizes, as did accumulated "experience points." Psychodrome professionals- psychos-were cult figures living out a life of fantasy most people could only dream about (or experience vicariously). It wasn't the sort of career I would have selected for myself, but as somebody once said, life is just what happens to you while you're busy making other plans. Besides, what gambler can resist the lure of a big game? And though Psychodrome seemed to be the biggest game around, it turned out that there was an even bigger game being played out behind the scenes- the clandestine game that Coles seemed to be running.

I had always assumed that there was someone running Coles, because the thought of Coles being accountable to no one but himself was a bit too unsettling to deal with. There had to be an order to things. Even Einstein had insisted that God didn't play dice with the universe. Of course, Einstein dealt with things on a far larger scale than I did, but if Coles wasn't God in my own small corner of the universe, he was certainly one of His Four Horsemen. He was one of Them, the mysterious and omnipotent They you're always hearing about, the ones who run things, the ones with all the power. He appeared out of nowhere, waltzed right into Game Control, and started giving orders.

I'd always wondered about Psychodrome International wiring all those people up. The biochip was presented to the world as the latest thing in cybertech, a boon to all humanity. There was nothing like a brain/computer interface for increasing human potential. Take a short nap and wake up with a college education, or fluency in a foreign language, or have yourself programmed with an advanced-level technical course. All you had to do was pay for the data, competitively priced; the computer time, expensive; and the implantation of a biochip, a mere king's ransom.

The operation was a relatively simple one for a psychocybernetic surgeon to perform and the actual cost of manufacturing a biochip, even allowing for a whopping profit, was still considerably less than what they charged. But then when something is ruinously expensive, it becomes that much more desirable to those who can afford it-namely, the rich and powerful, the movers and the shakers. If you want to hook that crowd, price your product accordingly and they'll line up for blocks to get one. And if you offer it as a grand prize in a glamorous lottery, a prize that not only lets you participate in the adventure of a lifetime, but gives you a biochip to keep forever as a souvenir, something that can increase your life potential (providing you can pay to have it programmed), well, you can sell all the tickets you can print. Everybody, but everybody, played the lottery.

However, on the other hand . . .

Inevitably, over a period of time, you'd have more and more people with biochips permanently implanted in their brains, which not only allowed their minds to interface with a computer, but could also conceivably allow someone to broadcast coded signals to their biochips and access their minds. Without their even knowing it. Of course, only a paranoid would think like that.

Enter Mr. Coles.

I never would have met Coles or learned how insidious Psychodrome could be if it hadn't been for a gaming round that took me to a planet called Draconis 9. The dominant form of life on Draconis 9 were creatures known as ambimorphs-in other words, shapechangers.

The first corporate development team to set foot on Draconis 9 did what humans always do whenever they encounter a new wilderness. They started killing things. Until the humans came, the ambimorphs were simple creatures who survived by instinct. But after ignorant humans started killing them, the ambimorphs' instinct for survival led them to imitate the strange new predators. They took human form and mutated in the process, becoming sentient. And that's when they became a real problem.

Breck had been with the Special Service unit sent to rescue the humans on Draconis 9. The mission had been a miserable failure. There had been no way to differentiate between the humans and the shapechangers. The ambimorphs were one-way telepaths. They communicated by reading one another's minds. And their shapechanging was more than superficial. They not only took on human form, they became human. They were so plastic a life form that one of them could read my mind and take my shape and become completely indistinguishable from me. It would sound like me. It would act like me. It would know everything I knew. It would duplicate my biology and essentially become another "me." And it could take any other form at will, with lightning speed.

No one knew how they could do it. No ambimorph had ever been captured alive and studied. Dead ambimorphs did not revert back to whatever their "natural" form was. They became fixed somehow in whatever shape they had taken on before they

died and even a detailed autopsy could not penetrate the secret of their morphology. They had been harmless, uncomplicated, unreasoning beings with a bovine placidity-until they encountered us. Then, just to survive, they changed and became the most terrifying life form in the universe, chameleons with human cunning and, worse still, human instincts. We had created the enemy and he was us-only it was a superior design.

Draconis 9 was quarantined. A military base was established in orbit above the planet to maintain the quarantine and it might have ended there except that there was something on Draconis 9 that people wanted-fire crystals.

Demand for the crystals as rare ornamental and industrial gems led to the formation of the Draconis Combine, a multinational conglomerate with enough clout to circumvent the quarantine and establish orbital habitats above Draconis 9, housing a new species of professional who was part adventurer, part gambler, part mercenary, and part scum-the crystal hunter. They went down to the surface of Draconis to hunt their crystals and kill each other to protect their digs and annihilate anything living that came close to them, just in case it was an ambimorph. They went down equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and skimmer sleds and specially coded transceivers so they could be scanned when they came back, have their humanity verified, be placed into protective quarantine, and exhaustively examined just to make sure no ambimorphs got through. Well, it didn't work. The shapechangers broke the quarantine.

Coles, in his infinite deviousness, had directed Psychodrome to announce the creation of a brand-new, continuing adventure game scenario. "Coming up soon-Alien Invasion! Tune in and share the fantasy! Stalk the ambimorphs who walk among us! Join the elite team mobilized to save the human race!" It was billed as the most realistic game scenario the company had ever run and only a

small group of people knew that it was real. Trust Coles to find the perfect way to desensitize the public to an alien invasion. Make it into a media event.

Breck and I were part of an inner group of psychos answering only to Coles. I don't recall ever being asked to join. At first, it scared me silly. And then I started to get excited about it. I tried to tell myself that it was only my gambler's instinct responding to a challenge, the lure of the big game, the charge in laying it all right on the line. I really wanted to believe that. But there was a little chip inside my brain, a miracle of modern psychocybernetic engineering, and ever since they'd put it in there, I never really knew for sure where my ideas came from anymore. But, of course, psychos aren't supposed to let things like that bother them.

Breck lit up a bang stick and leaned back in his chair, inhaling the vaguely minty smoke and holding it in his lungs a moment before exhaling slowly. He claimed the devilish stuff actually relaxed him. I tried not to inhale too deeply. The last thing I needed was a contact adrenaline rush that would make me start climbing up the walls. Breck ordered a beer and I asked the waitress for an Irish whiskey. It was ruinously expensive, what with the import tariffs, but there simply was no adequate domestic substitute. Just as there was no adequate substitute for cocktail waitresses.

The unemployment statistics being what they were, any service establishment using robotics was liable to get boycotted, if not trashed, so most places in the city had disposed of their robots and gone back to using human help. And they made an astonishing discovery-people actually preferred being waited on by people. There were fewer mistakes involved in taking orders, it made the atmosphere more congenial, and customers were far less likely to assault a human

waiter than to demolish a robot server, so the overhead went down. Besides, no robot could beat a cocktail waitress with great legs.

Solo's wasn't very crowded yet. The action didn't really pick up until after midnight, so we didn't draw a great deal of attention. Breck only signed about ten or fifteen autographs. I signed five, but then I wasn't as big a star as Breck was. Not that I minded very much. I watched the way they approached him, the expressions on their faces a mixture of awe, lust, and envy. It made me nervous.

It's only natural to want people to like you, to accept you for who and what you are, but you want it on your terms. You want to be able to decide how much of yourself you're going to reveal at any given time and you want to control how close you're going to let other people get. Psychos didn't really get to do that. We had more than just a sensory link with the home audience, we had an emotional link, as well. It wasn't true telepathy, but someone plugging into the net and tuning in a psycho often got more than just sight, sound, smell, and feel. Some psychos "projected" better than others. There was a greater sense of empathy. Apparently, I let a great deal of my self seep through and people who tuned in on me not only got the sensation of sharing my experiences, they got a strong sense of what it felt like to be me.

I found that out the hard way. I'd fallen in love with Stone Winters and kept it to myself, but when she plugged into a rerun of one of our adventures and tuned me in so that she could see how her game partner reacted, she experienced my feelings about her. And during the broadcast, so did everyone else who tuned me in. I started receiving fan mail from women who liked the way my feelings felt. It was embarrassing, to say the least, but there was nothing I could do about it. Blame it on my heritage, I was apparently one hell of an emoter.

Breck was different. Rudy was larger than life. He gave them a sense of what it felt like to be a hero, a swashbuckler who quite literally knew no fear. He was immensely popular because he gave his audience a chance to experience what it felt like to have power in their world. It wasn't really theirs, it was Rudy's, but for a while, they got to share it with him. It made their desperate working lives a bit more bearable. Perhaps that was a good thing in some respects, a beneficial therapy, but on the other hand, coming home from a long grind at the office and "becoming" Rudy Breck was a heady experience.

Someone who did not possess Breck's physical perfection, his superior hybrid strength and reflexes, his "leap into the jaws of death and devil take the hindmost" approach to life could tune him in and get a fix of what that felt like—only with safety valves incorporated into the delusion. No real danger, no real stress, no risk, no pain, no gamble. It could be incredibly addictive, turning people into passive receptors, dreamers whose fantasies became more real to them, more meaningful, than the lives they actually led. It was both sad and scary. And I was part of it, somewhere in the middle, not quite sure where I fit in.

"You're looking very pensive," Breck said, glancing at me over his beer glass. I tossed back the whiskey. I had promised myself I wouldn't drink anymore, but an Irishman trying not to drink is like a politician trying to be sincere. It's against the laws of nature. "I was thinking about the life we lead," I said. "It doesn't really belong to us, does it? It belongs to Coles; it belongs to the company; it belongs to the audience, to everyone except us."

Breck made a wry face. "You're not going to get drunk again, are you, O'Toole? You always become maudlin when you're drunk."

I sighed. "I'm just tired, Rudy. I don't think I've had more than six hours to myself since I got back from Tokyo. If Coles isn't running us ragged, he's got me on downtime or he's staging hallucinacts in which I'm dying half the time and I can't tell the difference between what's real and what isn't anymore. I'm on the verge of overload. And in answer to your question, yes, I'm going to get drunk."

"There's nothing more tedious than someone who's half Russian, half Irish, and all drunk," said Breck. "The last time you were in your cups, you got up on a table and made an incomprehensible speech about the virtues of ethical conduct. Then you sang a little song, received a great round of applause, and passed out on the floor. I had to carry you home and put you to bed. I wouldn't have minded so much if I hadn't been reprimanded by Coles for not keeping a tighter rein on you, as if that were my responsibility."

"A man's got to unwind somehow," I said weakly.

"Yes, unwind, not cease running altogether," Breck said. He pointed his index finger at me. "I'm watching you this time, O'Toole. The minute you start running your sentences together, I'm cutting off your booze."

"He doesn't do it to you, does he?"

Breck frowned. "Who doesn't do what to me? What are you talking about?"

"Coles! Who else?"

"Ah, the hallucinact training sessions, you mean." He shook his head. "No, he's been having scan crews working round the clock, debriefing me, trying to prime my subconscious so they can reconstruct that miserable mission to Draconis 9 all those years ago. It's an experience I dearly wish I could forget and he's been making me relive it. All he's doing to you is trying to bring you up to speed; something you should probably thank him for, believe it or not. It will increase

your 'survivability quotient,' as he puts it. Bureaucrats seem to have a language all their own, don't they? In any case, buck up. At least you've still managed to retain your sanity. That puts you ahead of the game."

"You could die playing this game," I said. "And I sure don't feel like I'm ahead. I feel as if I'm losing touch with my own reality." I drained the glass and ordered another whiskey.

"On the contrary," Breck said. "Your own reality is the one thing you're not losing touch with. Do you remember the advice I gave you when we first met? You were worried about how to tell if what you were about to experience would be real or a programmed hallucination and I told you not to concern yourself with that, to treat each and every experience as if it were absolutely real, because if you allowed yourself the luxury of doubt, your mind would cling to that doubt in moments of extreme stress and that could kill you." I nodded. "I remember. I didn't even know the half of it then."

"What happened in your last hallucination?" said Breck. "The ambimorph got me," I said, staring down at the table. "I screwed up and I died."

"But did you ever doubt that you were really about to die?"

I frowned and shook my head. "No. It seemed so real..."

"Precisely," Breck said. "Even after repeated training sessions in psychocybernetic computer simulations designed to subject your mind to continually increased levels of stress, you still maintained your grasp on your perceived reality. You stayed grounded, in other words. You did not retreat into denial. Even faced with what appeared to be imminent death, you continued to integrate your perceptions into your own reality, instead of allowing your sense of reality to disintegrate."

I stared at him. "But don't crazy people do exactly the same thing? If what you perceive isn't real and you act on that, is that sanity?"

Breck smiled, "It depends on how you respond to what you perceive," he said.

"Schizophrenics, for example, tend to have completely unpredictable responses.

If you react to your sensory input in a normal manner, it doesn't matter if your perceptions are based on something that isn't real. The brain is essentially a computer and a computer is only as good as its input. If Coles inputs a hallucinact in which you are about to die, what matters is how you react to that situation, not whether or not the situation is actually real. Because your perceptions are all you have to go on. You might say a hallucinact bypasses your 'reality circuit.' Since it's the only input you're receiving, it becomes the only reality you can respond to."

"You mean as in 'garbage in, garbage out?'" "That's a rather peculiar way of putting it, but in principle, it's essentially correct. Another way to look at it is to think of it as problem solving. All life is, after all, is a series of problems that we have to solve. A hallucinact is merely a model of the real thing. Both require the same problem-solving approach. However, if you start to doubt your own perceptions, questioning your input, then that becomes the equivalent of ignoring the problem. That doesn't mean it's going to go away."

"I understand that part of it," I said, "but what has me worried is that Coles seems intent on confusing my sense of reality. He'll send us out on a real-life exercise, then he'll program a hallucinact that mimicks that reality and I never know which one it will be."

"Would you believe that it doesn't really matter?" ; "Now that's crazy," I said.

"Not from his point of view," Breck said, with a shrug. "The most effective way of training someone to cope with life or death situations is to place them in

life or death situations. That's why the Asian martial arts purists always trained with real edged weapons and why the Special Service always trains with live ammo. Coles is getting you accustomed to facing death. Once you become accustomed to it, the threat itself doesn't affect your response time anymore. It's a rather novel way to use hallucinants. The service should probably look into it. It's certainly more economical than going on maneuvers."

"But if I keep encountering life-threatening situations in hallucinants and waking up to find out that it was all a psychocybernetic dream, then won't that have the effect of desensitizing me to the idea of dying?"

"That seems to be the general idea," Breck said, nodding.

"But fear is a function of self-preservation."

Breck shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Personally, I'd rather depend on knowledge and ability for my survival."

I couldn't argue with the man. He'd been through more hell than I would ever see and he'd survived it. But then, that was what he'd been designed to do. He was a high-performance model and I was strictly economy class. I wondered why Coles bothered. A man in his position could easily recruit more hybrids like Breck or even ordinary humans, who were much more suited to the task than I was. Why me? It couldn't have been simply because I knew too much not to be on the inside. I had no illusions that my civil liberties would mean anything to a man like Coles. If he thought it would be more cost effective to wipe me like a slate, he wouldn't hesitate a moment.

I worried away at it on the way back to the hotel. I had stopped at the point where I had a pleasant buzz on instead of getting drunk, and that was fortunate, because when I got home, I found out I had company.

As I walked in the door, Cass Daniels came out of my bedroom, wearing my black silk robe and carrying two glasses of champagne. She leaned against the doorframe and held one glass out to me. As I took it, the robe fell open and I saw that she was wearing a sheer black lycra bra and panties, dark stockings and spike heels.

"Was this more or less what you had in mind?" she said, raising her eyebrows.

It felt as if there were something stuck inside my throat. I drained the glass in one gulp. She sipped her drink and watched me over the rim of the glass.

"Cass ..." I said.

She approached me, holding the glass in her left hand and putting her right hand on my chest. She smiled as she started to undo my shift. "I thought we should get better acquainted," she said huskily. "All you really know about me is that I'm one of the scanning engineers at Game Control." She looked up at me and smiled. "But I know a great deal about you."

Her lips came closer, her slowly moving hand dropped lower as it stroked gently and there was something nibbling away at the back of my mind, only I was having trouble paying attention. I felt her warm breath as her lips brushed my cheek and she pressed herself against me.

"Wait," I said. Inexplicably, I suddenly felt paranoid and backed away from her, trying to catch my breath.

"Why?" she said, letting the robe slip to the floor and reaching around to unfasten her bra.

She looked exactly as I had imagined she would look without that loose-fitting jumpsuit. Exactly the way I had pictured her in my mind. Only I suddenly recalled her saying that she was actually somewhat heavier around the middle. I didn't see any love handles. And there was no tattoo. Perhaps she had been

joking, but I suddenly wondered what would happen if I called Game Control.

Would I find out that she was still on duty?

She suddenly threw the glass aside and opened her mouth in a snarl. Gleaming hydraulic fangs slid out of her incisors. Her skin became iridescent and developed scales. She was turning into a nightmare plucked right out of my mind.

Without thinking, I clawed for my gun and fired. The bullets passed through empty air where she had been an instant earlier and exploded against the wall.

And then I felt something climbing up my leg.

The thick serpent's body with the travesty of a human female head coiled around me and I wanted to scream, but instead I jammed my gun right into its gaping maw and squeezed the trigger. The back of the creature's head exploded, and I kept firing until the magazine was empty.

I fell to the floor, trapped by the serpent coils as the creature stiffened in death. I hammered against its body with my empty gun, trying to free myself.

After struggling for a few minutes, I managed to extricate myself from the coils and I stood over the thing, covered with its blood and breathing heavily.

"All right, Coles, damn you," I said through clenched teeth, "this time I didn't die!"

Only Coles did not respond. And the scene did not dissolve around me and I didn't come out of it lying on a laboratory couch at Game Control. I was still in my hotel room and there was an alien creature lying dead on my carpet and I had its blood all over me.

I was still shaking when Breck broke down the door.

TWO

The entire floor of my hotel had been secured so fast, my neighbors must all have been in shock. So far as they would ever know, someone had made an attempt on my life and I'd shot him in self-defense. They'd see the body bag being removed, but they'd never suspect what sort of thing was actually inside it. I wondered how they'd have reacted if they had known.

"I wish you hadn't killed it," Coles said, his voice manifesting itself in my mind.

"Well, now what the hell was I supposed to do?" I said out loud, still feeling badly rattled. The men sealing the body bag glanced at me. They hadn't heard Coles, of course, and they looked puzzled for a moment, then they figured out what was going on and wordlessly went back to their task.

"I didn't mean that as a criticism," said Coles. "I was merely expressing regret that we missed an opportunity to capture one of them alive. It obviously intended to kill you and take your place. If it had succeeded and we weren't monitoring you, your death would not have registered before the creature could assimilate your biochip and it might have penetrated our security. We were very lucky. It was a close call."

"Yes, I'm so relieved that 'we' came out of it all right," I said.

"I want you both to report in immediately," Coles said. "I don't want either of you talking to the news media, so I'm having you picked up in the lobby. Not a word to anyone. Understood?"

"Understood."

I watched the men carry the sealed body bag out into the hall. "Doesn't seem to bother them," I said. "You'd think they bagged human-headed serpents every day." Breck glanced at me. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'll live. I'll probably have nightmares for a while, but these days, what's the difference? Awake or asleep, reality or hallucination, seems like it's all the same damn thing."

"You mean it isn't?" Breck said, grinning and flexing his nysteel fingers. He had lost his real arm in the service and the prosthesis had some interesting modifications built into it, such as the knife blades that sprang like stilettos out of his artificial fingers. Not to mention that the nysteel alloy itself was damn near indestructible. One shot with it was all it had taken to pulverize my door.

"You ruined my door with that damn thing," I said.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to knock quite so hard."

I grimaced ruefully. "I guess I should stop complaining about the scan crews monitoring us on our own time. For all the damn good it did. If I hadn't shot that creature, their monitoring my readouts wouldn't have helped me much. You would've arrived too late. No one saved my ass this time but me."

Breck raised his eyebrows. "Are you quite certain of that?"

I glanced at him sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Game Control scanners registered abnormal levels on your readouts, resulting in a signal alarm that alerted them to tune you in. I suspect that confronted with the spectacle of Cassandra Daniels in her scanties, or what you thought was Cassandra Daniels, you reacted with predictable excitement. Add the fact that you'd been drinking, which affects the bio signals, and the result was an abnormal readout of some sort. The real Miss Daniels, still on duty back at Game Control, thought it prudent to tune you in and check on your activities. Imagine how surprised she must have been when she tuned in and saw that you were about

to make love to her] The ambimorph apparently plucked your current fantasy straight out of your mind the moment you walked in. However, the significant thing about all this is that the creature didn't pick up on the fact that you were being monitored, either because it couldn't or because it was too intent on plucking a familiar and compelling image from your mind to throw you immediately off guard. It suggests that ambimorphs are not infallible mind readers. And that's encouraging news."

I was slow on the uptake. "Wait a minute. If Cassandra tuned me in and saw what was happening, why didn't she contact me?"

Breck looked amused. "What makes you think she didn't?"

I suddenly remembered that nagging little feeling at the back of my mind, that insistent, prodding sensation which had burst into a powerful attack of paranoia, and I realized what must have happened.

"She knew you were in trouble," said Breck, "and distracted by a rather powerful sexual stimulus. Rather than throw you off balance by using voice contact, which might well have caused a fatal hesitation on your part, she simply activated your strongest defense response and amplified it. You did all the rest. I think it was an excellent judgment call on her part. She saved your life."

I stared at him, stunned. I'd been wondering why Coles bothered with someone like me, when he could easily have recruited more hybreeds like Breck, with superior strength, responses, and powers of concentration. The answer, of course, was that someone like Breck would be a lot harder to manipulate. Breck was "wired differently." Coles could not tiptoe through his mind without Breck knowing it. The degree of mental discipline and control that came so easily to Breck was excruciating work for me. I was getting better at it, but Breck, being a hybreed, would always have the edge. Consequently, Breck was a good choice as

an operative, but a poor choice as a subject for experimentation to see how much cybertech could do applied to ordinary humans as behavior modification.

I began to see that I was much more than a covert government agent playing Psychodrome professionally as a cover. I was an experimental prototype, as well.

When Coles learned where all my buttons were and how to push them, he could do the same thing more easily with others-and in such a manner that they would never be aware of it. It was as if I were the vehicle and Coles and his people were sitting behind the wheel-learning how to drive.

"I see," I said softly, trying not to think about the worst nightmares of George Orwell. "I suppose I'm going to have to thank Cass Daniels for pushing the right button."

Breck gave me a wry smile. "Just make certain that it's really her this time."

There had been some changes at the corporate headquarters of Psychodrome International since Coles and his people took over. They were subtle changes for the most part, such as the security system that relied not only on hidden scanners, but on human receptionists and guards plugged into the security matrix, their senses monitored by Security Control.

To the casual observer, the lobby of the building looked no different than it had before the advent of what some of us referred to as "the change in management." (Personally, I wasn't at all convinced that there had been a change in management. I had a sneaking suspicion that Coles might have been running things all along. I know, paranoia. ..) Entering through the front doors from the courtyard plaza, you came into the cavernous atrium. The centerpiece was the massive multiplex holocube display. The huge cubes were clustered like quartz crystals, each containing constantly changing scenes, slices of experience from

past interactive game scenarios. The whole thing was suspended over a reflecting pool which, depending on the time of day, was either placid or had colored fountains playing in it.

Beyond this garish testament to our corporate image, there was the information desk, staffed by a covey of bright, young, helpful people whose primary function was to be polite, cheerful, and attractive without being terribly accommodating.

If you were able to convince them that you had legitimate business somewhere in the vast corporate hive, they would point you in the right direction, usually down one of the side corridors leading to a bank of lift tubes. However, by the time you'd gotten that far, you'd already been scanned about a dozen different ways, examined by both automated and human sensors.

While that charming young receptionist was soothing you with her seductive voice and perhaps even flirting with you a little, she was making direct eye contact and her visual impression was being instantaneously transmitted via her biochip to Security Control, where computer enhancement of the image enabled a reading of your retinal pattern for identification. Your voice print was checked as the receptionist listened to you speak and the scanners hidden in her desk made certain you weren't carrying anything antisocial on your person. More of the same took place inside the lift tubes, which were equipped with concealed antipersonnel weapons capable of tracking and zeroing in on individual passengers and rendering them either unconscious or dead without harming the person standing next to them. If necessary though, the entire tube could be destroyed. Needless to say, all but a handful of employees were ignorant of these procedures, just as only a handful of employees knew that there was something more to Psychodrome than entertainment. In other words, we were so paranoid, we didn't even tell our own people what we were doing.

So far as I knew, Coles never left the upper levels of the building. Perhaps he felt safer there or maybe he wanted to be right on top of things twenty-four hours a day. Probably both. The maximum security floors of the building were prohibited to anyone who wasn't implanted with a biochip. Everyone with clearance for access to those floors was now monitored by automated scanner banks around the clock. At the first abnormal reading, as had happened in my case, alarms went off and a scanning engineer on duty tuned in immediately. Coles was serious. I wondered if he was serious enough to have had himself implanted with a biochip, as well. I guessed he probably had. Fanatics like Coles tended to be true believers in the system. If it were up to him, he would probably have a biochip implanted in every infant that was born.

He was waiting for us in his office on the top floor. It was all done in black. Black carpeting, black walls, black ceiling, black furniture, black fixtures and accessories ... it was like the inside of a womb. I always felt slightly disoriented in his office, a little claustrophobic, as if I were visiting a mole in its lair.

"Come in, gentlemen," Coles said, from behind his big black desk. "Have a seat. I'd like you to see something."

He pressed a tiny sensor panel in the console set flush with the desktop and a panel in the wall slid up to reveal a holoscreen.

"The footage you're about to see," said Coles, "was obtained from an independent producer who was attempting to sell it to the news media. Fortunately for us, they didn't bite. They thought he was trying to pull a hustle with some special effects."

The scene flashed on abruptly, showing a beautiful young woman standing on the

guardrail of a span way, against the background of the midtown towers, high above the lower levels of the city. She was clearly about to jump. Breck and I both tensed as we recognized Stone Winters-only we both knew that this wasn't really Stone. It was the ambimorph that had returned to Earth with us by assuming her identity.

What we were watching on the screen had taken place moments after the creature, still in the shape of Stone Winters, had escaped from the very building we were in. Game Control had still been receiving signals from the biochip the shapechanger had assimilated when it had eaten Stone and I knew what was coming up next. The creature had panicked at the sight of all the vehicles bearing down upon it as it fled out onto the spanway and it had leaped over the guardrail, shapechanging as it fell.

We were on its trail when it happened. Game Control had been receiving signals from the biochip and Coles had fed the transmission directly to Breck and me. I recalled the terrifying sensation of falling, followed by the feeling of winged flight, the transformation taking place so quickly that there was no sensation whatsoever of the change. What we had experienced through the medium of the biochip interface with the creature, we were now about to see for the first time.

"This was an absolute fluke," said Coles as he froze the image on the screen.

"This guy was shooting a series of background scenes for an ad agency campaign and he just happened to catch this." He started the footage once again, reversing it so that it rewound to the scene an instant before the cameraman had seen "Stone" up on the spanway. "All right, now here's where he spotted what he thought was a woman about to commit suicide."

He resumed running it once more and we saw the blurring effect as the cameraman

quickly panned up to the spanway, catching "the woman" poised on the guardrail.

A second later, she jumped.

"Now hold on to your seats," said Coles.

The camera followed as "she" fell, tumbling like a high diver out of control, and then suddenly, incredibly, the falling figure exploded, bursting apart into a flock of small birds, pinwheeling around one another and then grouping together into a flight that went soaring out of frame as the picture tilted crazily-

"Here's where he dropped the camera," said Coles, stopping the holographic footage, and then reversing it. He ran it from the fall and froze the image at the instant of the transformation. The process had been too fast even for a holocamera to capture. One moment, a falling woman. The next, a human figure exploding into birds.

"My God," I whispered.

"Amazing," said Breck, staring at the screen. "So that was how it seemed to achieve the impossible and alter its mass. It never altered its mass at all, it simply rearranged it by separating into discrete entities, linked by one intelligence! I never dreamed that they could do that!"

"What about the people who saw this?" I said. "What about the cameraman? How did you intend to keep them quiet?"

Coles shrugged. "I have no intention of trying to keep them quiet. They can talk about it all they please. They're even welcome to talk about how we seized their footage. The news media have already decided it's a Psychodrome publicity stunt."

"But what if somebody believes them?"

"People believe all sorts of irrational things," said Coles. "They see ghosts, they speak with Jesus Christ, they wrestle with the devil, they're kidnapped by little green men in flying saucers . . . Aliens walking among us is hardly something new. I doubt even the sensational press would find it very interesting. On the other hand, our xenobiologists find this utterly fascinating. The fact that the ambimorphs can do this seems to support the theory that they reproduce asexually, by fission."

"You mean mitosis?" Breck said.

Coles shook his head. "I don't know. I'm wary of sticking a convenient label on it until we know for sure exactly what it is they do and how they do it. It could be a form of cell division we've never even seen before. Our people believe it's possible that what we're dealing with here is not a species of individual creatures, but that each ambimorph is a sort of 'colony.' As you said, Breck, discrete entities linked by a common intelligence. But also linked, apparently, by something more than that, something like a common nervous system, possibly based on enzymes or even something on a particle level, micro-molecular. A dead ambimorph becomes fixed, rather like water freezing into a solid block of ice. The cells, I guess you'd call them, aren't completely independent. They can sustain a certain amount of damage, but past some point, trauma becomes irreversible. We know they can be killed. What we didn't know is that we could be dealing with interdependent, symbiotic communities of creatures that behave together in an individual manner."

"You mean like a hive?" I said.

Coles raised his eyebrows. "Perhaps. That's an interesting way of putting it. Of course, we won't know any of this for certain until we can manage to get our hands on a live ambimorph. Which brings me to the main reason why I sent for

you. Have either of you ever heard of a place called Purgatory?"

Purgatory.

Just the mention of the name was enough to make my stomach start contracting. I had once spent three months on Purgatory while I was a supply sergeant on a service freighter and those three months had been three of the most miserable months I'd ever spent anywhere, including the Ginza Strip, Junktown, and that bug-infested swamp of a planet where I received my baptism of fire as a psycho, fighting with a brigade of corporate mercenaries.

I'd heard of a place called Purgatory, all right. I was twenty years old and the barge we charitably referred to as a "ship" had limped into port at Purgatory Station, where our chief engineer finally conceded that it would take more than a crescent wrench and some electrician's tape to effect repairs. What it took was an overhaul of the drive system, which tied up engineering for about three weeks, and debugging a small glitch somewhere in the navigational computer, which only took a little over two months. Those of us who were not in engineering or systems maintenance had nothing to do except mickey mouse make-work and we'd already been doing that for months. So the skipper decided to break down and give us shore leave on the planet surface.

Five of us never made it back.

We never did find out what happened to them. They had been drinking-there wasn't much else to do on Purgatory-and they had taken a jet-powered desert sled out beyond the confines of the military ground base. They had been careening around the desert, shooting up the bleeding cactus, when they ran out of fuel. A search party from the ground base made several flyovers and they finally located their desert sled, but there was no sign of our men. No one seemed surprised.

Their bodies were never recovered. Possibly because there were no bodies to recover. They might have encountered one of several predatory species who lived out on the high desert plains. They might have died of exposure and been recycled by the efficient little scavengers of Purgatory, who wasted nothing, not even the bones. Or they might have been taken by the natives, nomadic tribes whose life in the high country was so harsh that they could always use an extra hand or two. Having found the abandoned sled and no sign of our men within a fifty-mile radius, the ground-base commander had simply shrugged and said, "Forget it."

Our skipper gave us a choice. Go back up to the orbital station and our ship or remain confined to the ground base.

The ground-base commander didn't much care what we did. As far as he was concerned, if we were stupid enough to go out into the desert and get lost, that was our own lookout. He had other things to worry about, such as the fact that it looked as if he was never going to get his transfer. So he did a lot of drinking.

I wound up doing a great deal of it with him, watching my crewmates, one by one, succumb to the endless heat and drudgery and take the shuttle back up to the ship rather than go bugfuck. I was determined to make the most of my groundside liberty as long as we were there, because I knew it would be a long time before I got my feet on solid ground again, but a choice between staying aboard ship or ground liberty on Purgatory was like a choice between a killer migraine or an infection of the urinary tract.

I couldn't imagine why in God's name Coles would send us to a place like Purgatory. There was nothing there except for a few refineries and a toxic waste dump or two. However, as I learned from Coles, it seemed that Purgatory had

experienced some growth in recent years and the high pay scales and harsh conditions had made it a natural recruiting ground for the Draconis Combine.

After a few years spent on Purgatory, workers had more than enough cash to stake themselves to a crystal hunter's gamble in the Combine's Fire Islands' habitats and they were desperate for a thrill. All too many of them wound up getting more thrills than they had bargained for.

The Combine operated frequent flights between Purgatory and the Fire Islands.

The Draconis Combine was not above "selling contracts"-a polite euphemism for indentured servitude. There was always a need for laborers on Purgatory and the Combine liked to maintain a decent turnover in the habitats. It was all too easy to get suckered in by dreams of easy money and adventure in the Fire Islands.

Once you got there, you might decide that a crystal hunter's life was far too violent for you and then you wanted out. That was when you fell prey to the human sharks who inhabited the Islands. If you were lucky, you got out on a turnaround. If you weren't, you found out what slavery was all about. If you were lucky, you were "turned around" and had your contract sold-most likely to one of the companies on Purgatory. It was a vicious cycle that trapped a lot of people. There was virtually no escape. Once the value of your contract and the freight had been worked off, you were then free to go anywhere you liked.

However, first it would be necessary to save up for the fare, and meanwhile, you had to eat, so you signed another contract . . .

It was a profitable system for the Combine for many years, but the Fire Islands habitats were under quarantine now. Am-bimorphs who had broken the quarantine would have been more likely to wind up on Purgatory than anyplace else. From there, given enough money, they could have gone almost anywhere. However, it

seemed that some of them had stayed.

There had been an explosion at one of the refineries. A huge cracking tower had been demolished and the fire had damaged much of the plant before it was brought under control. It had been no accident. Explosive charges had been strategically placed, and just before the tower had blown, a plant foreman had ordered everyone away from the site. They later found him, bound and gagged in a storage closet. He swore that he had been struck from behind and that he had come to inside the closet, where he had been unsuccessfully struggling to escape his bonds for hours. And despite eyewitness testimony that he was the one who had warned everyone out of the area, the foreman denied having done any such thing, insisting that someone was trying to frame him.

It looked like it was time to play another "game."

The playermaster Coles had assigned to run the operation was our old friend Tolliver Mondago. Coles had far too many irons in the fire to personally run field agents on a mission. Mondago would make sure that Coles was kept informed. Personally, I didn't know who was worse, Coles or Mondago. Mondago had a lot to answer for. That crazy old man had almost killed us last time. I often worried about telling the difference between reality and programmed hallucination, but I wasn't sure Mondago knew there was a difference. And Coles would only part with so much information-as usual, the operative term was "need-to-know."

Personally, I needed to know a lot more than I was being told. I didn't know if Coles was playing it by ear or just close to the vest. Probably both. I didn't know if Mondago knew more than he was willing to tell us or if he, too, was being made to function purely on a need-to-know basis. Again, probably both. For that matter, I didn't even know if this was going to be a real mission or merely another elaborate hallucination the home audience would share with me. It was a

hell of a way to train agents and run a covert operation-with live coverage on mass media entertainment channels.

The audience would be sitting at home, plugged into their psy-fi sets, vicariously participating in what they thought was an interactive fantasy adventure game. Only it would be for real-appropriately edited, of course. And as they plugged in and watched and heard and smelled and felt, Coles would undoubtedly be plugging in to them at the same time, feeding them subliminal programs and propping them for future use as they enjoyed their entertainment. He'd be learning how to push their buttons. It was the new ecology. Eat or be eaten, beat or be beaten. Use or be useless.

I came out of downtime as the ship made its approach to Purgatory Station. I didn't remember going down. And I had no idea how long I had been down. The last thing I remembered was sitting in a comfortable black leather chair in Coles's black, dimly lit office. Someone flicked a switch and turned me off and now I was coming out of it trillions of miles away.

There were no viewports in the supercargo compartments Breck and I were traveling in, tiny individual passenger cubicles not much larger than the inside of a coffin, but I was able to see Purgatory Station by turning on the small monitor screen built into the bulkhead. There wasn't enough room in the compartment to sit up, so I turned over on my side and propped my head up on my elbow, watching the tiny screen as we made our docking approach.

There wasn't much to see. Purgatory Station was a small island habitat, a sphere about one mile in diameter with external radiators at its poles that removed heat from the interior of the station and solar mirrors that directed sunlight inside through windows near the rotational axis. Like most such stations, it was

equipped with tachyon drive. It had functioned as a starship until it reached its destination and then it became a permanent orbital habitat. If necessary, it could become a starship once again, but leaving orbit would mean leaving behind the various smaller work stations and cylinders that had been constructed around it over time and linked to it with skyhooks. There were a lot more of them than when I had been here as a young noncom in the supply corps, berthed aboard a freighter we used to call "The Slop Bucket."

Our pilot then wasn't much better than our pilot now. Docking was accomplished with all the dexterity of a drunk trying to thread a needle, but we eventually made it and locked on. We left the ship and transferred to a shuttle that would take us to the planet surface. The cargo would follow later, in several shifts, and anyone who had brought a lot of luggage would have a long wait until they could collect it at the ground-base spaceport terminal. Fortunately, Breck and I were traveling light.

As we made our descent to Purgatory, I saw that nothing had really changed. It was still a wild, desolate world of low mountains and high plains which leveled off toward the equator into vast deserts that seemed to go on forever. There were a couple of oceans on Purgatory, much smaller than those on Earth, and there were a few lakes nestled in mountain valleys. Someday, there would probably be cities, but for the present, there was nothing here except for a number of sprawling refineries and industrial plants that were the sole reason for human presence on the planet.

You could make a flyover of the barren plains and see miles upon miles of nothing and then, suddenly, you'd see giant islands of metal rising up out of the ground like surreal sculptures, surmounted by dense clouds of pollution. The unmistakable footprints of man. Having almost poisoned our own world beyond

recovery, we were now dumping our waste into other people's yards.

There had been a lot of construction since I had spent three lonely, maddening months here all those years ago. Small developments had grown up around the plants, scatterings of clustered workers' housing all looking absolutely identical, interconnected by plastic tubeways. The shuttle landed and we disembarked. I was immediately struck by a blast of desert heat and the stench of pollution.

Breck sniffed the air and grimaced. "Travel halfway across the universe," he said, "and you arrive at a place that smells just like New Jersey."

We hurried across the tarmac and into the air-conditioned coolness of the terminal. We were supposed to meet a man named Grover Higgins. I imagined some corporate type stamped out with a cookie cutter, glib and superficial, a PR man with red eyes and ruptured capillaries in his nose from too much drinking.

Someone who had suffered a long fall from the climb up the corporate ladder and was stuck out in the middle of nowhere, desperate to make good and get out.

Grover Higgins turned out to be not at all what I expected.

The man who greeted us as we came into the terminal was in his late forties, about five-ten and a well-built hundred and eighty pounds, with thick, dark brown hair and sleepy, deeply set brown eyes. He was darkly tanned and his hair was streaked from sun bleaching. His skin had the weathered look of a man who had spent a great deal of time outdoors. He had a slow and easy dimpled smile and a relaxed, informal way about him. He was dressed in lightweight khakis and well-worn leather boots.

"Mr. Beck, Mr. O'Toole? I'm Grover Higgins." His hands were callused and his handshake very firm. The hands of a real working man, not an office

button-pusher. "Hope the flight out wasn't too bad," he said. "That all you brought with you?"

"Yes, just our hand luggage," Breck said.

"I find it's always best to travel light, myself," he said. "How about a bite to eat and a drink or two or three?"

"Sounds fine to me," I said.

He led us to a little cart and beckoned us in. "Hop aboard."

He sat behind the tiller and the cart whispered off quickly across the terminal, heading toward a tubeway. The tinted plastic cut out the sun's glare and the cool air inside the tube was a marked contrast to the heat outside. The tube ran from the terminal toward the plant, with several branching off points along the way, where the tube corridors radiated out from traffic circles like spokes from a wheel. Other open carts zipped by us, but we didn't see a single pedestrian. Apparently, the people on Purgatory didn't walk any more than they had to and they spent most of their time insulated from the outside environment, which made me even more curious about Higgins with his outdoorsy look. He didn't seem to fit in.

"We'll be eating at my place if it's all right with you," he said. "Not that we don't have any bars or restaurants, but I think I can promise you better food than that. I'm a pretty decent cook."

"I hope you won't go to any trouble on our account, Mr. Higgins," said Breck.

"It's no trouble. I like to cook and I thought you might prefer a quiet place to eat and talk a bit. Our bars tend to be a little on the rowdy side and you being celebrities, I thought you might not want to attract a crowd right off."

"That's very thoughtful of you," Breck said.

"Like I said, no trouble at all."

The cart swung around and shot off down another branch of the tubeway, heading toward a cluster of residential buildings nestled in a slight depression. He parked the cart at the end of the tubeway and we went into the village.

It was designed as a residence mall, with all the individual dwellings clustered together into one huge, multileveled structure. The entire village was sealed off from the outside. The climate control systems kept the temperature inside quite cool, as if in overcompensation against the heat outside. The corridor opened out onto large wide, multileveled walkways with tinted skylights overhead. The interior of the mall was generously landscaped and heavily planted with trees, vines, flowers and shrubs, sweet-smelling herbs and mosses, rock gardens and artificial streams and waterfalls.

"Looks like a damn rain forest, doesn't it?" said Higgins.

"It's like living in a terrarium. I try not to spend a lot of time here."

As I wondered where he spent most of his time, he led us up to a door and opened it by placing his palm against the sensor pad. As we entered, he called out to someone in a language I had never heard before.

The woman who came out to greet us was dressed in a knee-length khaki skirt, a plain white cotton blouse, and knee-high, soft leather boots. Her hair was thick and dark, almost like a horse's mane, naturally streaked with gray and silver highlights. Her skin was the color of coffee with a lot of cream in it, a light caramel shade, and her eyes were golden. She moved with a sinuous grace that made me think of a large predatory cat—a mountain lion.

"This is my wife, Tyla," Higgins said. "She's tribal."

..Which meant, of course, that she wasn't human.

THREE

That "God made man in His own image" was a conceit we've had for a long time, despite the imprecision of the statement. Man was a varied species-some of us were black and some were white; some were brown, some were red, and some were yellow; some of us had sharp features, some had flat and broad ones; some eyes were slanted, some were round, some almond-shaped . . . Precisely which of the many images of Man was God's?

That old debate was complicated further the first time we encountered races that weren't human, but that looked disturbingly familiar. It sure did upset a lot of folks. It disappointed all those people who had clung to the notion that humanity was unique in the universe. And it provided much fuel for theological debate, as well as for some arguments that weren't exactly theological, such as the old chestnut about how we were "planted" on Earth by some extraterrestrial superrace of ancient astronauts who had apparently wandered around the universe, scattering people like cosmic Johnny Appleseeds. Of course, what makes old debates old is that they never really get resolved. The discovery of intelligent races on other worlds didn't change anything as far as that was concerned.

We did what we usually do when we encounter strangers. We acted like a bunch of busybodies, sending out ambassadors and missionaries, followed by embassies and military bases and settlements and fast-food outlets. Sometimes we were welcome, sometimes we weren't. Either way, the arguments continued. Personally, I've never bothered with the truly weighty questions. I'm a fairly simple guy and I've always tried to stick to issues I could understand.

When it comes to Truth-with-a-capital-T, I don't really know, you see. However, I do know the difference between faith and knowledge and after where I've been and what I've done, I don't take anything on faith. I figure that since I've got considerable doubt about the issue in my mind, then if there is a God, that must

have been the way He made me. I'm neither prejudiced nor insecure. For all I know, maybe God did make us in His own image, but that doesn't necessarily mean the image referred to is physical. Virtually all of the humanoid races we'd encountered had some sort of spiritual mythos, a sensibility beyond the rudely physical. Call it God if it makes you comfortable, call it Nature or call it Being, any way you look at it, we all came from the same ingredients. On Earth alone, there were so many of us who were different in so many ways, yet roughly similar in essence, that perhaps we shouldn't have been surprised to find the same basic design occurring elsewhere under similar conditions.

There was no question that Tyla wasn't human, but on the other hand, she looked a lot more human than some people I have known-some cyberpunks, for instance. Her fingers had short, catlike claws, though they were retracted when she shook our hands; her canine teeth were long and sharp, bringing to mind the image of a vampire; and her grip was very strong. Her hair was thick and coarse, yet beautiful in a savage way. She looked like some surrealist's impression of an Apache. The most striking things about her were the tawny color of her skin and those incredible golden eyes. There was an otherworldly beauty about her, which seemed a ridiculously obvious observation, since she was otherworldly and we were the aliens here, but no other expression would suffice.

She shook hands with me first, very formally and correctly, as if it were something she had learned recently, and she was puzzled for a moment when Breck offered her his gloved right hand. She took it and frowned, glancing at him uncertainly as she felt the hard, smooth nysteel inside the glove instead of flesh. Confused, she glanced at Higgins.

"I'm sorry," Breck said, removing his glove.

Tyla gasped and took his metal hand in both of hers, looking at it with wonder.

"You'll have to excuse her," Higgins said, a little awkwardly. "She's never seen a prosthesis before." He spoke to her briefly in her native tongue, a rolling, lilting, musical-sounding series of quick, short syllables. She glanced up at Breck and reluctantly released his artificial hand.

"Please tell her it's all right," Breck said. "I'm not sensitive about it. I don't mind if she examines it."

Higgins spoke to her again and she glanced from him to Breck, then back to Breck's artificial hand.

"It's all right," Breck said, holding it out for her to inspect.

She touched it and gently ran her fingers over it, fascinated by its cool, polished smoothness. She felt his wrist and then his forearm, glancing up at him with alarm as she realized that the entire arm was made of nysteel. Then she turned his hand over and stared raptly at the articulated metal, the complex apertures built into the palm, the strange slits in the tips of the fingers ... she frowned and looked up at him questioningly.

"Watch," said Breck, taking his hand away and holding it up in front of him, fingers extended stiffly. In rapid succession, the six-inch gleaming nysteel blades shot out of his fingertips with sharp pneumatic sounds and locked into place.

Her eyes grew very wide. She looked down at her own hand, exposed her own claws, then looked back up at Breck's considerably more lethal ones. With a smile, Breck retracted his blades in quick succession. They vanished up into his forearm, allowing him to flex his fingers once again. She turned to Higgins and launched into a brief torrent of her native speech, reminiscent of the lilting, singsong cadence of Mandarin mixed with the quickness of Japanese and the

sibilant and hard consonants of a Semitic dialect. Higgins answered her in kind and she turned back to Breck, staring at him intently, searching his face as if seeking some sort of explanation there.

"Uh, I told her you were from a tribe of great warriors," Higgins said, "and that you were injured in a battle and had your flesh and blood hand replaced with one that was a weapon, so that you could continue being a warrior." He added, somewhat apologetically, "I couldn't really explain about hybrid commandos. I had to put it in terms she could relate to. It was the best I could do."

"And perfectly appropriate," said Breck, with a smile.

Tyla spoke briefly to Breck and Higgins stiffened slightly and was about to say something to her, but Breck caught it and quickly asked him what she said before Higgins could speak.

"She asked a question we would normally consider in poor taste," said Higgins. Breck gave him a prompting look. Higgins looked slightly ill at ease. I suddenly had the insight that she wasn't the reason he was uncomfortable, we were. "She doesn't mean to be rude," he said. "It's just that her people tend to be very direct. She, uh, wanted to know what happened to the other great warrior, the one who took your arm."

Breck suppressed a smile. "Tell her I took my arm back from him and beat him to death with it. It isn't literally true, of course, but it's true enough in the metaphorical sense. I exacted my pound of flesh, if you'll forgive the pun."

Higgins stared at Breck for a moment, then turned to his wife and translated.

Tyla's eyes grew wide again and she looked at Breck with new respect.

Dinner was excellent, made from Earth vegetables grown in hydroponic

greenhouses. There was some meat, as well, which Higgins served with a disclaimer, saying he didn't know if we ate meat or not, but if we did, we might be curious to try some local game.

It certainly smelled gamey. I tried a small piece; as did Breck. It was tough and slightly salty, of a consistency not unlike beef jerky. The flavor wasn't all that bad, despite the smell. It wasn't venison or beefsteak, but it was passable fare if you didn't mind chewing relentlessly.

"Interesting flavor," Breck said. "What exactly is it?"

"Sort of a cross between a wild boar and a rodent," said Higgins. "It's hunted by the native tribes. It's a staple in their diet."

"Your wife isn't eating with us?" I said.

"Tribal women don't eat with their men," said Higgins.

I raised my eyebrows. "Well, just because they treat their women as second-class citizens, doesn't mean we have to," I said. "Can't we ask her to join us?"

Higgins smiled. "I'm afraid you misunderstood. It isn't a matter of her being a 'second-class citizen,' as you put it. It's the other way around. The tribes of Purgatory are matriarchal. Besides, they never cook their food. They eat it freshly killed. Tyla is as offended at the idea of roasting meat as you might be at the sight of her tearing at her kill, with blood running down her chin."

"Oh," I said, feeling a little foolish. "I see."

"Have many of the people here married natives?" Breck said.

"No, I'm the only one," said Higgins, "which makes me a bit of an outsider. The tribes tend to keep their distance, you see. We're quite a puzzle to them. They don't understand why we want to wall ourselves off from the environment-or at least they didn't until they started seeing what we're doing to it. The people here call them Nomads. That's when they're not calling them something worse."

There's not much contact between humans and natives. A lot of the people here think they're little more than animals, primates of a sort. They couldn't be more wrong, but they're not interested in listening to me. I'm just the token treehugger around here. Corporate environmental counselor and xenobiologist. Most of them think I'm crazy. Some of them won't even talk to me. After all, it's my job to make life difficult for them." He grimaced wryly. "A job without much point, actually. It's like pissing in the wind. I keep submitting my reports and recommendations and they keep doing everything they can to ignore them. But, hey, I'm here! That proves their corporate concern for an alien environment."

"I take it you spend a great deal of your time with the natives," Breck said.

"Well, I find there's a lot to be said for their way of life. And I find them fascinating. I have to work here, but I try to spend time with Tyla's tribe whenever I can. Tyla very rarely comes here. She came this time as a favor to me, because you were coming."

"You mean you live apart, you here and Tyla with her tribe?" I said.

"Much of the time we live apart, yes. But Tyla has other husbands. Sixteen, to be exact, not counting me."

"You're one of seventeen husbands?" I said.

"Their females give birth in litters and there are usually more males among the offspring than females," Higgins explained. "In a human society, an imbalance as large as theirs would cause problems, but the Nomads have a very accommodating biology. Their females are fertile virtually all the time, whereas the males have cycles. And since these periods occur at different times, depending on the male's stage of development, the females normally bond with a number of males,

usually of different ages."

"You mean the females rotate their males?" I said.

"Well, not exactly, though I suppose you could look at it that way. A female could be mating with several different males simultaneously . . . well, not actually at the same time, but during the same cycle, especially if she is of high rank in the tribe. However, this doesn't seem to cause any trouble among the males. I suspect it's because it takes far more stamina than any one male has to keep a female satisfied."

"You mean she ..." I cleared my throat. "That is, they . . . the females . . . wear the males out?"

"Well, I've only mated with Tyla once and it almost crippled me," Higgins said matter-of-factly, as only a scientist could. "I still have the scars. Since then, as a matter of self-preservation, our relationship has been essentially platonic."

The ensuing silence fell like an anvil.

"Excuse me," Higgins said apologetically. "I didn't mean to be tactless or crude. I tend to be socially awkward on occasion. Tyla's people are a great deal more direct than we are and I sometimes find it difficult to switch modes. You see, my marriage to Tyla isn't quite the same thing as a human marriage, which is not to say that I regard it as anything less. But it's a different sort of relationship.

"By our human standards, I'm not legally married to Tyla, since it was a tribal marriage. And in any case, there's certainly been no legal precedent. The situation poses an ideal opportunity to observe at close hand the customs and lifeway of an alien species. If I weren't an ethical man, then once I was finished with my studies, I could easily leave and not feel in any way bound by

the tribal ceremony. However, I recognize that while their marriage customs are different from ours, they don't take them any less seriously than we do. I could even argue that they take their form of marriage a great deal more seriously than we take ours, since they bond for life. They'd never understand the concept of divorce. But while mating is an important part of their bonding, it's by no means an imperative.

"For instance, Tyla's mother is still in the prime of life, yet three of her husbands are well past their prime. The cycle doesn't come upon them anymore. One of them is very old, indeed, the senior husband of another marriage whose matriarch had died. Death of the wife releases a male for remarriage, but in this case, the male was extremely old, no longer capable of reproduction and only minimally capable of sharing in the workload. Tyla's mother married him nevertheless, adopting him, in a manner of speaking, into her marriage. Rather like bringing an orphan into the family.

"You see," he continued, "in a sense, the matriarchal structure of the tribes places every female in a marriage in the role of both wife and mother to her husbands. Which is not to say that the husbands are necessarily subservient. Once you've seen a Nomad male, I don't think you could come to that conclusion. The wife is not an autocrat. She's treated with the respect and veneration we might give an elder, the founder of the family- even though she very often is not the senior in chronological terms. She's the family arbiter. The children are all held in common within a marriage, sharing all the husbands as fathers. Female children within the marriage have a certain share in their mother's ranking."

Higgins grinned. "Imagine what it's like to court a young woman with six

fiercely protective older brothers and you might have some idea of what it means to become involved with a Nomad female, only she might have a dozen or more fiercely protective brothers and as many fathers. The female has the final say in the matter-the mother rarely interferes-but if the males in the family are all against you, the odds of your being accepted into the marriage are extremely small. In fact, if their disapproval is strong enough, you may not even survive."

"So, apparently, you made a good impression on the relatives," said Breck, smiling and sipping his wine.

"Well, more specifically, I made a good impression on the tribal matriarch, Tyla's grandmother. The marriage was really her idea, though Tyla volunteered for it."

"I don't follow," I said. "You mean your marriage to Tyla was . . . what would you call it, arranged? I thought you said the senior females didn't interfere."

"Normally, they don't, but in this case, it was different. I had established a rapport with the tribe over a period of time and Dyla, the tribal matriarch, called all the females in the tribe together and asked if any of them would be willing to accept me into marriage. And it was very much a request, not an order. Tyla volunteered."

He grinned. "I've always wondered if she was the only one, but she won't tell me. We both treat the marriage seriously, but we obviously didn't marry for love. We have respect and affection for each other, but even as I'm observing them, they're observing me. They've always kept their distance from humans before, but now it seems they want to learn a little more about us."

"Because they're starting to perceive humans as a threat?" I said.

"Partly," Higgins replied, "but there's another reason, which bears directly on

your coming here. Their gods have started appearing to them in physical manifestations, directing them to increase their contact with humans and learn more about us."

"Their gods?" said Breck.

"The Nomads have a very spiritual relationship with their environment," said Higgins. "They worship nature spirits. To put it in our terms, they believe that each element in nature has a spirit or a soul-plants, animals, minerals . . .

Well, there have been reports circulating throughout the tribes of nature spirits manifesting themselves to tribal matriarchs. Animals suddenly standing upright and transforming themselves into the aspect of people-tribal people, that is-speaking to them in their own language and then changing back again before their eyes."

Breck and I exchanged glances.

"The tribes believe each living thing is possessed of a spirit," Higgins continued, "and they extend that definition to things we would ordinarily consider inanimate, such as rocks, water, mist, and the ground itself. To them, everything in nature is imbued with 'spirit force.' Their rituals reflect this sort of anthropomorphism. However, while they believe that one is capable of communing with the elements, there is no basis in their spiritual mythos for a literal communion, where the spirit forces actually start talking back to them. Nor is there any basis in their folklore for manifestations such as I've been hearing about. And it's not in their nature to lie or exaggerate. I'd already started having some suspicions and the recent sabotage at the refinery seems to confirm them."

He paused, watching us carefully for a reaction. "I think the quarantine of

Draconis 9 has been broken. I believe there are ambimorphs on Purgatory. Which means there could be am-bimorphs on the colony worlds, as well. Perhaps even on Earth."

Neither Breck nor I said anything.

Higgins refilled our wine glasses, then poured himself another glass, as well.

"So ... I made my reports through the necessary channels, and forwarded copies to the corporate headquarters and Bureau of Extraterrestrial Resource Management, discreetly voicing my suspicions, and I was told that I'd become a raving paranoid, that I've been spending far too much time out in the wilderness with the tribes, that I've gone native and started to lose touch with reality, and that what I really needed was a long rest. Perhaps even to be relieved of my post here and sent back home to recuperate."

He sipped his wine and watched us over the rim of his glass. "Only I wasn't relieved, as you can see," he continued, after a brief pause. "In spite of what seemed to me to be a disproportionately strong reaction to my reports. Instead, I received notification of acknowledgment concerning my reports and assurances that they were being carefully reviewed. Now, ordinarily, I might have been inclined to consider this sort of reaction placatory, except for the fact that it was so out of synch with the initial response. And then suddenly I was notified that my reports had been classified 'Top Secret,' and I was to discuss them with no one. I was also informed that I'd be contacted and that I should stand by for further instructions. All this in a military courier pouch, classified, for my eyes only, destroy when read."

He set down the wine glass and gave us a level stare. "And who should turn up but a couple of Psychodrome stars, of all things. Not quite what I expected. Yet one of them is an SS hybrid, a former senior officer with a distinguished

military record." He glanced from Breck to me. "And you're a former serviceman, as well. Merely an interesting coincidence, perhaps?"

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "So where exactly do we stand here, gentlemen? Has somebody decided to incorporate my so-called paranoid delusion into an escapist fantasy game scenario or is it all some sort of subterfuge? Are we playing a game here? Is that what this is?"

"Even if it was, we'd probably tell you it wasn't," said Breck. "After all, if this was merely a game, a Psychodrome fantasy adventure, then part of our job would be to make it appear as realistic as possible for the benefit of our home audience." He shrugged. "On the other hand, if this was a 'subterfuge,' as you put it, and we were actually dealing with reality here, then we'd probably want to make it seem as if it were nothing but a game, because we wouldn't want to panic everyone, would we? You see, any answer I gave you would be suspect."

Higgins sat silent for a moment, rubbing his chin. "Are you telling me that Psychodrome is actually going to broadcast all this as a game scenario? Is that what you're saying?"

"We could be live on the psy-fi channels at this very moment," Breck said.

"Which doesn't mean that we're not taking you seriously. You did receive your orders in a military courier pouch, didn't you?"

Higgins shook his head, frowning. "I don't understand. You mean the game scenario is just a cover? How can you possibly hope to keep something like this a secret, especially if you're incorporating it into a psych-fidelity broadcast?"

Do you seriously expect to convince people that none of this is really happening? That's crazy!"

"Perhaps," said Breck, "but there's a certain logic to this particular form of

insanity. You see, people are to a large extent conditioned by what they experience through psy-fi. They often tend to confuse it with reality. You have no idea how many times people have approached me, strangers acting as if we were old comrades in arms, clapping me on the back and wanting to reminisce about some adventure we had shared. Of course, they never actually shared any adventures with me, but they 'experienced' it with me through psy-fi. It seemed real to them, not only because the feelings they experienced-albeit passively-were real, but because they wanted it to seem real. And they really did experience my feelings and perceptions vicariously. They're reacting based on those vicariously shared feelings and perceptions and it's part of my job as a psycho to play along. Yes, I tell them, as if they really were old comrades in arms, certainly I remember, wasn't it something? Didn't we have a hell of a time?"

"But this is no game," protested Higgins. "This is really happening."

"All the adventures we psychos have really do happen," Breck said, with a slight smile. "Except for the hallucinacts, of course. However, we always treat those as if they were actually happening too, because we usually don't have any way of knowing if they're really happening or not. So if it's real to us, it seems real to the home audience and only later on we might find out that it was all an elaborate illusion. The home audience might never know. In fact, what we're experiencing right now may be nothing more than an elaborate psychocybernetic illusion, yourself included, only we won't know that for certain unless we wake up when it's all over."

"Bullshit, Breck," Higgins said. "I know I'm real and no amount of head games will change that. I know what's really happening."

"I'm sure you do," said Breck, with a mocking smile, "but what difference does

that make?"

Higgins frowned. He had no appreciation for Breck's cynical sense of humor. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Well, ask yourself," said Breck, "what has more impact-an event that takes place, or the way that event is reported to have taken place? I will give you an updated version of an old Zen koan. Imagine that a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it fall except yourself and a psy-fi crew. You hear the tree fall with a not terribly dramatic thud, but the psy-fi crew enhances the effects considerably and the world hears it fall with a resounding, roaring, echoing crash. Which of the two 'realities' will the world accept?"

Higgins said nothing.

"You see?" said Breck. "Under such circumstances, your knowledge of reality wouldn't mean a thing. The public would know what 'really' happened, wouldn't they? After all, they were there, they experienced it through psy-fi. And the interesting thing about psy-fi reality is that it's very pliable. By now, we've been interacting with you long enough for Game Control to have created an effective computer vocal matrix for you. That means as we're sitting here having this discussion, Game Control could be running a computer-generated simulsynch and the home audience would see us sitting here, only they might hear us talking about the weather or the dinner we've just had. Our psychocybernetic engineers are rather good at editing reality. On the other hand, they might decide to run it as is. After all, this is only a game. Isn't it?"

"You people are scary," Higgins said softly.

"For whatever it's worth," I said, "I find it pretty scary, too."

"But you go along with it."

"That's right."

"Why?"

It was a good question. "I'm honestly not sure I could explain that to you, Mr. Higgins."

I wasn't all that sure I could explain it to myself. For one thing, I wasn't convinced I had a choice. Maybe it was all a matter of momentum, play or pay. Once you were in, you were never really out again, like all those people who had biochips implanted in their brains that Coles could access anytime he chose. But that was only part of it. Another part of it was my gambler's instinct and the fever of the game. I had bought into the game the moment I walked into The Pyramid Club and sat down at that table with Hakim Saqqara. Or maybe it had started even earlier, when I enlisted in the service and left Mars, looking for a way to get out of the giant shadow cast by Scan O'Toole. Either way, the cards had been dealt and there was nothing left to do but play them. Just the way they fell.

"What happens if more incidents like the explosion at the plant occur?" said Higgins. "Are innocent people going to be blamed? Surely you can't control the news media? How can things like that be covered up?"

"Once again, you're asking questions I really don't know how to answer," Breck said. "For one thing, such decisions are not ours to make. After all, we're only here to play the game." He smiled. "However, one might suppose that if am-bimorphs were responsible for the explosion at the plant, it could be because they wanted to announce their presence and were trying to see how far we can be pushed. It's significant that everyone was warned to vacate the premises well in advance of the explosion so that no one was hurt. If the ambimorphs were, indeed, responsible, they also very considerately provided us with a convenient

scapegoat. The plant foreman."

Higgins frowned. "You mean, they did it that way on purpose? I don't understand.

Why would they want to do that?"

"Maybe they wanted to leave us a way out," I said. "They don't want to force us to employ strategic weapons on Draconis 9. The threat that we'll sterilize their home world is the only thing that prevents widespread terrorism on their part, an all-out war waged from within. But they'll keep pushing, as with the explosion at the plant, trying to force us to accede to their demands."

"Then, for God's sake, why not negotiate?" said Higgins.

"Because their terms would necessarily be unacceptable," said Breck.

"How can you know that?"

"It's obvious. They'd want control over their own destiny, which does not seem like a lot to ask, but unfortunately, the only way they could ensure our good faith would be by their continued presence among us. And that would be unacceptable, you see. Yet, even if the ambimorphs agreed to return home, how would we ever know they hadn't left infiltrators behind? We cannot trust them, you see, and they cannot trust us."

"So what's the alternative?" said Higgins.

Breck shrugged. "There doesn't seem to be any. We must try to maintain the standoff somehow, at least until a way can be found to detect their presence among us. In the meantime, they will undoubtedly continue to make that presence felt. It's very much a war of nerves."

"It doesn't seem to me as if it's a war that we can win," said Higgins. "Even if you come up with a way to detect an ambimorph masquerading as a human, what are you going to do, screen every single human? It's impossible! You simply can't

control people like that!"

"They're working on it," I said.

FOUR

After dinner, Higgins drove us to our hotel, located at the hub of Center City, the industrial complex. With the exception of visiting company officials and newly arrived workers not yet assigned to housing, it didn't see much business. We stayed there only long enough to unpack. We had one bag apiece, each containing a plasma pistol and a small, lightweight plastic semiauto chambered for stunners and the small, jet-powered fragmentation rounds. The polymer holster rigs, spare magazines, and disposable charge paks left barely enough room for a change of clothes.

"Looks like you take your 'game' pretty seriously," said Higgins.

"Some games are more serious than others," Breck said. He slipped the heavy plasma pistol into his shoulder rig, snugged the semiauto into the cross-draw holster on his belt, then put on an elegant, three-quarter-length black coat, fashionably cut and tailored loosely to conceal the bulges. "And I, for one, don't like to lose," he added.

"Who's the plant foreman accused of the sabotage?" I said.

"Gil Cavanaugh."

I glanced at Breck. "I think we should see him first."

"I agree," said Breck. "And then, Mr. Higgins, perhaps you'd be kind enough to show us some of the local nightlife, such as it is."

"I was hoping to get an early start in the morning," Higgins said. "Tyla has agreed to take us out to her tribe and-"

"It's early, yet," said Breck. "I'd like to get a feeling for the mood of the workers here in light of what's occurred. Ask your wife if she'll accompany us." Higgins shook his head. "I don't think that would be a very good idea. I haven't exactly endeared myself to the people here. My relationship with Tyla has only made things worse. I'll show you around if you like, but it wouldn't be smart to bring Tyla along. It would be inviting trouble."

"Trouble is precisely what I wish to invite," Breck said. "If there are any ambimorphs among the workers here, I not only want them to know we're here, I want them to know we're going out to contact the natives tomorrow. We'll look after your wife, don't worry. She'll be perfectly safe with us."

"It's not my wife I'm worried about," said Higgins.

Breck raised his eyebrows.

Higgins shrugged. "All right, I'll take you over to see Cavanaugh and then I'll drop you off at what we call the 'Red Zone.' I'll go get Tyla and meet you at a bar called Cody's Place. It isn't hard to find. Just ask anyone."

Gil Cavanaugh was a very angry man. He was also a very big man, with a face like a russet potato, wide and ruddy, the sort of face on which every thought and emotion were plainly written. I didn't think it looked like the face of a saboteur.

"I'm not going to let 'em pin this on me, the bastards!" he shouted, slamming his hand down on the table. "I told 'em, put me on the goddamn machines, gimme the test and see if I'm lyin'!"

"Settle down, Cavanaugh," a tinny voice came from a speaker mounted below the single high window. The room was bare save for a table and four chairs. We sat on one side of the table, Cavanaugh sat on the other. There was nothing

separating us, but Cavanaugh was wearing magnacuffs which could be activated at a moment's notice.

"You keep your mouth shut, Evans, I'm talkin' to these people!" Cavanaugh thundered, pointing a meaty finger up at the guard's window.

"Just settle down, all right, Gil?" said Evans wearily.

"All right! All right!" He scowled up at the window, then continued at a slightly lower volume. "Anyway, I took the test and I passed the goddamned thing! I wasn't lyin', see? But that's not enough for 'em, the sons o' bitches!

They figure I came up with some way to beat the damn machine. Me, a simple workin' stiff, what do I know" about crap like that? I'm no cybernetics engineer! Listen, I tell 'em, what the hell do you think I did, planted the explosives, then beaned myself with a goddamn wrench and tied myself up while I was unconscious? Feel the size of that lump there! Damn near split my head open! So you know what they came back with? 'We know you didn't pull this off alone,' they said. 'You've got an accomplice. Tell us who he is and it'll go easier on you,' they said. 'Confess,' they said. Confess? Confess my ass! Confess to what? I didn't do a goddamn thing!"

"Cavanaugh, I'm warning you-" Evans's voice came through the speaker overhead.

"Fuck you, Evans!" Cavanaugh hollered, leaping to his feet and sending his chair crashing to the floor. He pointed up at the window. "Corporate security, my ass!

You're just a cheap, imported armbreaker, you union bustin' son of a-"

The guard activated the magnacuffs and Cavanaugh's braceleted wrists suddenly snapped together with a hard click. He doubled over sharply as the cuffs slammed against the metal magnaplate in the belt around his waist.

"AAARRGH! Evans, you weasely little runt . . . !" His muscles bunched as he strained against the cuffs. "You wait till I get outta here, I'll rip your

goddamn head off!"

"Release him, please, Mr. Evans," Breck said.

"I don't think that would be a very good idea, Mr. Breck," Evans's voice came through the speaker. "You've got him all excited. The state he's in right now, I couldn't answer for-"

"Release him, please."

The cuffs were turned off and Cavanaugh straightened up, glowering at the guard behind the window. He glanced at Breck and muttered, "Thanks."

"Please sit down, Mr. Cavanaugh," Breck said. "There's no need for these histrionics. We're inclined to believe you."

"Yeah?" he glanced at Breck uncertainly.

"Yes. We have good reason to think you're probably telling the truth. However, we cannot help you at the moment. To do that, we would have to prove that you did not sabotage the plant and that would be difficult, as there are numerous witnesses who saw you."

"I don't care how many witnesses say they saw me, I didn't do it!"

"What do you think happened, Gil?" I said.

"How the hell should I know? I'm bein' set up, that's all I can tell you! If people are sayin' they saw me do it, then they've been paid off. Wouldn't surprise me one bit. Between that damn treehugger try in' to shut us down and the company try in' to stop us from startin' up a union, that's the only explanation I can think of."

"Well, I can think of another possible explanation," Breck said. "Tell me, did you happen to notice anything unusual before you were struck unconscious? Anything at all?"

Cavanaugh frowned and shook his head. "No, nothin' special. Why?"

"Were there any new people on your shift?"

Cavanaugh shook his head again. "No, it was the same crew I've been workin' with for months."

' "Was anyone not where they were supposed to be?" I said.

Cavanaugh shook his head. "No. Not that I know of. Why? What are you gettin' at?"

"We're attempting to find out if any of your coworkers were in a position to assault you," Breck said.

"There wasn't anybody near me that I could see," said Cavanaugh. "You think if I saw someone comin' at me with that wrench, they'd have knocked me out? The bastard snuck up on me. Believe me, I wish there was something I could tell you, but if I didn't see anything, I didn't see anything. One minute I was just doin' my job, and the next I was out on the floor."

"Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to do you an injury?" Breck said.

"Someone you had quarreled with, not necessarily related to your efforts with forming a union. Something personal perhaps?"

"Hey, on a job like this, you have your arguments, you have your fights. You go out after work and have a few, somebody mouths off and you dance around a little. It's no big deal. It happens all the time. You don't go hangin' something like this on anyone for that."

"So what you're telling us, Mr. Cavanaugh, is that you really can't help us prove you're innocent," I said.

"I don't have to prove I'm innocent, for God's sake, I didn't do it! They have to prove I'm guilty, don't they?"

"They've apparently got a hell of a case," I said. "Your own friends have

testified against you."

"Yeah, that's what they tell me," Cavanaugh muttered morosely. "I don't understand it. Someone must've got to 'em somehow, threatened 'em, paid 'em off, I don't know, what can I say?" He turned to Breck, anxiously. "You said you had another explanation for all this?"

"A possible explanation," said Breck, "but it would be very difficult to prove.

We'd have to prove that what your fellow workers saw was not you, but someone-or some thing-who looked exactly like you. A creature capable of assuming your appearance, of reading your mind and knowing exactly where to find the explosive charges and how to place them for optimum results. In other words, Mr.

Cavanaugh, a Draconian am-bimorph. A shapechanger."

Cavanaugh's jaw dropped. "That's impossible," he said. "That would mean they broke the quarantine!" His eyes narrowed. "Wait a minute! This is all part of that new game of yours! Is that what this is all about? That's why you're takin' an interest in my case, isn't it? You're tryin' to use me in your goddamn game!"

He started to get to his feet.

"Sit down," Breck said firmly. "Even if we were only helping you to add realism to our game, what difference would it make? You need all the help that you can get. And from where I sit, it doesn't look as if you're getting any. Right now, we are all you've got. As to whether or not this is a game, judge for yourself.

Your own friends saw you order everyone out of the plant. Perhaps some of them could have been paid to frame you. It's certainly possible. But all of them? I don't know these people, but you do. You've worked with them. What do you think?"

"You're sayin' this is for real?"

"You tell me," Breck said. "But in order to convince your accusers, we'll need to prove two things to our own satisfaction first. We'll be leaving first thing in the morning, to investigate reports of what could be ambimorphs among the Nomad tribes. We've heard enough to make us think there are. But we need proof."

"You said you'd need to prove two things to get me off," said Cavanaugh. "So what's the second?"

"That could be even more difficult," said Breck. "We'd have to prove that you are really human."

"Were you serious in there?" Higgins had watched and listened with Evans in the guardroom. "You actually suspect that Cavanaugh may not be human?"

"I allowed that suspicion to enter my mind, yes," said Breck. "That way, in the event that Cavanaugh isn't really Cavanaugh, he now knows that we suspect him of being an ambimorph. And now that he also knows our plans, it may force his hand. Unless, of course, he's really what he seems to be, in which case we'll have to try and flush our quarry elsewhere."

"So then it wasn't just a ploy; you really do suspect him?"

"I suspect everyone, Higgins," Breck said. He turned to him and smiled. "Even you."

"Well, that's certainly reassuring."

"Don't sound so affronted. It's nothing personal," said Breck.

"You realize, of course, that Evans heard everything you said. That was intentional, wasn't it? You want it to get around. You're setting yourselves up as targets. And that means I'll be a target too, because I'm with you."

"We are all targets, Higgins," Breck said. "That is the nature of the game. Anyone can be a victim."

"So everyone should be suspected," Higgins said, shaking his head. "I couldn't

live like that. I'd become a raving paranoid."

"Paranoia has its uses," Breck said. "A useful psychosis," Higgins said wryly.

"There's a new idea."

"In an insane world, sanity has its drawbacks," Breck said with an ironic smile.

Higgins didn't seem to find Breck's remark amusing. For that matter, neither did

I, largely because it was the sort of black humor that was derived from truth.

Gallows humor, as it was sometimes called. We were all going to swing together, so we might as well have a good last laugh.

Real psychos, as opposed to the entertainment kind, were all too often merely people who couldn't handle the psychosis of society. They caved in to the pressure and became buried in their own delusions, which were different from those of society only in degree. Sanity was relative. It all came down to how much you could handle. Survival of the fittest translated into how much madness could you take?

It was all a matter of conditioning, something Coles was expert in. He was a product of the system, a system that insidiously conditioned us all through the news and entertainment media to gradually accept greater and greater levels of abnormality as being normal. More violence, more death, more decadence, more editing of our reality by those we placed in charge of us. It was a chain reaction, out of control and growing exponentially. Like grading on a curve, the scale of sanity kept moving farther and farther into the red zone of psychosis, but since we were all taking that trip together, nobody really noticed.

The ones who broke down, we labeled mad because they couldn't take our level of insanity, which became "sanity" by virtue of being shared by the majority. I empathized with those who didn't want to play the game. Who was to say they

weren't the sane ones, the ones who saw what we were doing to ourselves and opted out in the only way they could?

Part of our audience was going to believe that all of this was real; part would think it was a game, only a harmless psychocybernetic entertainment; and part wouldn't have known the difference either way, perhaps because they had stopped caring. It was that last segment of the audience Coles was trying to expand, because they were the ones whose realities would be the easiest to manipulate, who would be the easiest to control. Was there a worse sin in the modern world than to be useless? No, it was far better to be used. Much like Cavanaugh, who was being used by both sides. And much like me. After all, I was to some extent a product of their fantasies. I couldn't tell what was real and what wasn't anymore, so it all became reality to me. It made me wonder, was that insanity or merely self-defense?

The Red Zone reminded me a little of the Ginza Strip, only on a far smaller, more compartmentalized scale. Like the workers' residential villages, it was laid out in a tri-level mall on the west side of the industrial hub known as Center City. Only here, there was no effort made to create a "balanced living environment," as the planners liked to put it. The Red Zone was definitely unbalanced.

The atmosphere was raucous. Flashing lights and blasting music competed with the amplified shouting of the pitchmen as they tried to snag passersby into their saloons. Feral-looking hookers cruised the mall, cyberpunked to the core, charging all the trade could bear-which was considerable-thinking to score big and return to whatever urban warren they had come from. They'd probably wind up just as lost in that dream here as they would have been at home. Few of them would ever make it out again.

Company-town morality ruled in the Red Zone. Enterprising business people came in and for a small licensing fee paid to the consortium, a rental and utility agreement, and a percentage of the gross, they opened up establishments to service the workers-in much the same way that stallions serviced mares. The consortium paid its employees generous wages to offset the hardships of working on Purgatory. The Red Zone furnished entertainment and the means for the consortium to recover some of those generous wages. The consortium could afford to pay the workers well partly because, one way or another, much of that money went right back into the company coffers.

As Higgins had promised, we found Cody's Place without any trouble. It was located at the far end of the mall, on the third level. Cody's Place was a bit different from most of the other funplexes on the mall. For one thing, it didn't have a flashing sign or speakers blaring music or a pitchman or any kind of video display. There were no nymphettes cavorting in the windows; in fact, there were no windows. There was just a black wall with the words "Cody's Place" painted on in large gilt letters. The door was an unpretentious metal slab and there was a glassed-in notice posted on the outside that read,

"NO HUSTLERS, NO HOOKERS, NO CREDIT. PATRONS WILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR

BREAKAGE."

"I suspect this place has what they call 'character,' " said Breck.

We opened the door and went inside.

The bar was immediately to our left and it ran the length of the entire establishment. You could have held races on it. If it came in a bottle and was alcoholic, it looked like Cody's had it. There were several bartenders, both male and female, and they were all being kept busy by a mixed crowd of laborers

just off shift. It wasn't a gaming establishment, but there were a number of friendly card games going on at several of the tables. I stifled my natural urges and swore that I would merely observe. A holojuke was playing a plaintive ballad as the life-size, three-dimensional images of the singer and her backup band were projected on the stage.

Some men and women were gathered around several arcade games in the corner, one of which featured a realistic-looking robot cowboy that urged you to "Slap leather, hombre." If it beat you to the draw, you caught a sonic pulse from its gun that was like being struck hard in the chest with someone's fist, whereupon the robot grinned, spat a stream of ersatz tobacco juice into a brass spittoon, and said, "Eat dirt, greenhorn." If you beat the robot, it went flying backward, struck against a wall, slid down to the floor, and said, "You got me, Doc." Then it picked itself back up again to urge the next player to "Slap leather, hombre."

"Yup," said Breck. "Character."

"Help you, gentlemen?" said the pretty blonde behind the bar.

"Irish whiskey," I said.

"Your best dark ale," said Breck.

"Comin' right up." She brought the drinks. "You fellas aren't new, are you?"

"Actually, we're only visiting," I said.

"Visiting? You're kidding. Who visits Purgatory? I've been here six months now and it feels like six years."

"I know the feeling," I said.

I felt like telling her that if she thought it was bad now, she should have seen it before the construction of the tubeways and the malls, before there was

anything like the Red Zone or a "planned living community," when there was only a small military base with a despondent drunk for a commander, a couple of isolated industrial plants, and a cluster of modular workers' housing tacked onto the soldiers' barracks. And beyond that, miles and miles of nothing. There were still miles and miles of nothing; only now the steel islands of human industry were much larger and the air around them was much dirtier, though the inhabitants were well protected within their closed environments.

She glanced from Breck to me with a slight frown. "I swear you guys look sort of familiar. Wait a minute ... I know you!"

Here it comes, I thought, Breck's swashbuckling charm strikes again.

"Aren't you Arkady O'Toole, the psycho star?"

Breck grinned and raised his glass to me.

"Yes, I am," I said, astonished at being singled out over Breck.

"And you're Rudy Breck, aren't you?" she said, glancing from me to him and back again. "I can't believe it!" She grabbed my hand in both of hers. "Can I have your autograph? What are you doing here?"

"Well, we-"

"Wait a minute! You're staging one of your adventure games, aren't you? Of course, why else would you be here? I can't believe it! Are we on right now?"

"Well, actually, we are-"

"Oh, my God! Hey, people, listen up! You'll never believe this! We're on Psychodrome!"

We immediately became the center of attention. People crowded around us, shaking our hands, asking for our autographs, wanting to buy us drinks. It took a while to get the whole thing sorted out. We wound up sitting on the bar so everyone could see us, surrounded by the patrons and answering their questions. A lot of

them were familiar with the alien invasion "game" that the company had been promoting. Coles, never one to waste an opportunity, had broadcast some of my hallucinact training sessions as "coming attractions." They wanted to know if we were going to stage an invasion scenario on Purgatory.

"Here to hunt some shapechangers?" one big guy said, with a wink.

"Hey, Rudy," said another bruiser, as if he'd known Breck all his life, "what do these ambimorphs look like?"

"They could look like anyone ... or anything," said Breck. "We heard there may have been some sightings among the native tribes. We're leaving in the morning to check out those reports."

"Hell, they start with those screwy ceremonies of theirs, they're liable to see anything," someone else said, to accompanying laughter.

We could have sat there, like a couple of boys who had cried wolf, insisting that it wasn't just a game, that it was real, that the shapechangers of Draconis had actually broken the quarantine and could even be standing among us at that very moment, and they would have laughed and played along with it in the spirit of the game, figuring we had to play it as if it were for real.

The fact that it was for real didn't seem to matter. If a squad of ambimorphs had walked into that bar, shapechanged in front of everyone, and slaughtered half the people there, the surviving witnesses would probably never have been believed, so strong was the momentum of the alternate reality Coles had created. Common sense seemed to indicate that it had to break down somewhere. The lie would have to become too cumbersome and the truth would have to come out eventually; only I didn't think Coles cared about that very much. Like most bureaucrats, he'd deal with the truth only if and when he had to. Meanwhile, he

would manufacture lies and stall. Power brokers always played for time, because time could purchase power, which could buy more time and so on. The trouble was, time was not an unlimited commodity. Sooner or later, it ran out.

The crowd kept getting bigger as word of our arrival spread and Cody, himself, appeared to take charge of the situation. The owner of Cody's Place was a dark, wiry, sharp-featured man named Cody Jarrett, a five-foot-five bundle of cocky energy who spoke in sharp staccato bursts and easily dominated the roomful of roughnecks, despite being fully half their size.

"We missed you guys at the hotel," said Jarrett. "When we heard you'd arrived, a bunch of us went out to give you a proper welcome, but you never showed."

"Sorry, we had dinner with a friend," I said.

"Oh, you mean some inconsiderate shit wined and dined you while we all cooled our heels waiting? Whom do we have to thank for this?"

"A gentleman named Grover Higgins," Breck said.

Our audience stopped smiling.

"You should be more careful about who you call your friends," said a huge barrel-chested man with a shaved head. "Out here, a man's judged by the company he keeps."

"That's enough, Strang," said Jarrett. He turned to us with an apologetic shrug.

"Your friend, Higgins, hasn't exactly gone out of his way to get along with people here."

"He mentioned something about that," Breck said. "The way he tells it, it seems as if he's only doing his job."

"There're different ways to get a job done," said Strang.

"I only know two," Higgins said. "A right way and a wrong way."

He stood outside the circle with Tyla by his side. People made way for them,

some staring at Tyla with more than just surprise at seeing a Nomad female in their midst. She stared back at them with equal frankness, imperious challenge in her golden eyes.

"If you're going to mouth off about me, Strang," Higgins said, coming to within about a foot of him, "why don't you do it to my face?"

"Come on now, that's enough, boys." Jarrett tried to intervene by standing between them. The gesture lacked something. He only came up to Higgins's chin and Strang looked over him without any trouble whatsoever. I wasn't even sure he saw him.

"What're you gonna do, write me up in one of your reports?" Strang said with a sneer.

"My job is to make sure the operations here are in compliance," Higgins said evenly. "If they're not, I have to report it. You've got your job, Strang, and I've got mine."

"Bull," said Strang. "You just want to shut us down so you and your scientist friends can have this piece of rock all to yourselves."

"Come on, boys, simmer down," said Jarrett. "Sit down and have a drink."

"Why don't you tell the truth?" said Strang, ignoring Jarrett. "You don't really give a damn about compliance. You're glad that cracking tower blew! I wouldn't be surprised if you even had a hand in it. You've been out to shut us down ever since the day you got here."

"That isn't true," Higgins protested. "You know I-"

"Guys, look-" said Jarrett, vainly trying to get their attention.

"The hell it isn't. It's because of guys like you that workin' men like us have to bring our families out to some miserable piece of rock like Purgatory just to

make a living. You shut us down on Earth and now you even want to close us down out here. And for what? For a bunch of stinkin', savage, subhuman-"

Higgins reached right over Jarrett and punched Strang in the face. Strang reeled back, recovered quickly, shoved Jarrett aside, and delivered a roundhouse blow to Higgins's jaw. As Higgins went down, Tyla lunged at Strang with a snarl and laid his face open with her claws. Strang howled with pain and rage, seized her, and threw her clear across the room.

She flipped in midair and landed crouched on the balls of her feet in the middle of the stage. She looked as if she would have come right back at Strang, only landing in the middle of a holographic projection confused her. The singer strutted across the stage and passed right through her. Tyla leaped backward, glanced down at herself in shock, and then reached out to touch one of the projections, jerking her hand back when she found that it was insubstantial. By the time she had recovered from her shock, Higgins had plucked a beer bottle off the bar and broken it over Strang's head.

One of Strang's buddies took exception to this cavalier christening of his friend and punched Higgins. Jarrett tried to intervene and got his nose bloodied for his trouble. Some friends came to his rescue and the donnybrook erupted in a cacophony of yells, grunts, smashing glass, and breaking furniture. For a moment, I had a ringside seat atop the bar, but then I felt myself being pulled over backward and the next thing I knew, I was flat on my back on the floor behind the bar, with the pretty blonde bartender crouching over me.

"These things can get a little noisy sometimes," she said, her eyes bright, her voice sultry. "It's much quieter down here."

Her face was inches from mine. She moistened her lips. Suddenly her features swam and seemed to melt. Her nose became a snout, her teeth lengthened into

feline fangs, her smooth skin became tawny fur. A deep growl rumbled from her throat as the hands holding down my shoulders turned into huge paws . . .

There was a sudden jarring impact on the creature's back and the blood-chilling growl became an agonized, high-pitched yelp as five razor-sharp nysteel blades ripped through its chest, spattering me with blood.

The creature wrenched itself off Breck's blades and collapsed beside me, its transformation to feline predator not yet complete. With its last breaths, it changed back to the form of the pretty blonde bartender, her chest and back a bloody ruin, her lips flecked with red foam. She stared at me with utter loathing, then coughed twice, blood bubbling up from her throat, and died.

"Don't just lie there, O'Toole," said Breck, leaning over the bar and extending his left hand to me. "Come on!"

He pulled me to my feet and, with only one hand, lifted me effortlessly over the bar. The riot was still in progress and I couldn't even tell which side was which, much less who was winning. Breck pulled me toward the exit, shoving people out of his way as he plowed through the crowd like a juggernaut. I didn't see Higgins or Tyla anywhere.

"Where's Higgins?" I shouted as we burst through the door.

A number of people passing by recoiled from Breck as he stood there, looking around wildly, blood dripping from the slender blades on his artificial hand.

"There!" He pointed with his knives and I saw Higgins in the distance, racing along the mall. We took off after him.

I didn't have the slightest idea of what was going on. I kept thinking about how close I'd come to being killed again. Breck had saved my life once more. He easily outdistanced me, running with astonishing speed. He caught up to Higgins

and passed him. I sobbed for breath, pumping my arms and legs for all I was worth, dodging around people or knocking them over. I heard the high-pitched, whining sound of Breck's semiauto firing the stunner darts.

As I turned the corner into a wide circular atrium, I saw people running in the opposite direction, screaming and shouting. Breck stood against the railing of the promenade to my left. Three stories down, on the ground level, a fountain spouted up from the center of a wide pool, shooting long plumes of water toward the skylight. Across from Breck and to my right, Higgins was running around the promenade toward the far side, where Tyla lay sprawled at Strang's feet.

' 'Stay back, Higgins!' shouted Breck, leveling his weapon.

He fired again just as Strang leaped over the railing. His body became dark and blurry as it fell, as if it had been atomized into thousands of particles, and then it burst apart into a black, buzzing cloud of insects that circled the fountain, heading straight toward Higgins.

I drew my plasma pistol and fired.

The white-hot charges sizzled through the fountain, sending out clouds of steam, incinerating most of the insects as they flew toward Higgins. The rest, all that remained of the whole that had been Strang, rained down like gravel into the pool below.

I came up beside Higgins. He was bending over Tyla.

"Is she all right?"

Higgins nodded as she stirred slightly. "She was just knocked unconscious. She saw Strang run and she went after him. Only it wasn't Strang, was it?" He looked over the railing, down at the fountain, and he shook his head. "How the hell do you fight creatures like that?"

"For the moment, fighting them is the least of our concerns," said Breck as he

came up to us. "Fighting them is not impossible. What I'd like to know is how we're going to capture one."

"Capture one?" said Higgins. "Are you crazy?"

"No, merely a psycho, Mr. Higgins." Breck grimaced wryly. "Capturing an ambimorph is what we came here to do, though no one bothered telling us exactly how we are supposed to do it. In any case, we'd best pick up our bags at the hotel and be on our way about it now, instead of waiting for the morning. If we remain here, I may be charged with murder."

"Murder?"

"I had to kill that pretty young bartender," Breck said. "She wasn't human, you see, but I'm afraid that only O'Toole and I could testify to that, since the creature managed to change back to human form before it died."

"Jesus, that's unbelievable," said Higgins.

"Precisely," said Breck.

"But if both you and O'Toole testify that she was an am-bimorph, and if I testify to what just happened here--"

"Don't be absurd," said Breck. "I have no intention of standing trial. Who would listen seriously to our testimony? We psychos don't even know what's real and what isn't. Besides, everyone knows that this is just a game."

FIVE

The desert sled skimmed several yards above the ground, its jet engines kicking up thick clouds of dust behind us. The brightly lit steel islands receded in the distance, plumes of flame shooting up above the roiling black clouds over the

cracking towers. It was like leaving one world and entering another. The sky was streaked with indigo, orange, and red-violet as we hurtled toward the sunset at over 200 miles per hour, Higgins watching the softly glowing instrument panel, following a course plotted into the sled's navigational computer.

The screen before him showed the forward scanner's guidance display. Objects in our path appeared as blips on the green grid. Higgins moved the joystick with a supple wrist, effortlessly skirting the blips, which became briefly visible through the cockpit canopy as we passed them—large, dark, shadowy projections sticking straight up out of the ground. The "bleeding cacti" of Purgatory. We passed several of them very closely and I glanced uneasily at Higgins. If we hit one at our speed, the collision itself might not damage the sled, but it would send it slewing out of control, almost certainly resulting in a fatal crash.

However, Higgins seemed to know what he was doing.

I sat beside him in the front; Breck was with Tyla in the back. Except for the glow from the instrument panel, the interior of the cockpit was dark. Outside, it was getting darker still.

The red-golden, violet-orange streaks in the night sky were fading rapidly.

"You fellas mind a little fresh air?" Higgins said. "I sure could use some."

"It's all right with me," said Breck.

"Sure, why not?" I said, figuring that he was going to open a few vents.

Instead, he flipped a switch and the entire cockpit canopy retracted. The aerodynamically shaped windshield kept our faces from blowing off, but I was unprepared for the sudden howling blast of wind.

Higgins inhaled deeply. Tyla sat up, raising her chin and sniffing at the airstream. "God, I love it out here," Higgins shouted over the blast. "A man can feel like a man, instead of like some rat in a maze!"

I suddenly noticed dozens of blips appearing on the screen and my stomach tightened as Higgins banked the sled sharply, heading directly toward the blips instead of maneuvering to go around them.

"What the hell are you doing!" I yelled.

"Ever do any skiing back on Earth?" Higgins yelled back.

"What?"

"Watch this!"

He hit a switch and four powerful floodlight beams stabbed out into the darkness, illuminating the desert dead ahead. We were headed straight for a veritable forest of bleeding cactus. They were huge, standing like garish, twisted specters in the desert, spidery arms flung wide as if to snatch at us as we passed. The smaller, younger plants were without "arms" and no thicker than my wrist, but the largest cacti grew as tall as fifty and sixty feet, and were as big around as the body of our sled.

"Higgins, are you crazy?" I shouted over the wind blast. "We can't go through there!"

He laughed.

"Higgins!"

We plunged into the cactus forest, Higgins working the joystick quickly with sharp, deft movements of his wrist as the sled slalomed through the clumps of giant plants, the headlight beams sweeping crazily back and forth like laser turrets as we banked sharply first one way, then the other. Dozens of times, it looked as if disaster was imminent, but Higgins always pulled out just in time, maneuvering the sled expertly, turning at the last second, standing it on its side, and zooming through the narrow gaps between the plants, once scraping by

so close that we abraded the meaty pulp off one of the large black cacti and the thick red sap that gave the plants their name splattered the body of the sled. After what seemed like a heart-stopping eternity, we were out of the dense forest and back on the open desert, heading toward the foothills.

Higgins threw back his head and gave a Texas cheer. "Eeeee-hah!"

I let out my breath slowly. "Higgins, you're a maniac."

He grinned at me. "And you're a couple of psychos. Fine bunch we make!" The sled gave a sudden lurch. "Uh-oh ..."

He instantly became serious and stabbed at the console, rapidly flicking switches on and off, checking the instruments, his mouth drawn in a tight grimace. I wasn't reassured by the sight of all the flashing lights that had not been there before.

"What the hell is happening?" I yelled at him, over the wind blast.

"We've got a problem!" he shouted back.

He hit the switch to slide the canopy back over us again, cutting out the wind blast and making the various little flashing lights and warning alarms that much more ominous as their rapid beeps became audible.

"Looks like we're running out of fuel," he said.

"What? Out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"I can't understand it," he said. "The gauge shows full. And the stabilizers aren't responding, either."

He was struggling with the joystick as the sled pitched wildly, its jets spurting, cutting out. He grimaced as the controls became leaden and struggled to keep the sled's glide under control as it rapidly lost momentum.

"Shit, hang on!" he said through clenched teeth.

The undercarriage scraped, the sled rebounded, scraped again, and Higgins barely

managed to get the nose elevated slightly before the tail section caught and slammed the body of the sled into the ground, sending out plumes of dust and dirt as it plowed a long furrow in the desert before coming to a shuddering stop.

Higgins leaned back against his seat, blood running down his face from a cut on his forehead. He took a ragged breath and let it out in a long and heavy exhalation. "Damn. We made it. I was afraid we'd tumble when we hit. That would've been a real mess. Is everybody all right?"

"We're all right back here," said Breck. "O'Toole?"

"Barely," I said. I turned on Higgins furiously. "Well, that sure was fun! Your stupid stunt going through that cactus forest was what probably damaged the damn sled!"

"No way," said Higgins emphatically. "We only scraped by a couple of those plants, just barely touched 'em. That wouldn't have been enough to rupture any of the fuel cells or cause a failure in the stabilizer system. Besides, the gauge was showing full! I can't understand it. I checked the sled myself this morning!"

"But I suppose anyone could've gotten to it since then," said Breck.

"Are you saying someone sabotaged it?"

"Someone or some thing," said Breck. "What sort of shape are we in?"

"Not good." Higgins stabbed at the buttons on the console. It was dead. He shook his head. "This sled isn't going anywhere. We've torn up the entire undercarriage. It's nothing but a pile of junk now."

He released the canopy, but it wouldn't open all the way. He swore and hammered at it several times, but it wouldn't budge.

"Great! We'll fry in here when the sun comes up."

"Allow me," Breck said.

He rose up in his seat, grabbed hold of the canopy, grunted, and shoved with all his might. There was the sound of metal buckling in protest, then it scraped back with a grating whine into the fully retracted position. I felt the cool night air on my face. The silence was eerie.

Higgins jumped down lightly to the ground, Breck and Tyla followed. I climbed down out of the cockpit, thinking back to the last time I was on Purgatory, when those crewmates of mine had gotten drunk and taken a sled out into the desert... Higgins reached inside the cockpit and pulled out his small backpack, then he tossed our packs down. "Might as well start walking," he said.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What are you talking about? We're miles from anywhere! Wouldn't we be better off staying with the sled?"

"What for? There won't be any help coming," Higgins said, hiking the pack up onto his shoulders. "The locator beacon's out and we don't have any radios. Your people at Psychodrome could send for help, but even with tachyon broadcast, by the time anyone got out here to pick us up, about a dozen different things could happen to us, none of them very pleasant. We've got some nocturnal predators out here that could be dangerous, but the ones active during the day, you really wouldn't want to meet, believe me. We'd best try to make the high country before daybreak."

I could barely see the hills against the night sky. "We'll never make it," I said.

"Of course we will," said Higgins. "Remember, Tyla's people have lived out here for generations. She'll get us through."

I glanced at her, standing casually off to one side as if nothing unusual had

happened, looking almost bored by our discussion. She was barefoot, dressed only in a hide skirt that was belted at the waist and fastened at the shoulder, leaving the opposite shoulder and both arms bare. It was crudely made from the skin of some native animal, light-colored, thin and supple, cut high on one hip to allow for freedom of movement. It was a garment meant to be purely utilitarian and not in the least bit decorative, though she looked terrific in it. Her lush, manelike hair hung long and loose, blowing in the wind. In the moonlight, her shadowed form standing with legs slightly apart, hair rippling in the wind and arms hanging loosely at her sides, she seemed like an archetype of the primal female. She certainly didn't seem worried. But then, she wasn't human, either.

"He's right," said Breck, checking his weapons and shouldering his pack. "It will be easier traveling on foot at night than during the day. Let's not waste any time. It seems someone doesn't want us to contact Tyla's tribe. Since we already know there are ambimorphs on Purgatory, I wonder what it is they don't want us to find out."

"I'll settle for finding out how we're going to get out of this alive," I said.

We started walking, heading toward the distant hills. Tyla led the way. She had a graceful, easy walk, springy and absolutely soundless. She placed one foot almost directly in front of the other, holding her body upright, sniffing the air on occasion as she walked. By contrast, I felt clumsy. The two small bright moons of Purgatory made the night a cool, shadowy blue rather than an impenetrable black. The figures of Tyla and Breck looked like ghostly shadows moving ahead of me. Higgins walked in the rear with me, no doubt to make sure I didn't straggle and get lost.

I was in good condition-or at least I thought I was-but after a while, the seemingly easygoing pace set by Tyla started to feel exhausting and I began to fall behind. Breck, of course, had no trouble keeping up with her. She could have sprinted and he'd probably have been able to run rings around her. However, what little solace my ego could have derived from the fact that Breck was superhuman and Tyla wasn't human at all was dissipated by Higgins, who wasn't tiring anywhere near as quickly as I was. Several times, he had to call out to Tyla in her native tongue as she and Breck started to get too far ahead. Then they'd stop and wait for us-for me-and I'd feel humiliated at the easy way she stood there, head cocked, watching me as I closed the distance between us. Then she would turn and go on at what seemed to be a slower pace, only to have me start falling behind again after about a mile or two.

Under other circumstances, I might even have enjoyed it. A little. Maybe. The ground sloped very gently upward as we headed toward the foothills. The wind was brisk and it was subtly perfumed with the piquant smells of the flowering scrub brush all around us and the short, grasslike growths with delicate stalks surmounted by wispy blooms rising out of the centers of the clumps. All around us was a lovely surreal vista in hues of blue and black and purple, eerie and peaceful save for the occasional piercing cry of some nightflyer giving warning of our presence. But I would have appreciated the primeval beauty of the Purgatory landscape more if we'd been able to turn back when we got tired. Anyone tuning in to me would be feeling the apprehension of civilized urban man out of his element in the wild. The uncertainty of not knowing if we were going to make it, despite what Higgins said. The exhaustion of strenuous exercise in an atmosphere I wasn't used to. The surge of adrenaline with every sound that broke the utter stillness of the night. The fear of what might be lurking out

there in the darkness.

Every now and then, Tyla would stop, her head held high, moving slightly back and forth, her nostrils flaring. She would hold her arm out, silently motioning us to keep still. Then, when the unknown danger had passed, we would go on again. After the first time, I asked Breck if he had smelled anything at all. He shook his head, saying, "It's difficult to separate the unfamiliar smells." The second time it happened, he shook his head again, frustrated at her ability to discern an odor he could not, and the third time, he finally sensed something. "It's very faint," he said, sniffing the breeze. "Something rather musky. I was barely able to pick it up at all. It had to be a good distance away, because I could neither see nor hear anything. Her olfactory sense must be incredible. Do you have any idea what it was, Higgins?"

"If it was musky, it was probably a herd of unicorns," he said.

"A herd of what?" I said.

"Well, that's what we call them, anyway," Higgins said.

"It's a one-horned, antelopelike creature, quite small, only about knee-high, with long, very shaggy hair that stinks like you wouldn't believe. They're night grazers."

"They don't sound very dangerous," I said.

"Unless they charge and try to stick you with their horns, they aren't really.

However, if you get a good whiff of one, the smell alone is liable to make you want to chop your nose off. It's also an irritant that gets into your eyes and mucous membranes. Burns like hell. The Nomads have learned to give them a wide berth. But the real danger is the sandcats that prey on the herds."

"Those are the nocturnal predators you mentioned?" I said, shifting the weight

of my pack slightly as we walked.

Higgins nodded. "They're large, roughly the size of a lion or a tiger, only longer and leaner, built closer to the ground. They're all muscle and they're fast as hell. If one of them takes off after you, you'd better be a damn good shot, because you're not going to get a second chance. Incredibly ugly brutes."

"I think I've seen one," I said.

"What? Where?"

"No, no, not out here," I said quickly. "I meant the am-bimorph that attacked me back at Cody's Place. It assumed a shape like what you just described before Breck killed it."

"Then you were very lucky," Higgins said. "A sandcat could rip you apart in seconds. These ambimorphs must be amazing creatures. It seems to go against every scientific principle we know that they can take virtually any form, with no discernible difference, even on the microscopic level. It's got to take an incredible amount of energy for any creature to undergo a change like that."

"I guess so. Why? What are you getting at?"

"Simply that they have to have some limitations. No living thing I know of has an inexhaustible supply of energy and the mind boggles at the amount of energy that must be required for the ambimorphs to transmutate the way they do. They must have absolutely fantastic metabolic rates. And logic would suggest that the more they transmutate or shapechange, the more energy they'd need. You said they reproduce by fission?"

"Our people originally thought it could be something like binary fission," I said, "as with unicellular organisms, but now it looks as though they're not actually independent entities at all. The latest theory is that they're a sort of 'hive' of microscopic protoplasmic creatures, existing in a complex symbiotic

relationship and functioning as a unit."

"In a sense, that's exactly what we are, as well," said Higgins, with a smile.

"Our cells are simply not as flexible. I keep thinking about that footage you told me about, where the am-bimorph in human form suddenly seemed to explode into a flock of birds . . . exactly the same way Strang changed into a swarm of insects. Maybe that was more than transmutation. Has it occurred to you that it could have been the creature reproducing itself?"

I stared at him. "No. It couldn't be."

"Why not?"

"Because Breck and I both saw the creature shortly afterward. And it didn't look any different. I mean ... it wasn't smaller or anything ..."

My voice trailed off.

"You see my point, don't you?" Higgins said excitedly. "How would you know? It may be a multicellular organism that behaves as if it's unicellular, dividing like bacteria, by geometric increase, only at a much faster rate than any bacteria we've ever seen!"

"What are you saying, that the damn things are a disease!"

"No, what I'm suggesting is that it's possible they reproduce by multiple division, very much the same way that bacteria do. Similar to a disease, if you like."

"But if an ambimorph reproduced by multiple division," I said, "then it would follow that it would have to be much smaller after reproduction, wouldn't it? It couldn't possibly divide and still retain the same mass."

"No," said Higgins, "but how would you know simply by looking at it? There's more to mass than size, you know. There's also density."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Take that ambimorph you saw back on Earth, the one that divided into a flock of birds and then re-formed once again in human shape. You say you saw it both before and after the transmutation. But suppose one or two of those birds didn't rejoin with the others to re-form into the same body once again? The difference in mass would have been very slight, perhaps not even noticeable, and even if there was a noticeable decrease in mass, the creature might have altered its density slightly to compensate for the loss."

I walked on for a few steps without saying anything, profoundly disturbed by the implications of what Higgins was suggesting.

"It's possible, isn't it?" said Higgins, the xenobiologist in him excited by the theory. "Then whatever part did not re-form with the main body would be much smaller. There would have to be enough of it to sustain a separate existence, because some of those insects Strang changed into-the ones who weren't incinerated by your blast-fell dead into the fountain, so we know there has to be some sort of minimum mass for the creature to sustain total separation from the parent colony, but the result would be a baby ambimorph!

"It could survive by adopting protective coloration," Higgins continued with excitement, "taking the shape of smaller creatures and avoiding unnecessary transmutation to conserve its strength while it grew . . . and considering what their metabolic rates must be and the amount of energy they must consume, their growth rate must be phenomenal! Considering all the energy they must burn up, how long could their lifespan be? There has to be a powerful reproductive imperative. They'd probably die if they didn't reproduce. Listen, O'Toole, that ambimorph you encountered back on Earth . . . after it had re-formed again, back into human shape, was there anything about it, the way it looked or acted, that

suggested it could have been in a weakened condition?"

I remembered how Breck and I had trailed it, how Breck had run on ahead of me and entered the slum building the creature had gone into. It had taken on the form of a cyberpunk, connected with a young cyberpunk girl, and gone back with her to her apartment in the box warrens on the ground level of the city. A place to hide out and recuperate after reproduction? Breck had already gone inside by the time I got there. As I arrived, out of breath, I saw the cyberpunk girl leaving.

Breck had gone in; she had come out. I ran after her, drawing my gun and aiming, I yelled and she had turned around . . . and it was Stone's face that had looked back at me. Only Stone was dead. It all came back to me.

"Arkady! Don't! It's me, Stone!"

Coles was screaming in my mind, "O'Toole! Don't kill it! I want that thing alive!"

The creature spoke in Stone's voice. "Let me go, Arkady. Please. They'll hurt me."

It hadn't changed. Like "Strang," it could have transmuted into a cloud of insects and swarmed away. It could have turned into a flock of birds or some other sort of creature, they could change so quickly, but it hadn't. It had stood there, helpless, pleading with me and only Saqqara's assassins striking at that precise moment had allowed it to escape. It had not tried to fight back, nor had it killed Breck, choosing instead to knock him out and flee. Why?

Because it had been in a weakened condition from reproducing? I remembered what the shapechanger had told us back on Draconis, about how consuming human flesh had made it violently ill. Maybe that was all that had saved Breck, its weakness

and its fear of being incapacitated.

Had the creature used up its last reserves of strength by assuming Stone's form in a desperate gamble for its life? It had made only a partial change, only the face, since it had already been in the shape of a human female. Did it choose that tactic simply because it was the only option left to it, because it had strength enough only for a partial transformation?

"There was something, wasn't there?" said Higgins, watching me intently as he walked beside me.

"Yes," I said, slowly, "there was."

"I knew it! God, I wish I could examine one of those creatures!"

"I know someone who feels much the same way you do," I said, thinking of Coles.

I had a feeling that if we ever got back alive, Higgins would probably come to regret his wish.

After a while, even the loquacious Higgins abandoned conversation in favor of conserving his energy. We'd been walking for hours, but it seemed like days. Sometimes we followed a desultory course, stopping for a while to let something pass by in the night that only Tyla could sense or making a detour around an unseen herd of night grazers, but for the most part, we kept heading steadily toward the high country.

The desert plains of Purgatory had a desolate magnitude about them that brought back memories of the red dust plains of Mars. I had spent much of my life in cities, but there was something about the vastness of a sweeping desert vista, the trackless scope of unpopulated country stretching out to the horizon that always instilled silence. It was humbling. It seemed somehow inappropriate for man to make his paltry noise out in the midst of all that pristine wilderness.

Perhaps that was why we always congregated in cities, responding to some

primeval herding instinct. Maybe it was because we were frightened by the wilderness, not so much by the dangers there-because there were far more dangers in our cities-but because the wilderness put us in our place. It was difficult to stand out in the middle of a desert and say, "I am the Master." Your voice would sound so small.

There could be thousands of miles of virgin, unpopulated country available all around us, and yet most of us always gravitated to the skyscrapers and the slums, the concrete and the steel, the pulsating, sweating, heaving multitudes choking in their own effluvium, pressing in on one another, living like insects in a hive, all for the illusion of security and fellowship. The city made its own rules and forgot about the rules of nature. It became a ravening beast, its pulse abnormally fast, its reactions unnatural, its sexuality perverse, its mind twisted. When there are too many ants in a colony, they all go mad. The loneliest, saddest people I've met have always lived in cities.

My ancestors were Irish and Russian, both peoples with a passionate involvement with the land, a feeling for it, a love as profound as that for family and self.

Somewhere in the distant past, my people had worshiped at Druidic altars and galloped on horseback across vast steppes. They had farmed and hunted. When the game was scarce, they went hungry. When the drought came, they starved. Their connection with the land was tangible, if at times brutal. But as we built our cities and exerted our collective will against the wilderness, we lost that connection with the land. And in so doing, we had lost a part of ourselves, as well.

We would either live or die. We would do our best to live, and with Tyla's help, we had a far better chance than we would've had on our own. The terror of (he

city dweller out in the wild and away from everything familiar had abated and in its place there came a quiet acceptance, a serenity, a sense of peace. It was as if the vastness of the desert had reminded me of my insignificance and, properly humbled, I had once more assumed my proper place in the natural scheme of things. I wasn't "master" of anything. I was, instead, merely a part of everything. There was a certain inexpressible joy in that realization, a true feeling of community that people always seek in cities and never really find. It was almost dawn by the time we reached the foothills. We had walked briskly all night and made surprisingly good time. I was absolutely exhausted, but I had to give Coles credit. If it weren't for all the hell he'd put me through, both physically and mentally, I doubt I would have made it. The others would've had to carry me.

Tyla heard it first. She stopped and pointed back the way we came. I couldn't hear anything at all. Neither could Breck, at first, but then he heard it, too. Moments later, so did Higgins and I. It was the faint, far-off sound of a jet engine. It might almost have been the wind. But then we saw the silvery sparkle of light reflected off a desert sled as the sun started to come up over the horizon.

"He's circling," Higgins said. "Right where our sled crashed. By now, the wind will have erased any tracks we left, but he'll figure out we've headed for the high country. He'll probably fly a few widening circles around the wreck, then he'll start heading this way. It might be a good idea if we got out of sight."

"And it might be an even better idea if we didn't," Breck said. "Since you're a competent outdoorsman, Higgins, I assume that one of these packs contains something in the way of an emergency shelter?"

"Well . . . yes, I'm packing a collapsible, reflective dome shelter, but-

"Excellent," said Breck. "If you're quick about setting it up, it should reflect quite nicely as the sun climbs over the horizon."

"But that would only attract . . . oh, I see."

Breck smiled. "Precisely."

A few moments later, Higgins had the shelter erected. It was a silver nyflex dome big enough to comfortably sleep two; four if comfort wasn't a major concern. Obviously, Higgins hadn't counted on using it, but being a competent outdoorsman, as Breck had observed, he had packed it as a prudent safety measure.

"What happens now?" said Higgins as he finished setting it up.

"Now ... we wait," said Breck. "Let's see what he does when he spots the reflection off the dome."

"You think it's an ambimorph in that sled?" said Higgins. "Our saboteur?"

Breck nodded. "I'm sure of it. Unless you can think of any other reason why someone would wish to follow us out here."

"I hate to bring it up," I said, "but I can think of one. Someone could have followed us with the express purpose of arresting you for murder. The people back there wouldn't have any way of knowing that bartender you killed was an ambimorph. If there are other shapechangers present in the city, they'll be certain to exploit that situation. And it's entirely possible that someone familiar with the terrain might have found us without the aid of a locator beacon."

"How?" asked Higgins, frowning.

"Simple. They could tune in to the broadcast of the game."

Higgins stared at me with astonishment. "They could what! Wait a minute, let me

get this straight," he said. "I want to make sure I understand this lunacy I've gotten myself mixed up in. You and Breck are Psychodrome players, but you're also working for the government. However, since that's supposed to be a secret, you've made it part of your alien invasion game, only the invasion is actually real, which nobody's going to believe because it's part of the game to act as if it's real. So, supposedly, what's happening isn't really happening, except it is, right? And anyone with a psy-fi set can tune in on this craziness?"

"That's about it," I said.

"But. . . but when you explained about editing and enhancement for broadcast purposes, I assumed you meant that steps would be taken to protect your mission."

I shook my head. "Not necessarily. They edit primarily to protect the home audience from reality. And for maximum dramatic impact when they broadcast the condensed version in a rerun. You see, Higgins, the more danger we're in, the more interesting it is for the home audience. That's the bottom line, because if we get good ratings, more people will tune in. If more people tune in, the game becomes more popular. The more popular the game becomes, the more people will enter the lottery, the more biochips will be given out as prizes, which means more minds and bodies for our friend Coles to play with. He calls it 'increasing the data base.' He'd probably like to do it more quickly, but if he started handing out biochips by the thousands, it might look a little funny. Instead, what he's trying to do is pick his winners carefully, utilizing things like demographics, position in the business community, political affiliation, and so forth. Of course, this part of our conversation will probably be edited out for broadcast and redubbed with simulsynch. That's the sort of reality people have to be protected from. So as far as the home audience is concerned, we probably

aren't even having this conversation. I wonder what we're really saying?"

Higgins turned to Breck. "Is he serious?"

"I'm afraid so."

"But . . . that's crazy!" Higgins stared at us with disbelief. "Don't you realize what that means? It means you're being used as Judas goats! It means that any ambimorph with access to a psych-fidelity set can tune you in!"

He pointed to the silvery speck of the desert sled in the distance, gradually getting larger as it approached. "Whoever or whatever that is only needs a communication link to someone tuned into you right now to know exactly what you're planning!"

"Makes it a bit more challenging, doesn't it?" said Breck, watching as the craft approached.

SIX

The jet-powered desert sled came out of the sun, heading straight for the reflective dome tent. As it banked sharply, turning its canopy toward us, Higgins followed it with binoculars.

"It's Jarrett!" he said.

"I think we can safely assume that it most definitely isn't Jarrett," Breck said as we hid in some rock outcroppings a short distance from the dome. "Not unless Jarrett has some sort of official law-enforcement status here."

"No," said Higgins, glancing at Breck and then putting the binoculars back up to his eyes. "Blaisedell's Chief of Security. You met him when we went to visit Cavanaugh. If he had a warrant out on you, he'd serve it himself. He wouldn't

send Jarrett. And if he came after you, he sure as hell wouldn't come alone."

"I didn't think so," Breck said.

The sled banked sharply and circled round the dome.

"He's retracted the canopy," said Higgins. "He's-"

A burst of automatic weapons' fire sounded above the whine of the jet engines and the fragmentation rounds plowed into the dome shelter, exploding as they hit.

"Now," said Breck, bringing his pistol up, "as our friend lands so that he can survey the damage ..."

The sled set down with a diminishing whine of engines beside the wreckage of the shelter. Jarrett jumped down from the cockpit and came toward what was left of the shelter, holding an assault rifle at the ready. Breck stood up and rapidly fired three stunner darts into his back. Jarrett spun around and fired a burst in our direction. The rounds exploded as they hit the rocks, sending shards and chips of stone flying everywhere. Breck tried to fire once more and Jarrett opened up again, forcing him to duck back down. I edged around the outcropping on the other side, leveled my gun and fired twice. The fragmentation rounds took Jarrett in the chest, spinning him around as they exploded. He fired as he fell and the frag bullets stitched the body of the sled, struck the fuel cells, and the whole thing exploded into flame.

"Damn you, O'Toole!" swore Breck, "I was trying to take him alive!"

I glanced down at the grip indicator of my gun and saw a strip of red showing through the clear plastic. Red magazine. Fragmentation rounds. I thought I'd loaded stunners.

"I'm sorry," I said, lamely. "I thought I... Holy Christ!"

I stared wide-eyed as the ground around Jarrett's body churned and what looked

like hundreds of fist-sized, hairy, multilegged creatures erupted to the surface. They looked like a cross between tarantulas and hermit crabs. They swarmed over the body, covering it completely in a black, writhing, hairy blanket. There was an incredible sound, like hundreds of walnuts cracking, and moments later, they had burrowed back down beneath the surface, leaving nothing behind. Not even bones.

"My God," I said. "What were those creatures?"

"Sandstriders," Higgins said. "They burrow underground at night and then come up and swarm over the surface toward their prey."

"We were standing right there just a little while ago," I said, swallowing hard.

"That's right," said Higgins, uneasily. "And we're standing way the hell too close right now. We'd better move it."

"My apologies, O'Toole," said Breck as we hurried away. "You may not have intended it, but you just saved our lives. "It's a pity about the sled, though."

"At least Jarrett, or the shapechanger, didn't realize it was a trap," said Higgins. "What if he had been in communication with another ambimorph who was tuned in on the game?"

"It might have been interesting," said Breck. "And if they were tuning in on us, it would certainly have been worth knowing. However, I think they'd shy away from that idea. I don't think they're certain yet how vulnerable they would be if they plugged into the net. For that matter, I don't think we're sure of that, ourselves."

"I'm having a hard time keeping all this straight," said Higgins, "but it occurs to me that if people could follow our experience right now by tuning in to either of you guys through the psy-fi network, then wouldn't they have been able

to see the bartender transforming herself into a sandcat? That means they'd know she was an ambimorph, wouldn't they? Surely that would clear you?"

"It isn't something I would care to bet on," said Breck. "If anyone on Purgatory was tuned in at precisely the right time, and if they believed that what they were seeing was actually real as opposed to a psychocybernetically achieved special effect, then perhaps it might have cleared me. But I don't think a court of law would be convinced that anything experienced on Psychodrome was representative of reality."

"But what about the body?" Higgins said. "Certainly they can't doubt that reality!"

"It's the body of a human female," said Breck. "And no autopsy would be able to prove otherwise."

"But unless she was an ambimorph,-what reason would you possibly have for killing her?" asked Higgins.

"Some of them will think I simply went berserk," Breck said. "After all, I am a hybrid who has been trained to kill and everyone knows that genetically engineered killing machines such as myself occasionally slip a cog, especially given the high incidence of Psychodrome players going insane. Of course, there may be others who will think the alien invasion game is real, especially if they witnessed the girl's transformation on psy-fi." He smiled. "It all depends on which brand of reality you subscribe to. In any case, none of it amounts to proof. I imagine it will prove somewhat controversial."

"Aren't you even worried?" Higgins asked.

"I never worry," Breck replied, with a shrug. "What would it accomplish?"

"But you could wind up facing a murder charge!"

"Quite possibly."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"At the moment, we have other things with which to concern ourselves. Such as the fact that your wife seems to have disappeared."

Higgins spun around, looking all around him. There was no sign of Tyla.

"She was here a minute ago," I said.

"You didn't see her leave?" said Breck.

I shook my head.

"Neither did I," he said. "Now that may be cause for worry."

Higgins turned on Breck. "What are you saying? You don't think that... Now wait a minute! You're not seriously suggesting that Tyla could be one of them? Oh, come on! That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?"

"Don't be absurd! She must have gone to hunt for food or..."

"Or?"

"For God's sake, Breck, I've lived with her! You can't seriously believe that she could be one of those creatures!"

"I've told you once before, Higgins," Breck said, "I suspect everyone. Even you."

"You're crazy. Tyla! Tyla!" His voice echoed in the rocks above. There was no answer. He glanced from me to Breck and back again. For the first time, I saw uncertainty in his face. He didn't want to think about it, but he was only human and Breck had planted a frightening, horrible suspicion in his mind.

"You said yourself that you lived apart much of the time," said Breck. "How do you know that it was really Tyla who came back to you this time?"

"You think I wouldn't know my own wife?" Higgins looked around anxiously, then

called her name again.

The answering call came from high up in the rocks.

"There!" he said triumphantly, visibly relieved. "I knew she hadn't run out on us! She must have found us shelter up there or some food."

He started climbing quickly up the slope. Breck and I followed.

"What do you think?" I said.

"I think we should take turns sleeping tonight," said Breck.

Tyla had found a small cave in a large group of rock outcrop-pings higher up in the foothills. It provided some welcome shelter from the savage heat. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, I was extremely grateful that we had walked all night and not stayed on the desert. We would have cooked down there. Not to mention the possibility of being eaten alive by creatures like those sandstriders.

Higgins spread out his bedroll and settled down on the rock floor with Tyla, who curled up beside him. Breck volunteered to take the first watch, since I was exhausted. I spread out my own bedroll, on loan from Higgins, and stretched out my aching legs. Breck took up position near the entrance to the cave.

"Breck," said Higgins quietly, his voice echoing slightly in the confines of the cave.

"Yes?"

"How do I know that you 're not one of them?"

Breck smiled. "You're learning, Higgins. We'll make a psycho of you yet."

I closed my eyes and wondered where the whole damn thing would end. What would we find out here in the middle of this godforsaken no-man's-land? And how would we get back? I felt that we were stumbling in the dark, improvising as we went along. How the hell were we supposed to capture an ambimorph alive? And how were we supposed to deliver it to Coles? We'd had several chances already and we'd

blown every one.

I thought about Kami, a young woman I had known back when she was the leader of a gang of wild scooter bandits in Tokyo. She'd moved up in the world a bit since then. She was now known in the Japanese underworld as the Tiger Lady, operator of The Pyramid Club, the plushest casino on the Ginza Strip, and through her position as shogun of the bushido gangs, she controlled over a dozen more. The empire that had once been Hakim Saqqara's was now hers. I'd had something to do with that and she had made it clear that I was welcome there to share it with her anytime I chose. I wished I was there right now.

There had been a time, not very long ago, when the life that Kami led seemed frighteningly violent to me. I had told myself I was too old for taking up with a gang of scooter bandits and zooming around high above the streets of Tokyo on a jet-powered skimmer, terrorizing the "zens." That sort of life seemed very tame now compared with what I was involved in. At least Kami's world was simple and brutally direct. Mine had become about as unpredictable as possible. And far more violent than I could have dreamed.

I opened my eyes and saw a dark figure in a long flowing coat that billowed like a cape. He stood at the entrance to the cave, silhouetted against the light. I looked for Breck, but he was nowhere in sight. Higgins and Tyla were both gone. I sat up quickly, reaching for my gun, but my weapons had disappeared, as well. The sun made a blinding aura around the shadowy figure standing motionless at the mouth of the cave, watching me. He took a couple of steps forward, seeming to glide across the rock floor of the cave. As he came closer, I could see the long white hair falling to his shoulders, the gaunt face etched with age, the dark and penetrating eyes, the blood ruby amulet of the playermaster on a chain

around his neck...

"Mondago," I said.

He smiled, standing over me, and though his lips did not move, I heard his familiar deep sepulchral tones as he spoke inside my mind. "How are you bearing up, O'Toole?"

I realized I was asleep. Mondago always had a flair for the dramatic. He liked to contact players in their dreams, making his entrances in clouds of mist, appearing like a specter from beyond. He was another one for tiptoeing through people's minds without their knowing it. He'd done it to me on at least several occasions that I knew of. Now here he was again, appearing in my dream like an unwelcome guest come to spoil the weekend.

"What do you want, Mondago?" I said irritably. "I'm tired. Let me sleep."

"You are sleeping, my dear boy. And quite soundly, I might add. Judging by your readouts, it would take something on the order of a cannon to wake you up right now."

"Fine, get to the point, Mondago. I was having a perfectly nice dream when you showed up."

"Ah, yes, that fascinating young bandit queen of yours. Quite charming, in a rather feral way. You seem to have unusual tastes in women."

"Mondago ..."

"Yes, yes, very well, I'll come right to the point. There have been a number of interesting new developments Coles thought you should be aware of. In light of what we've learned through your experience here, Purgatory is going to be placed under quarantine. This is all highly classified, of course, and the quarantine will not be officially declared until after you've left, but the orbital station will be refitted as a military garrison and everyone on Purgatory will

essentially be held incommunicado until such time as we can devise a foolproof method for differentiating between a human and an ambimorph."

"Short of implanting everyone with biochips from birth and monitoring them from the moment they can crawl, you mean?"

"I will assume the question was rhetorical," Mondago said, ignoring my sarcasm.

"As I was saying, the quarantine will be officially put in place after you and Breck have left, but you will not be leaving alone. Coles would like Mr. Higgins to accompany you."

"Wait a minute," I said, "why Higgins? And what if he doesn't want to go? He's got a wife here, you know."

"Who apparently has more than her share of husbands already," Mondago said dryly. "One more or less would probably make little difference. Impress Mr. Higgins with the importance of his leaving with you. His ideas on the subject of ambimorphs have aroused a good deal of interest here. We would like to have him on our research staff."

"Does he have a choice?"

"Not really, no. We could arrange for him to be shipped home, but we would prefer his voluntary cooperation. People tend to be more productive when they're working of their own free will."

"That's a hell of a radical thought for somebody who works for Coles."

"Yes, I suppose it is, at that. In any case, it would be best if you were the one to bring the matter up. Higgins seems to have a slight antipathy for Breck. He might take it better coming from you. Do try to convince him."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Good. I doubt it will be all that difficult. He is a scientist, after all.

He'll probably jump at the chance. Meanwhile, you recall the ambimorph you knew as the crystal hunter, Nikolai Razin, the one who came back from Draconis 9 with you as-

"As Stone, yes, I remember. Christ, Mondago, how the hell could I forget?"

"Well, we were able to track it for a time until it apparently learned how to control the signals from the biochip it had assimilated from Miss Winters."

Assimilated. He meant that the creature had absorbed her and ingested her biochip, as well. For a while. Game Control had received intermittent signals from Stone's biochip, but then the signals had become erratic, fluctuating wildly, suggesting that the creature was learning how to control the biochip, something that was supposed to be impossible. Eventually, they had lost the signals altogether.

"We've started receiving signals from that biochip again," Mondago said.

It was startling news. I was convinced that the ambimorph Breck and I referred to as "Nikolai Razin," after the crystal hunter whose identity it had assumed, was perhaps the most dangerous of them all. It had come very close to penetrating our security and it was the only ambimorph to have ever been inside the Psychodrome headquarters complex. "Then you've found the creature?" I said, excited.

"Not exactly" said Mondago. "More like it's found us. The biochip is not responding to an activating signal from Game Control. The creature, which we have code named Chameleon, has learned how to activate its biochip at will and transmit selectively, directly to our satellite network."

"Does that mean you can't trace it?" I said.

"No, as long as the signal is identified in time and we can get a fix on it, we are capable of tracing it with some limited success, depending largely on how

long Chameleon is transmitting. But what is far more significant and ominous is the fact that Chameleon is now capable of transmitting signals that can completely bypass Game Control."

I still didn't understand. "What are you telling me? You mean you can trace the signal if you can lock in on it in time, but you can't control it?"

"Unfortunately, no, we cannot. We are still trying to find ways to block it.

Chameleon has been sending us transmissions which are essentially the equivalent of test patterns, as if it were arrogantly showing us what it has learned to do.

Although we've had no direct evidence of it as yet, theoretically, what this means is that it's possible for the creature to use our satellite network to tap into psych-fidelity broadcasts."

It finally sank in and I was stunned. "Are you saying it can make direct telepathic contact with anyone tuned in to the channel it's tapped into?"

"Exactly."

"Holy shit."

"Coles used somewhat stronger terminology himself. You can appreciate how this has caused the situation to escalate alarmingly. If one ambimorph can learn to do this, no doubt others can. This opens up the possibility for psychocybernetic terrorism, with the victims being accessed through the media."

"But what about the fail-safe systems, the biomonitors built into psy-fi sets?

Won't they protect the user?"

"We don't know. Obviously, we're hoping that they will, but the fail-safes are designed so that the biomonitors will register unacceptable levels of stress and block out that part of the transmission or shut the entire system down. For example, if someone who is tuned into Mr. Breck performing some feat of daring

becomes too frightened and experiences increased respiration and accelerated heartbeat and so forth, the biomonitors will register that and the fail-safe systems will react accordingly. So we can protect our audiences from their own physical reactions. But can we protect them from their emotional reactions? Can we prevent ambimorph terrorists from instilling ideas within their subconscious minds that will fester and break out only after the psy-fi set had been disconnected?"

"And you know that can be done because you people have been doing it yourselves, haven't you?" I said, "All along, you've been feeding the home audience some subconscious programming along with their entertainment. And I've been part of the program, God help me. Well, now it looks as if Game Control is about to lose control. I don't know if I should laugh or cry."

"I cannot give enough emphasis to the importance of your assignment, O'Toole," Mondago said intensely. "We must have a live ambimorph to study. It is absolutely imperative. We have every available undercover team out in the field, attempting to capture one. So far, you and Breck have had the most contacts. And you also have the most experience."

"I gather the other teams aren't doing too well," I said.

Mondago was silent for a moment. "We have lost touch with nine of them."

I swallowed hard. "Completely?"

"Completely. Termination signals have been received. Shortly after that, their biochips began transmitting once again, indicating that they had been assimilated by the ambimorphs. And then, as happened with Chameleon, we lost them."

"God."

"You must bring back an ambimorph, O'Toole. Alive. At any cost. Any cost, is

that understood?"

"Oh, it's understood, all right. But you mind telling me how?"

He became insubstantial and faded away.

I opened my eyes with a start and sat up abruptly. I was sweating. I looked around. Higgins and Tyla were still asleep, curled up together in the back of the small cave. Breck sat leaning against the wall at the mouth of the cave. He heard me sit up and glanced toward me.

"What is it? Are you all right?" he said.

"How long have I slept?"

"About four hours."

I sighed and got out of my bedroll. "I guess that's enough. I might as well take over the watch. Go get some sleep. You're about to have a really rotten dream."

SEVEN

There's a certain type of person to whom the idea of "roots" is meaningless. I'd met a lot of them because the currents of my life were such that I always wound up floating with the drifters. Breck was like that, though he was really sort of an exception, because he never had a home and family to start with-unless you can call a hybreed creche a home and I certainly can't. It's not the same.

That's why hybreeds tend to feel a sort of extended family closeness toward one another, even if they've never met before. There's something in there, deep in the human part of their genetic matrix, that drives them to seek the families they never knew. No, Breck was different. I was thinking of another type of person altogether, one who grew up in the normal circumstances of family and

home, community and friendship, and who for one reason or another wound up rejecting them.

The corporate mercenaries I had fought with during my first Psychodrome adventure were such people. Some had families at home that they would probably never see again, some had been driven to the corporate wars by desperate circumstances, but by far the vast majority of them-the hardened pros who were the real survivors-were truly isolated men. And, sometimes, women. They lived in their own little self-contained worlds. They had no need of home or family. They had no lovers, only sex partners. No friends, only comrades. They had no roots. No past. At least, no past that mattered. And no real future, either. They claimed to like it that way, but I noticed that they didn't really much like anything.

In the Middle Ages, mercenaries were known as "free companions." From the Latin *com*, meaning together, and *panis*, meaning bread. In other words, a companion was someone to break bread with and if you were a mercenary, you were free to choose which soldiers you'd break bread with. You were also free of love, free of familial ties, and free of care. You broke bread together and you fought together and there ended your responsibilities. But since there was no such thing as a free lunch, that kind of freedom had a price. Paid in the coin of loneliness.

I stared down at the rocky slope, letting my gaze travel out across the sun-baked desert that stretched out unbroken for as far as the eye could see. It was a lonely place. Somewhere beyond the cobalt-blue horizon, there were huge surreal-looking islands built of steel and glass, with noxious black clouds, like storms hot through with flames, hovering above them. Purgatory, indeed. I felt like a lost soul.

I had never consciously rejected the idea of having roots, of having a home and family. A place to settle down. The very phrase bespoke a sense of calm and peacefulness. Settle down. Relax. Apparently, that was not for me. Not yet. Perhaps, not ever. That little biochip was in my brain to stay. It seemed ironic. Here I was, huddled in a tiny cave over a trillion miles away from anything I knew, and I was feeling lonely-all the while, millions, perhaps billions, of people were sharing my experience.

"Wake up, O'Toole," Breck said. "You were a million miles away."

"More like a trillion," I replied. "What's the matter? Can't you sleep?"

He looked at me strangely. "I rarely have difficulty sleeping," he said. "I've slept three hours. It's enough."

I stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"It's a good thing you weren't under my command when you were in the service,"

Breck said dryly. "I would have skinned you alive for falling asleep on guard duty."

"But I never fell asleep!" I protested. "I've been awake all the time, just sitting here and thinking ..."

"And you were not aware that over three hours had passed?" said Breck.

I shook my head. "What is this, a joke? I relieved you no more than ten or fifteen minutes ago! I've been awake all the time!"

"And you haven't noticed anything unusual? You're telling me that absolutely nothing's changed since you relieved me?" Breck said.

I shook my head, feeling utterly confused. "No, of course not. Why? What are you-"

"You did not see Tyla leave?" he said softly.

"What?"

I scrambled to my feet so fast I almost smashed my head on the low ceiling at the entrance to the cave. I glanced back into the cave, and after a few seconds, my eyes became accustomed to the change in light and I saw Higgins curled up on the ground, asleep. Alone. There was no sign of Tyla.

I stared at Breck, utterly bewildered. "I know I didn't fall asleep," I said. "I couldn't have! There has to be another exit from the cave."

"There isn't," Breck said curtly.

"But she couldn't have gotten past me without my seeing her!"

"No, not if you were awake," said Breck.

"What's going on?" said Higgins, getting up and stretching.

"Your wife seems to have wandered off again," said Breck. "She has a disconcerting habit of coming and going as she pleases."

"Maybe that's because she's free to come and go as she pleases," Higgins said, a slight edge to his voice. "Or were you under the impression that she had to ask your permission?"

"Now look here, Higgins-" Breck began, but Higgins didn't let him finish.

"No, you look here, Breck. I've had about enough of your paranoid insinuations!

If it wasn't for Tyla, you wouldn't even be here now. You would've died out there on the desert. And if Tyla was a shapechanger, she's had more than ample opportunity to kill us all. If anyone's got reason to be distrustful, believe me, friend, it isn't you. I've lived with Tyla and her tribe. I don't know you from Adam. And what's more . . ." He stopped himself, his gaze focusing behind us, and we turned quickly to see Tyla standing there and watching us.

She had come up on us without a sound and she stood at the entrance to the cave, an animal carcass slung over her shoulders. There was blood on her mouth. She

dumped her kill onto the ground at the cave entrance, then turned and walked away.

Higgins brushed past us, handing Breck his knife. "You carve," he said. "I'll get some wood."

I had no idea what it was we ate and I was so hungry, I didn't even care.

Higgins cooked the beast over a fire made from the scrub brush that grew in scraggly clumps among the rocks. The wood gave the meat a pungent, extremely smoky flavor. I felt like some Neanderthal as I sat near the entrance to the cave and tore into a roast haunch, the juices dribbling over my lips onto my chin, the grease making my fingers sticky. I never was much of a meat eater and, given a choice, I'd take seafood or veggies anytime. For all I knew, the roast mystery meat would either kill us or give me incapacitating stomach cramps, but at that moment, if Higgins had told me it was some sort of giant slug, I would have eaten the damn thing just the same. I wondered if the majority of my home audience was experiencing disgust at my gustatory sensations or a vicarious thrill at the way I tore into my meat as if I were some primal savage.

In any case, I managed to survive the dinner. Or breakfast, or whatever meal it was. My time sense was thoroughly screwed up. Especially since I had somehow lost about three hours. I didn't understand that. And I sure as hell didn't like it. Breck did not pursue the issue. Perhaps, since no harm seemed to have come of it, he had decided to forget about it. I was, after all, only an ordinary human. Higgins, who was more accustomed to the terrain than I was, had slept like a dead man our trek. Maybe Breck thought he was being too hard on me. But I could not forget about it. It preyed on my mind as we resumed our journey in the afternoon.

According to Breck, I had slept about four hours. During that time, I had been dream-briefed by Mondago. Then I awoke, relieved Breck, sat down with my back against the rocks at the cave entrance, and ten or fifteen minutes later, Breck was telling me that I had fallen asleep on watch and about three hours had gone by.

I didn't believe it.

Not that I thought Breck was lying to me. I knew he wouldn't do that and besides, when I looked at the position of the sun, it was clear that much more than ten or fifteen minutes had gone by. No, what I did not believe was that I fell asleep. True, I was exhausted, but I'd gotten by on far less sleep before without nodding off like that. It was possible that I might have dozed off without realizing it, but when Breck spoke to me, there had been no sensation of waking up, that startled feeling when someone wakes you suddenly after you've nodded off. I had, in fact, never nodded off. I was convinced of it. From the moment I relieved Breck till the moment he spoke to me some three hours later, I had experienced complete continuity of thought and consciousness-and somehow it had been "compressed" so that it seemed like only ten or fifteen minutes.

No, I had not fallen asleep. Something had been done to me. The question was, by whom?

If it was Mondago, who was presumably at the controls, then it was some sort of new wrinkle that he had never tried before and I could see no purpose to it.

Breck had told me that, with time, I would become much more aware of interface and he was right. I didn't think that anyone at Game Control, not even Coles, could pull a stunt like that without my at least being aware of something being done, even if it was only after the fact-as had happened when Cass Daniels activated my natural defensive mechanisms and amplified them into an attack of

paranoia which had saved my life. Later on, when I had a chance to think about it, I could pinpoint the exact moment when it happened and I could recall the feeling. But this time, there was nothing.

It gnawed at me as we climbed higher up into the hills. If someone back at Game Control was playing with my perceptions, what purpose would it serve? Why interfere with an operative out on a mission? Unless, of course, this wasn't really happening at all and it was simply one more hallucination, with Coles pressing some new buttons so he could see what happened. I had to admit that was a possibility, but I could not afford to consider it a probability. I had to act on the information of my senses-whether it was happening objectively, in real life, or subjectively, in my mind, it had to be real for me or else I might not survive it. At least not with my sanity intact.

Breck had once told me, with characteristic black humor, that psychos could not afford to doubt the reality of their perceptions. It was an involuted pun, one that grimly underscored the thin line between a Psychodrome pro and a psychotic. The only difference between our sort of psycho and the real thing was that we were better able to handle alternate realities-at least until we crossed over that line. I could not consider that a possibility. That way, literally, lay madness.

That left one other explanation. If it wasn't Game Control, and if I wasn't going crazy, then it could only have been Tyla. We knew that shapechangers could read minds. And at least one of them-the ambimorph Coles had code named Chameleon-was learning how to use a biochip to send. Tyla could be an ambimorph. Or maybe it was Higgins.

What did we really know about him, anyway? It occurred to me that this whole

thing could be a trap. What if both Higgins and Tyla were shapechangers? What better way to divert suspicion from themselves than to have staged that confrontation in the Red Zone? The Purgatory settlements had to be infested with the creatures. And all we had to do was catch one. I felt as if I'd been given a speargun and told to bring home a fish for dinner-then dumped into the middle of a school of sharks.

I had to talk to Breck. I had to convince him that I hadn't simply fallen asleep on watch. But I had to have a chance to talk with him alone and that would be difficult with Tyla and Higgins around. Supposedly, Tyla didn't speak our language. However, we had only Higgins's word for that. And if she was a shapechanger, she wouldn't need to speak our language. She could simply read our minds. She could be reading my mind even now . . .

I stopped short, my heart pounding, my stomach suddenly in knots as paranoia washed over me in waves. It was insane. There was absolutely no defense. How could you hope to prevail over an enemy who knew what you were thinking?

"O'Toole?" said Higgins, looking at me strangely. "You all right?"

"Yeah . . . sure," I said, wondering if he could read my mind, if he was human or a creature that could assume any shape at will, leading Breck and me to some ungodly fate out in the wilds of Purgatory.

"You sure?" he said. "You look a little pale. You want to rest?"

"No. Let's go on."

Breck was watching me, the expression on his face unreadable. Did he know what I was thinking? Was he thinking the same thing? Or was he using his formidable . . . mental discipline to mask his thoughts in a way that I could not?

As I hurried to catch up with the others, I wondered what my audience at home was thinking. Their interface with me wasn't telepathic, after all, but

telepathic, which meant that they could share perceptions with me and a great many of my feelings, too. As I had learned, some psychos "projected" far more strongly than did others and I was one of them. So even though my home audience did not know what I was thinking, they could undoubtedly infer a lot about my thoughts from the emotions that I projected through the interface. And in that sense, I wondered if I was not a two-edged sword for Coles, on one hand acting as his eyes and ears-the ultimate intelligence agent, a sort of remote, ambulatory sensor bank through which he could pick up information-and on the other, an unpredictable human link between a home audience that did not suspect how it was being manipulated and a secret agency that was hiding in plain sight, playing a deadly game within a game that was far more ominous than anybody realized.

The day grew late and the sun began to sink behind the hills, staining the sky incarnadine and violet. We made camp in a little valley created by a ridge, a rocky outcropping that rose up several hundred feet, curled around in a semicircular shape and leveled off gradually at either end. It was a spot protected from the mountain winds, which made our situation somewhat more comfortable. We stacked rocks to create improvised bunkers that were open on the top and we put our bags down inside these makeshift shelters, on top of beds made of piled scrub-tree branches. It wasn't until Higgins started to make a fire that I noticed Tyla had gone off again. She reappeared by the time Higgins had the fire going, threw down the freshly killed carcass of a creature that looked like a cross between a small antelope and a hairy mountain goat, and imperiously departed once again somewhere off into the darkness, where she wouldn't have to witness the distasteful spectacle of males eating, and ruining

perfectly good flesh by roasting it. I was beginning to feel seriously inadequate.

"You want me to take the first watch?" Higgins said after we had eaten. "Or wouldn't you feel comfortable unless one of you was awake and watching me?"

I glanced at him sharply. He met my gaze with a wry smile.

"I don't have to be a mind reader to know what you're thinking," he said. "In your place, I'd be thinking the same thing. Is he or isn't he?"

"And what would you conclude?" said Breck, leaning back against a rock and lighting up a bang stick with a glowing twig from the campfire.

"I'd think that if I'm an ambimorph, then I probably wanted you alive, since I've had ample opportunity to kill you." His eyes glinted with amusement. "It wouldn't necessarily convince me that I wasn't an ambimorph, but it might at least keep me from losing any sleep over it."

Breck grinned. "There's a certain fatalistic logic to that," he said. "But to play the devil's advocate, what keeps you from losing sleep over the fact that O'Toole and I might not be what we seem?"

"The same reason," Higgins said, with a shrug. "If you wanted me dead, you'd hardly have needed to go to so much trouble. And if you were shapechangers who had successfully assumed the identities of a couple of government agents, I can't think what in hell you'd need me for."

"Good point," said Breck, nodding.

"Paranoia's a lot like a disease, isn't it?" said Higgins thoughtfully. "It's catching."

"It can be," Breck replied, inhaling deeply on his bang stick. "However, your wife seems to be immune to it."

"Her people don't worry about things the way we do," Higgins said. "Not so I've

noticed, anyway. Their lives seem to have more immediacy than ours. They simply take things as they come."

"Such as these sudden manifestations of their gods?" said Breck.

Higgins was silent for a moment as he stared into the embers of the fire. "I'm not really sure what they think about that. Outside of what Tyla's told me, I haven't been able to get much of a reading on that situation."

"What do you mean?" I said, frowning. "I'd think you, of all people, would be in the best position to know how they felt about that."

Higgins shook his head and added some wood to the fire. "You're assuming they're as open with their feelings and opinions as we tend to be. They're not. In some ways, they're a lot more direct than we are, but in other ways, they're a great deal more private." He glanced at Breck. "Questions we might consider too personal, such as her questions about how you lost your arm, are perfectly acceptable among them. But questions that ask for value judgments, that's a different story. You won't get very far."

"You mean they don't think in abstract terms?" I said.

"No, I didn't say that," said Higgins. "I meant that abstract thoughts are highly personal to them. Different people-and different cultures-have different thresholds of privacy. Tyla's people are simply private about different things."

"So what are you saying, that Nomads keep their opinions to themselves?" I said.

"I guess you could put it that way," said Higgins, with a smile. "You could say that they call them as they see them, but they take great pains not to be judgmental. There's a very formal sort of courtliness about them, which admittedly sounds strange when you're talking about primitive hunter-gatherers, but I can't describe it any other way."

"I wonder what they think of us?" said Breck.

"They don't understand us," Higgins said sadly. "We just don't think the same."

He sighed. "They don't realize what's going to happen to them." He suddenly changed the subject. "Well, so what's the deal? Do you want me to take a watch or should I just get a good night's sleep while you two soldiers take turns standing guard over me?"

"Take the first watch," Breck said. "I'll stand the second."

I glanced at him, but I didn't say anything. I just stayed awake until Higgins woke Breck to relieve him. I waited until Higgins had crawled back into his stacked rock shelter, then I quietly crawled out and joined Breck at the campfire.

"We need to talk," I said softly.

"You think I made a mistake, trusting him to stand watch?" said Breck.

"It's not like you," I said.

"No, it isn't, is it?" he said. And then he grinned. "I was awake all the time.

Actually, I rather like him, but I still don't trust him."

"Well, that wasn't what I wanted to talk to you about anyway."

"I know. You were going to insist that you hadn't fallen asleep last night, that either Tyla or Higgins had somehow hypnotized you or something to that effect.

Yes, I know. And I believe you."

I stared at him in the firelight. "Then why did you-"

"Discipline, O'Toole, discipline. I wanted to think that you had fallen asleep, in the event that anyone was eavesdropping, in a manner of speaking. Notice that Tyla still has not returned. Higgins doesn't seem to find that unusual. Perhaps she's out stalking or baying at the moon, but whatever she's doing, I feel somewhat safer with my thoughts when she is not around."

"Are you saying she's a telepath?" I said. "She's one of them, an ambimorph?"

"It's possible," said Breck, "but somehow I don't think so. Earlier, I felt a sort of ... tug. Very hesitant and crude, but definitely probing. Even Coles is more subtle than that. And if it was an ambimorph, you can rest assured I wouldn't have felt anything at all. No, I'm inclined to accept Tyla at face value. However, there is no question that she's telepathic to some degree. Which raises some interesting questions. Is this something all the Nomads share or is she an anomaly? And why didn't Higgins tell us about it? Or does he even know?"

"I don't like the way she keeps wandering off," I said.

"I wouldn't complain about it too much," Breck said. "She's kept us fed."

"And that's another thing," I said.

Breck glanced at me and raised his eyebrows. "You'd prefer going hungry?"

I grimaced. "That's not it. It's just the way she does it. Shows up with some dead animal and throws it down on the ground before us like we're a bunch of dogs or something. Here, boys, have some meat. Here's some bones for you."

Breck-repressed a smile. "I see," he said, with mock solemnity. "You'd rather she prepared it properly, skinned it and cut it up into nice steaks and chops, asked you how you liked it done, and then served it to you on a plate with some potatoes on the side, so you could wolf it down, belch, and say, 'What's for dessert, dear?' "

"Christ, is that what I'm doing?" I said. "My male ego's being threatened?"

"Perhaps just little, eh?" said Breck.

"Perhaps," I said sourly.

"O'Toole, sometimes I have a hard time understanding you," said Breck. "That rather lethal young woman back in Tokyo is about as subservient as a shark and

she could break you in half without even working up a sweat. We've both seen her kill with her bare hands, yet she doesn't threaten you and Tyla does?"

"Kami never threw my food down on the floor," I said.

Breck shook his head in exasperation. "Go to sleep, O'Toole. I have more important things to think about than your tender sensibilities. Get some rest. I'll wake you in about four hours."

I didn't remember falling asleep. In fact, I wasn't even sure I had fallen asleep. I remembered Breck waking me to take my turn on watch. I remembered adding some wood to the fire and settling back against a rock to chew on some of that roast hairball or whatever it was Tyla had brought us for our supper, and I remember sitting there and sort of drifting, resting and feeling unaccountably relaxed, my attention occupied with the utter impossibility of our situation and other cheery thoughts like that and then suddenly it was starting to get light and it couldn't possibly have been starting to get light because I knew damn well that dawn wouldn't come for about another three hours. Yet the sky was starting to get smoky gray and streaked with the silver aura of predawn light and the morning mist was thick upon the ground. I told myself that I couldn't have fallen asleep, I simply couldn't have, and I stared dumbfounded at the cold ashes of the fire, which had been burning brightly only moments ago-or what seemed like only moments ago- and then I saw them standing there like specters in the mist, motionless, like dead warriors descended from Valhalla.

I didn't move. I sat there, staring at them, ethereal barbarians wreathed in the chilly morning mist. Long, thick, silver-streaked black hair falling to just above their waists, framing bronze-colored faces with gaunt, chiseled features and prominent jaws; curved vampirelike fangs protruding slightly over their lower lips; eyes of gold that seemed to glow as if illuminated from behind by

some hellish fire in the brain.

They were dressed in furs and skins, armed with long-shafted, stone-tipped spears and crude stone axes. I recalled what Higgins said about the matriarchal structure of the Nomad tribes.

Something about how once we'd seen a Nomad male, we'd never again think of them as being subservient. I saw them, and I understood.

I had no idea how long they had been standing there. For that matter, I had no idea how long I had been sitting there. I had once again experienced that peculiar time-compression, as if I'd been somehow frozen in a limbo while the rest of time went on without me. For a moment, no, longer than a moment, I wasn't sure if I was awake or if it was a dream. It was a moment stuck in time.

I sat there, motionless, staring at them with wonder as they stood silently in the gently undulating mist, watching me. The scene must have resembled a Biblical engraving by Doré, a sleeping prophet visited by angels.

"Breck . . ." I said, not very loudly, and then I cleared my throat and said his name again, a little louder, though I was suddenly afraid to raise my voice.

"Breck!"

I heard a sound behind me and I turned to see Breck sitting up behind his stacked rock shelter, his plasma pistol in his hand, and then Higgins was beside him, saying, "Don't!"

Tyla walked out past me toward her tribesmen and stopped before them. I had no idea when she had returned. She came up to the male who stood closest to me—there were about fifteen of them in all—and she flowed into his arms, pressing up against him, her hands running up and down his flanks, and for a moment, I thought that they were kissing, but they weren't. They were sniffing.

Not like animals investigating one another with short, quick inhalations, but more like oenophiles languorously smelling the bouquet of an exquisite vintage wine. He closed his eyes as she rubbed her cheek against his, and with his lips slightly parted, his sharp fangs gleaming, he gently inhaled her natural, musky scent while she buried her face in his long mane. It was the most erotically sensual display I'd ever seen and I simply had to look away.

"Her senior husband," Higgins said, beside me. "His name is Garr. I'll greet him first, but don't do what I do. The proper greeting between unrelated males is right hand held up, palm out, as if you were taking an oath. Wait for him to touch your fingertips, then maintain contact until he takes his hand away. It's important that you look directly into his eyes, nowhere else. If this were his camp, you would go to him, but since it's our camp, wait till he approaches you."

I waited until Tyla brought Garr over to where we stood. The others all remained standing where they were. None of them had moved so much as a muscle. They looked like statues. Higgins stepped forward and placed his hand flat against Garr's chest, over his heart. Garr performed the same gesture and they stood there for a moment, hands on each other's chests, and then Tyla brought Garr to stand in front of me. She glanced quickly at Higgins and he nodded-I guess to let her know that I'd been instructed properly-and I held up my right hand, as if I were about to swear to tell the truth and nothing but, so help me God.

Garr raised his own right hand and gently touched fingertips with me. The directness of that golden gaze was disconcerting, but I managed to maintain eye contact. I'd known some champion deep gazers in my time, such as Hakim Saqqara, who could literally make shivers run up and down your spine with just one look, and my friend Kami, who could lock eyes with you and stare right down to the

bottom of your soul. If it hadn't been for that kind of practice in the past, I don't think I'd have been able to meet Garr's golden gaze without looking away. But it was Garr whose concentration wavered when he went to touch fingertips with Breck.

Breck had taken off his glove and he kept his face perfectly expressionless as he held up his hand for Garr to touch. It was interesting to watch. Apparently, Tyla hadn't briefed her senior husband, as if she wanted to see how he'd react. He was a trooper. I had no idea how, but he was able to tell at once that Breck was somehow different from Higgins and me. Perhaps there was a subtle difference in our scent or something, but he knew somehow that Breck was a different breed. Or hybrid, to be more precise. I could see the flicker of uncertainty as, for a split second, he hesitated, then he stretched out his hand . . . and absolutely froze when he realized that Breck's hand wasn't flesh and blood.

For a moment, he was thoroughly at sea. He had no idea what to do. He wasn't human, but the expression on his face was unmistakably one of complete dismay. Breck remained utterly motionless, his face deadpan. I could see that Garr was dying to ask Tyla what the hell was going on, but it seemed that form prevented it. It was fascinating. Tyla had no compunctions whatsoever about asking Breck what the deal with his hand was and Higgins had warned us that the Nomads were direct, but here, quite clearly, something else was happening. I held my breath. Then Garr slowly touched Breck's nysteel fingers, very gently, and the expression on his face was one of profound sorrow. Then he took his hand away. I heard Higgins exhale heavily beside me. "Fool," he whispered savagely. "I'm a complete and utter fool! Would you believe I forgot all about his hand?" "Is everything all right?" I said, under my breath.

"I honestly don't know," said Higgins. "Tyla threw Garr a curve by not telling him about it. Did you see how she was watching him? She did it on purpose."

"Why?"

Garr spoke before Higgins could reply. His voice was startlingly deep and sonorous, his words were addressed to Breck, though of course neither Breck nor I could understand them. There was very little known about the Nomads of Purgatory and there were no language programs that Coles could have fed us.

Higgins translated. "He humbly apologizes for hesitating in his greeting," he told Breck. "He says that he perceived at once you were a warrior, but that your ... uh ... your 'carved hand' is an, uh, artifact he had never before seen and he was startled. He apologizes again for his rudeness and expresses his deepest sorrow at your . . . your having been rendered ... uh ... hell, Breck, he doesn't understand . . ."

"What?" said Breck.

"At your having been rendered crippled and useless," Higgins finished awkwardly. Breck was about to reply, but Tyla spoke first. Her tone was sharp, but it did not seem to be a rebuke. More like a correction. Garr glanced from her to Breck, a slight frown on his features.

He said something and Higgins translated.

"He's speaking to Tyla," Higgins said. "He said, but humans have no claws. How can this one, who has not even a hand, possess claws sharper than mine?"

Tyla said one word to Breck.

"Show him," Higgins translated.

Breck wordlessly held up his hand and rapidly snicked out his blades, one after the other. Garr's eyes grew wide and he sucked in his breath sharply. He stared at Breck with wonder, reached out for his hand, then hesitated, speaking to

Breck once again.

"Is it permitted?" Higgins translated.

"Tell him he's welcome, but to be careful," Breck said. "The blades are razor-sharp."

Higgins translated to Garr and slowly, almost reverently, Garr took Breck's artificial hand in both of his, feeling it, lightly touching the incredibly strong nysteel blades. As he examined it, the others all approached, staring with equal fascination. Tyla spoke to them.

"Oh, hell," said Higgins.

"What is it?" Breck said.

"She's telling them the story of how you lost your arm. She's passing on your rather facetious comment about how you used it as a weapon and beat to death the man who took it from you. Only she's embellishing somewhat on the details, I'm afraid."

Breck grinned.

"She's also telling them that you have the true soul of a warrior. That when you lost your arm, you had it replaced with one that was a weapon, so that you could continue to be useful to the tribe. She says that is the true test of a warrior, one who continues to fight for the good of the tribe until there is nothing left of him at all."

"I've heard that somewhere before," said Breck.

"I'm sure you have," I replied wryly. "Probably from Coles."

EIGHT

It was probably a good thing that Purgatory was going to be placed under quarantine, because otherwise I shudder to think what would have happened to the Nomads. Humanity would have descended upon them with a vengeance. Already, we had started dumping our garbage on their world; we'd brought in some of our dirtiest industries, our most toxic wastes, and given time, we would have started exporting our most undesirable product-people.

True, there were already people on Purgatory, but they were there only for the money and they didn't really give a damn about the natives. That made them far less dangerous than the ones who would have really cared about the Nomads. The lure would have been irresistible. Here were savages to civilize, primitives to save. We have always been real big on saving. We'd been saving each other for centuries and considering how seriously we'd been at it, you'd think we'd have gotten the whole job done by now. But we hadn't, partly because the various savers could never get their act together collectively- which was, you'll pardon the expression, a blessing-and partly because some of us didn't feel like being saved. But there were very few of us who seemed at peace simply being the way we were. The sad fact was that most of us required answers to some of life's more complicated questions and it was upsetting to hear that in a complex world, there were no simple answers. Simple answers were infinitely more attractive. You could get more people to listen to a simple answer, because a complex one confused them and their attention span was ludicrously short at best. So keep it simple, set your hook and reel 'em in.

Clearly, the Nomads needed saving. They needed the benefits of our civilizing influence and our spiritual guidance. Their lives were elegantly in harmony with their surroundings. Something was obviously wrong here. What they needed was modern clothing, box warren apartments, mass transit, fast food, and biochips.

In time, we would have given it all to them and, in the process, taken away their culture and their land. The am-bimorphs were probably the best thing that ever happened to them.

This was seditious thinking for a man in my position, a psychic cog in the machine of the multinational overmind, but then I was a reluctant cog at best and the fact that I was still able to think seditious thoughts was one of the few things that kept me sane. But, unless you had all the sensitivity of a real-estate developer, it was hard not to think such thoughts when confronted with the lifeway of the Nomads.

Their camp was in a high valley ringed by mountains and as we descended the trail that led down to the verdant valley floor, winding along a swiftly flowing river fed by a roaring cataract, it felt as if we were stepping back in time to a period in Earth's prehistory. Their "houses"-low, dome-shaped shelters made of hides and scrub thatch-brought to mind some old Celtic village from the Bronze Age. The dwellings were spaced fairly wide apart, in a rough circle around a larger central structure that was probably used for tribal meetings. A crude sort of earthworks had been thrown up around the camp, which seemed to indicate some competition among the tribes, or perhaps it was only there to keep the beasties out. We went in through the main gate and immediately became the center of attention as the entire tribe turned out to look us over.

All the clichéd expressions sprang to mind as I returned their scrutiny-noble savages, fierce pride, primitive grandeur, and all that-but the truth was that none of those expressions really did the Nomads justice. Imagine a cross between Crazy Horse and Lucifer. The result would be something both magnificent and frightening. The result would be a Purgatory Nomad.

As Higgins had already explained, Nomad was our term for them. They thought of themselves in terms of their tribal identities. Tyla's tribe was Dyla-ken.

Higgins explained that this translated roughly as "Dyla's people." They took the name from their tribal matriarch, Tyla's grandmother, and her mother before her and so forth. If Dyla were to die, then Tyla's mother, Noli, was the next in line and at a sort of ceremony of investiture, she would add to her birth name the name of the matriarch, though she would be addressed only as Dyla.

Eventually, Tyla would also take on the name, using it as a prefix to her own.

In this manner, the name had become a sort of title.

However, names among the Nomads played a more colorful and descriptive role than among humans and apparently things could get a little complicated. Birth names were usually short and simple, chosen from among family names, but from there, it was anything goes. The next set of names a Nomad was saddled with depended on some significant or possibly even an amusing incident in his or her young life.

Garr, for example, was actually Kol-Ap-Garr-Hoc-Altani, which Higgins translated as "Kol, Small Killer of Large Stones." There was, of course, a story that went along with this, as there was a story that went with every Nomad name.

It seemed that when he was a child, Garr-then known only by his birth name, Kol-had been playing hunter with some other children and had attacked a fairly good-sized boulder, pretending that it was some local equivalent of a woolly mammoth or something. He had struck it a strong two-handed blow with a stone ax belonging to one of his fathers and the shock traveling up his arms had put him on his ass and made his head spin. However, he must have struck the boulder on the exact spot of a flaw, because the damn thing cracked and split apart, enhancing his reputation no end among his playmates. Hence,

Kol-Ap-Garr-Hoc-Altani, "Kol, Small Killer of Large Stones," which he had

informally shortened to Garr, which meant simply "Killer"-a name with a considerably more ominous interpretation, but given his size, apparently no one felt inclined to nitpick.

I learned all this, and a few other pertinent bits of information, while we waited in the large central structure for the tribal meeting to formally convene. Everyone, or most everyone, it seemed, was already there and we were now waiting on the matriarch, who was being fashionably late. I half expected to hear a skirling of wood flutes or a roll of hide-covered drums announcing her arrival, which I guessed would be in some sort of a sedan chair. I was surprised instead when a Nomad female who didn't appear much older than Tyla walked in without ceremony and sat down cross-legged on the ground, about fifteen feet away from the fire pit dug in the center. At once, the other members of the tribe gathered on either side of her, forming a circle around the fire pit which we were meant to join. We sat down and the fire was lit. I stared across the flames at Dyla, the matriarch of Tyla's tribe.

She was dressed simply, in the same short animal hide shift worn by the other females, and her hair was more silver than dark. For a grandmother, she wore her years extremely well. But then, what was old for a Nomad? I had no idea. I'd have to remember to ask Higgins. At the moment, instinct told me to keep my mouth shut, because everyone else was being quiet and you could cut the silence with a knife.

Ever sit in the same room with about a hundred people and have absolutely no one make a sound? Well, perhaps in church, but even in church people tend to cough and shift around and rustle hymn books and there's always at least one anarchist who breaks wind loudly enough to shake the rafters. This was serious silence.

Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Then Dyla started speaking.

Her voice wasn't very loud, but it was firm and full of confident authority. She exchanged a few words of greeting with her granddaughter, then she spoke briefly to Higgins, who replied in her own language. I didn't know what was said, but she seemed to regard him with the patient approval of a teacher toward a pupil who was making progress. Then she turned to look at us, and even from a distance of about twenty feet, that golden stare was difficult to deal with. I felt as if fuzzy caterpillars were crawling around inside the back of my head, tickling the gray matter as they slithered across my mind.

I didn't know if I was really feeling that or if I was just imagining I felt that. Was the feeling self-induced by an attack of paranoia or was it something she was doing to me? Or was it something that evil bastard, Mondago, was doing to me back at Game Control? I couldn't tell and that was scaring me. These little anxiety attacks were coming more and more frequently lately and the fact that I'd managed to keep it all together so far wasn't all that reassuring.

I knew only too well that the breakdown rate among psychos was phenomenally high. My morbid curiosity had led me to investigate a number of those cases. In each of them anxiety attacks and a growing sense of paranoia had increased exponentially until the mind went boom . . . and it seemed no one was really certain what happened after that, where those poor bastards disappeared to or what was done with them.

In fact, the idea of the mind "going boom" raised a very nasty question-could that happen literally? Could Coles have slipped a microscopic bomb into my brain that would explode upon reception of a certain coded tachyon signal? Or would he ever need to do that? Could he get into my driver's seat and make me shoot myself or dive headlong off a cliff or beat my head against the ground until it

turned to jelly?

I suddenly realized that I had drifted off into another paranoid fantasy, a sort of mini-fugue, a real doozy this time. I blinked and shook my head to clear it.

Dyla was still staring at me without expression. Jesus, how long had I been sitting there, glassy-eyed and slack-jawed, thinking those nightmarish thoughts?

I shot a sidelong glance at Breck and saw that he was staring straight ahead, sitting perfectly still, completely motionless except for a slight tic at the corner of his mouth. I opened my mouth to say his name, but I couldn't seem to do much more than part my lips slightly and make very faint croaking sounds.

I felt sweat trickling down my back. What the hell was happening here? A horrifying idea occurred to me, a terrible suspicion that Dyla was not a Nomad at all, but an ambimorph, that they were all ambimorphs, that Higgins had led us into a trap, that he was one of them, and in a moment they were going to start turning into giant snakes and slithering toward us, their jaws unhinged, fangs gleaming, dripping poison ...

And suddenly the fear was gone-Bam-'- just like that, vanished in an instant, and I was staring into the flames of the crackling fire in the pit, seeing forms moving in the background through a veil of heat shimmers. My time sense was confused again. My vision was a little blurry. It seemed very, very warm. The flames were dancing and the heat shimmers above them were dancing and the figures beyond them were dancing and there were strange sounds filling the air-the ethereal, high-pitched, whistling whine of bone flutes, like the cries of sea gulls on the wind. For a moment, I thought I heard Mondago calling me, but it was only a distant echo in my mind that dissipated in that haunting birdlike music.

A young Nomad female stood before me, looking down at me, legs spread apart, hips rolling gently, arms hanging straight down at her sides, fingers spread rigidly apart. Her head was inclined toward me and her jet-black hair hung long and loose down to her waist, only partially covering her naked breasts. She was wearing nothing except a sort of brief animal-hide loincloth and her golden skin gleamed with a sheen of perspiration. Her lips were slightly parted and I could see the tips of her two large pointed canine teeth. Her eyes were like yellow gold in firelight.

Several other couples were dancing slowly around the fire, moving in a sort of surreal minuet to the intertwining, whistling melodies of the bone flutes, a cacophony of sounds like a bird chorus coming from a distance, as if heard from across a lake. The couples didn't touch. They stood close to one another, undulating gently, swaying like trees bending in the wind, almost touching, and then rolling back, and moving in and circling slightly, then almost touching once again . . .

The Nomad girl reached out and pulled me to my feet. I stood and started imitating her movements, a little awkwardly at first, then falling into the rhythm of the bone flutes, their rising and falling whistles having a sort of ebb and flow, like surf crashing on a distant shore. Her gaze was locked with mine and I couldn't look away. Nor did I want to. The smoke from the fire filled the interior of the lodge, making my eyes smart. The temperature kept rising. In moments, it seemed, I was soaked with sweat. The wood they were burning had some sort of pungent, musky scent-or was that her scent?-that somehow made me think of the frankincense burned by the Russian Orthodox archbishops of my ancestors during their somber, melancholy services. I almost seemed to hear them chanting in their ancient Church Slavonic, the basso profundo voices of the deacons

rising up from deep in my subconscious, memories rising not from me, but through me, from all those who had gone before me, from the long-suffering peasants on my mother's side to the pagan Celts on my father's. The Byzantine intonations of the bishops seemed to segue into the stentorian, guttural chanting of white-robed Druid priests, marching slowly in torchlit procession to an altar set in the center of a circle of high stones. A pale-limbed girl with hair as red as fire was held down on the slab, her green eyes wide with terror as the crude stone knife was raised-

-and her sharp claws raked across my chest, leaving thin red trails that wept blood. I was naked, on my back, with the Nomad girl straddling me, her long, coarse hair, like a horse's mane, whipping me as she rolled her head with each savage thrust of her hips. Her hands gripped my shoulders and I felt her claws breaking my skin, digging deep, and I screamed, though not only with pain, a scream that seemed to catch somewhere in my throat and sound only in my mind, echoing inside my head and bouncing off a cacophony of images from a past that was completely alien to me, and yet, at the same time, hauntingly familiar.

"Good morning," Breck said. "How's the newlywed?"

I opened my eyes and saw him sitting cross-legged beside the pile of furs I lay on, a mocking smile on his face.

"What?" I croaked, my voice sounding hideous.

I tried to push myself up, but I collapsed almost immediately. My entire body was sore. I felt as if I'd run a marathon and then been forced to turn around and do it all again because I hadn't done it fast enough. I felt as if I'd gone eight rounds with the heavyweight champion of the world with my hands tied behind my back. I felt as if I'd been-

Jesus! I sat bolt upright and the entire room started spinning. Breck caught me and steadied me with his arm around my shoulders.

"Easy there, son," he said. "You'd best take things a little slowly for a while."

I looked down at myself and immediately squeezed my eyes shut. I was stark naked and my chest and thighs were covered with claw marks. My hips were bruised and there were thin trails of dried blood caked on my stomach. I looked as if I'd been mauled by a leopard. Actually, not exactly mauled, but ...

"Oh, God," I groaned. "Don't tell me . . ."

"One of these days, O'Toole, you'll have to explain to me about this attraction you seem to have for savage, predatory females." Breck pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Perhaps you appeal to their maternal instincts."

"What the hell happened?" I managed to croak.

"You mean you really don't remember?"

"Goddammit, Breck, this isn't funny!" I looked around at the inside of the tiny lodge. "Where the hell are we?"

"Your honeymoon suite, it seems," said Breck. "Tyla's family was gracious enough to loan it to you, seeing as how you married her little sister when you did the mating dance with her last night."

I groaned again and fell back on the furs, pulling them up over me. "Jesus. I can't believe it. Where were you while all this was happening? Why the hell didn't you stop me?"

Breck shrugged. "Well, after all, you are over twenty-one and I didn't really think it was my place to interfere."

"So help me, Breck, if I had enough energy to make a fist, I'd punch you in the mouth," I said weakly.

"All right, I'm sorry," Breck said, with a smile. "But you must admit that this situation is not without its comic aspect."

"Notice I'm not laughing."

"Duly noted," Breck said. "In fact, I couldn't have stopped what happened any more than you could. I've had a rather busy night myself, if not quite as active." He smirked, then caught himself. "Sorry. Actually your new wife is extremely concerned about you. Tali is young and apparently very energetic. She was afraid she might have killed you. She's with Tyla and Higgins at the moment, being instructed in the proper care and treatment of her fragile human spouse."

"You really find this amusing, don't you, you miserable bastard?" I said.

"Where're my clothes?"

Wordlessly, he held up what was left of my shirt. It was in tatters. His mouth started to twitch and he struggled to keep it contained, but it was too much for him and he lost it, dissolving into laughter. I wanted to kill him.

A moment later, he got himself back under control. "I'm sorry, O'Toole," he said, shaking his head. "I truly am. It's just that-" and he started to laugh once more, but this time he managed to fight it down. He looked away, cleared his throat, took several deep breaths, and turned back to me again. "We really do have much to talk about," he said.

"Damn you," I said. "You should have done something! I simply can't believe it! I remember some of what happened, but it's . . . it's as if I was drugged or something. Breck, I can't be married! You've got to tell Higgins, he's got to explain it to ... what's her name again?"

"You cad," said Breck.

"Dammit, Breck-"

"Her name is Tali," he said. "And you can explain things to her yourself. She can speak English, after a fashion."

"She ... she what?"

"Here," said Breck, tossing me some hides. "Put these on while I go get you some breakfast. Though she finds the idea quite appalling, Tali has actually agreed to burn some meat for you. Even Higgins is impressed. In this culture, that's akin to a princess agreeing to debase herself before the coachman. She must really like you. There must be more to you than meets the eye."

I glared at him as he went out to get me something to eat and then I started dressing in the hides he'd left me. When I was done, I looked absurd, as if I were on my way to a masquerade party. I was in fairly good shape, but in the outsize hides, I looked like some sort of undernourished caveman. Or perhaps a cyberpunk in drag. A few moments later, Breck came back with some food, which he had promised we would eat out of sight of the Nomads. Higgins, it seemed, ever the complete xenobiologist, had learned to eat his meat raw with the other males.

"I've heard from Mondago," Breck said, as he bit into his roast beast. "He's been absolutely frantic and Coles is in a state, as well. It seems they couldn't get in touch with us. Mondago kept trying repeatedly, but he could not establish contact."

"I seem to remember Mondago calling to me last night," I said, "during the tribal meeting or ceremony or whatever it was--"

"Did it sound as if he were calling from a great distance, his voice sort of muffled?"

"More like a distant echo," I said. "Then it wasn't just my imagination?"

Breck shook his head. "No, I heard it, too. And after a while, it sort of faded

away. They blocked him out, you see."

I frowned. "What do you mean, they blocked him out?" And then it sank in suddenly and my jaw dropped as I stared at Breck with disbelief. "They blocked him out?"

Breck nodded. "I don't really understand it, but it seems that what the Nomads did was to telepathically 'insulate' our minds, effectively jamming the tachyon broadcast and reception."

"But . . . but how?" I said, astonished.

"That" said Breck, "is what our friend Coles would give his right arm to know."

"Did Higgins know about this?"

"How would he know? The Nomads have never been confronted with biochips before.

He knew about their being telepathic, though." Breck grimaced. "It seems he neglected to inform us of that little detail."

I shook my head. "I don't understand."

"It's simple enough," said Breck. "He's on their side. Not against us, specifically, but against what's being done on Purgatory. And he realized that we could help him."

"So this whole thing about ambimorphs playing gods among the Nomads was a setup?"

Breck shook his head. "No, he claims that's real enough and Dyla backs him up. I spent most of last night talking with them. It was absolutely fascinating, I wish you could have been there, but you were . . . otherwise engaged."

"Don't start," I said, pointing at him.

He grinned. "Have some meat, you need to keep your strength up."

"Very funny. I'm still waiting for you to explain what this is all about. What

does Higgins think we can do for him? Where do the ambimorphs fit in? And why the hell was it necessary for me to marry ..."

"Tali," Breck prompted.

"Yeah," I said, feeling my face flush. "It couldn't have just been my boyish charm. Compared to the males around here, I'm downright anemic. So why?"

"At the risk of wounding your tender ego," Breck said, "it was not love at first sight. It has to do with their customs and traditions, which require sexual bonding in order to ... well, it's rather complicated. I'll explain it to you later. For the moment, let's simply say that the reasons for your marriage were primarily political, although Tali does seem to have taken to you. But you need not concern yourself. It's a serious matter, to be sure, but it isn't quite the same as marriage in our society, as Higgins has already pointed out. In fact, Tali has something like fifteen husbands already."

"Fifteen?"

"I understand that's a conservative number for a female in her position. She's being groomed to take her place in the matriarchy, along with Tyla," Breck explained. "And to accept responsibilities far greater than any matriarch has ever had to undertake before. Which is why she's been learning English telepathically from Higgins. Sort of on the principle of know your enemy."

"Meaning us," I said.

"Meaning us. It seems we never learn from our mistakes. We underestimated the creatures we found on Draconis 9 and now we've done the same thing with the Nomads. We wrote them off as primitive nomadic tribes, semisentient savages at best, of no great interest to us because we had nothing to learn from them and all they had that we wanted was their real estate."

"Instead, it turns out that they're the biggest threat to Psychodrome's

mind-control monopoly," I said. "Looks like Coles has finally met his match. He can't push their buttons. Nor can he push ours, if they don't want him to. They decided to cut him off and that was that. They simply pulled the plug."

And then it hit me. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "My God, Breck, they really did pull the plug. On themselves. They're already in the way of the greedy bastards who want to come in and rape this planet. And Higgins thought that he was helping them by bringing us here? Hell, we've just hammered the last nail into their coffin! Any reason Coles could possibly have had for helping out the Nomads disappeared the moment he found out that they could beat the biochip with just a thought. That makes them almost as great a threat as the ambimorphs."

"Perhaps it would, except for one thing," Breck said. "Well, two things, actually. The first is that the Nomads are not hostile and they're not interested in threatening Coles or anybody else. They'd really much rather we went away and left them the hell alone. However, they wouldn't have much to bargain with if it wasn't for the second thing."

"And that is?"

"They can detect ambimorphs," said Breck.

NINE

I wondered which moron had decided that the Nomads were not as intelligent as we were. Breck was right; we never learn. Whoever had contacted the tribes of Purgatory first had probably taken one look at the way they lived, at the simple animal hides they wore, at the fact that they were nomadic hunter-gatherers, not

interested in agriculture or technology, and based on that, they judged them simple savages. And the Nomads politely gave the fools back exactly what they expected, no more, no less. And no one ever suspected how sophisticated these "savages" really were.

No one except a xenobiologist named Graver Higgins, maintained on the consortium staff as an exercise in public relations-a man who was expected to do no more than collect his salary, keep his mouth shut, and look the other way while they did to Purgatory what they once tried to do to Earth. Only Higgins took his duties seriously. Unlike all the bought and paid for corporate scientists and researchers who, throughout the years, had defended everything from cigarettes to strip mining, Higgins cared about the truth. And because of that, he had discovered the truth about the Nomads.

I recalled what he had said about the Nomads being "private about different things." Their refraining from being judgmental was both an indicator of how differently they related to one another than we did and the different levels of their communication. A very formal, nonabstract sort of communication took place on the oral level. Secondary, nonoral communication required an intimate bonding, apparently more from custom and tradition than purely functional considerations. Higgins knew more about the Nomads than any other human, but without sophisticated scanning equipment such as could be found at Game Control, he could do no more than theorize about the way their brains worked.

His idea was that their minds functioned as if they were two separate organs-and for all he knew, perhaps they were. A sort of primary and secondary brain, as he put it, able to work together, but able to function separately, as well. The primary brain, to follow his analogy, was the main engine. The secondary brain acted as a sort of turbocharger, amplifying the functions of the primary brain

when necessary and giving them their telepathic and, in some rare cases, telekinetic abilities. However, not all of them were gifted equally.

The males, with only few exceptions, had little or no telepathic ability. With most males, it wasn't mind reading so much as it was intuition. The females seemed to have greater development of their secondary brains, but not all of them were equally telepathic. Tyla, for example, had not been able to sense the presence of the ambimorphs back in the Red Zone. There were far too many people there, too much "white noise," as Higgins put it, for her to pick up on the subtle difference.

"But Tali could've done it," he said. "Her powers are almost as strong as Dyla's, and Dyla says her own abilities increased with her maturity. When she was Tali's age, she says she wasn't nearly half as strong."

I glanced at Tali, sitting silently next to me, following the conversation.

There was a very intent, interested expression on her face, but then I realized that I was judging her by human standards and, for all I knew, the expression on her face might well have been one of amusement or even boredom. How was I to know?

"In-trest," Tali said in softly accented English, enunciating carefully. "I am in-trest, husband mate."

"I am interested," Higgins corrected her. "And it's just husband, Tali, not husband mate. Human females call their mates husband, at least when there's been a marriage ceremony. Unlike the tribes, humans do not always have a marriage ceremony before mating."

She looked surprised, then she glanced curiously at me. "Have you mated with human females without ceremony?"

Breck choked back a laugh as I tried to figure out how to reply, but my Nomad wife was already way ahead of me.

"This is . . ." She glanced at Higgins and briefly slipped back into her own language, ending on a question.

Higgins cleared his throat and replied, saying the word in her language and thinking it in ours.

"Per-son-al," she said, enunciating carefully and nodding. "I understand. Interested."

"Interesting," said Higgins.

"Interest-w#?" she said, looking puzzled. It seemed that proper English grammar even taxed a telepathic mind. She glanced at me. "No offense in-ten-ded."

"None taken," I said, feeling somewhat flustered. "This, uh, is going to take a little .getting used to. Are you reading my mind right now, Tali?"

"Do you not desire me?"

"Do you not want me to," Higgins hastily corrected her.

"It's a little late to worry about confusion on that score," I told him, wryly.

"Uh, Tali . . . can you read my mind only when I'm speaking and not at other times?"

She nodded. "Yes. I want to have . . . courtesy?" She glanced uncertainly at Higgins.

"I want to be courteous," he corrected her. He turned to me. "I know it must be pretty confusing for you right now, O'Toole. You see, they regard their secondary communication-the telepathy-as their most intimate level of communication, for obvious reasons. Their telepathy is not involuntary. It's something that takes a deliberate effort. And they don't need to be bonded to read each other's minds, but generally, they don't unless there's a close

familial relationship involved. In any case, it doesn't take a mind reader to see that you're in a somewhat difficult position. You might feel as if you've been . . . well, raped, I suppose. There's no delicate way to put it. At the very least, you were seduced. But there really wasn't any other choice."

"I don't understand," I said.

"I know," Higgins said. "It's difficult to explain. You see, a Nomad male is not normally sexually responsive unless he's specifically triggered or, to put it another way, 'activated' by a female desiring to mate. That's part of what you felt last night. It's an incredibly powerful stimulus the females put out, part olfactory, part telepathic. Part visual, too," he added, smiling. "And as you discovered, it works very well on humans. Sort of an aphrodisiac that hits you on several levels at once. If you'll forgive the pun, a Nomad female quite literally turns you on."

"Tell me about it," I said, still feeling weak and sore all over. I glanced at Tali awkwardly. There was a feral beauty about her that was absolutely riveting and I couldn't get over how I could have forgotten most of what had happened last night. She must have tripped some secret switch deep within me and driven me into a raving sexual frenzy. I now understood what Higgins meant when he said that mating with Tyla had almost crippled him. No question about it. I simply wasn't man enough for my new wife. Another night like that and my heart would burst. I sure hoped she'd understand and not hold it against me if I told her that I had a headache.

"Among the Nomads," Higgins went on, "choice naturally falls to the females. They can take as husband any male they wish, subject to their ranking in the tribe. For example, if Tyla wanted the same male that Tali wanted, Tyla's choice

would take precedence and Tali would not begrudge her. Jealousy wouldn't enter into it."

"But, purely for the sake of argument," said Breck, "what if Tali decided she wanted one of Tyla's husbands?"

Tali glanced at Breck with a puzzled expression. "There are many males with no mate," she said, speaking precisely and choosing her words carefully, her English improving rapidly as she picked up the conversational rhythms. "With so many males in need, why would I wish to take a male from my sister?"

"And if it was that important to her," Higgins said, "I think Tyla probably wouldn't hesitate to give one of her males to Tali."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Don't the males have anything to say about it?"

"Why?" said Tali, looking at me earnestly. At least, it seemed like an earnest expression.

"Why?" I said. "Suppose a male doesn't agree with a female's choice?"

She stared at me. "Males do not question females," she said, as if speaking an obvious truth.

"Well, this one does," I said.

"O'Toole, give it a rest a minute," Higgins said. "You're not at home, okay? You know, when in Rome, do as the Romans do?"

"What are Romans?" Tali said. "Different from humans?"

"I think I'm losing control of this discussion," Higgins said, with a sigh.

"They're sort of a human tribe, Tali. Anyway, the point I'm trying to make here, O'Toole, is that for Tali to have the . . . uh, the depth or intensity of contact with you that was necessary to forestall the telepathic attack upon your mind, it was necessary for her to mate with you and-"

"Whoa! Back up a minute!" I said, staring at him. "What do you mean, 'to

forestall the telepathic attack upon my mind'? What telepathic attack?"

Higgins glanced at Breck. "You didn't tell him?"

"I thought perhaps you'd best explain about his getting married first," Breck said. "He's had a rough night and it's not the first time he woke up on the morning after and found himself a newlywed, you see. He's a bit touchy on the subject."

"What the hell are you two talking about?" I said.

"That time compression sensation you experienced," said Breck. "You remember when I told you that I felt a mental tug, as well? A sort of probing?"

I nodded.

"We thought it was Tyla," he said. "Turns out it wasn't. It was Chameleon."

For a moment, I simply stared at him stupidly, and then it dawned on me. Mondago said that Chameleon had learned to use his biochip to tap into the playermaster satellite network and bypass Game Control. But I hadn't realized that meant the shapechanger could tune directly into any one of us!

"Tyla sensed it," Breck said, "but she didn't quite understand what was happening to you at first. It threw her. She thought humans were incapable of telepathic communication."

"She didn't know about biochips," Higgins explained. "I don't have one, you see."

"You will," said Breck.

"Like hell I will."

"I'm afraid you won't have any choice," said Breck. "You're about to be drafted, Higgins."

"Listen, if your people think they can simply-"

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted them. "Can we settle this later? For God's sake, Breck, some alien creature just attacked my mind from light-years away and you're arguing about whether or not Higgins is coming back with us?"

"Take it easy, O'Toole," said Breck. "You're safe enough for now. Mondago and Coles managed to override Chameleon's signal. Besides, you'll be all right so long as Tali's with you. She's the one who saved you. If it wasn't for her, Mondago and Coles would never have been in time."

"What would have happened?" I said, not sure that I really wanted to know.

"You would have died," said Breck. "Along with everyone who was tuned into you."

What had saved Breck was his hybrid brain-his phenomenal powers of concentration and his iron will. And even at that, he had been through an ordeal. Because Tyla had told her people that he was a "warrior," Dyla had chosen to let Breck cope with the assault all on his own, partly because she had not wanted to offend his "warrior pride" and partly because she wanted to see how the attack progressed and how he dealt with it. The concept of telepathic warfare was something new to them. They were both appalled and fascinated. Chameleon had used his biochip to tap into one of Psychodrome's playermaster satellites and launch a telepathic attack directed by tachyon beam. He (at least we thought of Chameleon as a "he," though ambimorphs did not seem to have gender) had prepared for us with a series of experimental satellite contacts and transmissions. By the time Coles and his people had realized what was going on, there had been thousands of casualties.

Reluctantly, Tali agreed to "release" me so that Mondago could contact me through my biochip. That, in itself, was an unsettling development-the fact that Tali could cut me off from Game Control. Ironically, despite all the paranoid feelings I had about having lost my mental privacy, I had grown accustomed to

the idea of having Coles and his people there all the time. Suddenly, with them gone, I felt somehow naked and exposed. It was at the same time both interesting and frightening to realize how dependent on them I had unconsciously become. And it was also highly disturbing to think that this young, incredibly beautiful alien female, who seemed so outwardly primitive and youthfully naive, could so easily slip into my mind and, as Breck had put it, "insulate" me from all of Psychodrome's hi-tech wizardry. Coles found it highly disturbing, too.

During the tribal meeting, Tali had realized that something was drastically wrong with us, as had Dyla, Tyla, and every other Nomad female with enough telepathic abilities to sense the assault Chameleon had launched against us. I had slipped into something resembling a coma-the time compression phenomenon I had experienced before-and everything had simply stopped for me as Chameleon's mental assault was transmitted through my biochip. In a way, it was like the calm before a storm. I had sort of "phased out" for a short while. And then my mind had started screaming.

The very idea of telepathic communication being used offensively to harm another being so shocked the Nomads that at first they hesitated, confused by what was happening. Then Tali did an unprecedented thing. Sensing my psychic agony more strongly than any of the others, and thereby empathizing more, she reached out to me telepathically-using their most intimate form of contact to commune with a total stranger. And an alien, at that. Of course, Tyla had communed telepathically with Higgins, but he was no longer a stranger to her by then and even so, she had waited until after their bonding. In terms of tribal customs and beliefs, what Tali had done was unprecedented and scandalous, but then they had never before been confronted with a mind being flayed "before their eyes."

That was when they had cut us off. Tali had reached out to my mind and "insulated" me from the incoming tachyon signal. Dyla, the matriarch, had followed her lead and done the same for Breck-only that hadn't ended it. In effect, they had neutralized a weapon after it had already been fired. The ammunition had already hit its target.

Chameleon had broadcast to us a telepathic imperative to kill ourselves. Tali had cut me off from the broadcast, but my mind had already received the message and been programmed. Breck still had enough presence of mind to fight the terrible directive. Dyla had sensed his awesome willpower and allowed him to wage the struggle on his own while the entire tribe watched his silent conflict with himself. I was not a "warrior" and was considerably weaker, so to counteract my programmed impulse to destroy myself, Tali had chosen to fight with the strongest impulse she could engender in me-the procreative urge. She had blasted me with the overwhelming sexual stimulus of a Nomad female triggering her mate and while I was dizzy with lust, she had thrown me over her shoulder and carried me away, because once a Nomad female had started, there wasn't any way to stop. I was thankful for small blessings. At least we hadn't done it in front of the entire tribe.

Afterward, she had gently healed my psychic wounds with a balm of very selective, telepathically induced amnesia. From the moment the assault had started to the moment I awoke with Breck looking down at me, it was almost a total blank. I did not remember the agonies Chameleon had inflicted on me, but a lot of other people weren't so lucky.

The game had become truly deadly, not only for the players, but for the home audience, as well. Mondago's scanners had gone right off the scale. Game Control had clipped the broadcast signal the moment they realized what was going on, but

they were too late for a large segment of the audience.

"The fail-safe biomonitors built into the psy-fi systems were never designed for this eventuality." Mondago's voice seemed to echo in my mind while Tali eavesdropped on our conversation, listening to Mondago telepathically and hearing me respond to him out loud. "They were designed to measure physical stress, not psychic disturbance. A glaring and fatal flaw in the design."

"So you're saying they were useless," I said.

"Not entirely useless," Mondago replied. "Our ratings indicate that the majority of those people tuned into you and Breck were saved when their psychic distress resulted in physical symptoms that registered on their fail-safe biomonitors, which immediately caused their psy-fi systems to shutdown. Unfortunately, a segment of the home audience retained a deep residual psychic imprintation after their systems had shut down and there was no way for us to reach them. Many of them committed suicide."

"How many?" I said.

"We don't know yet. The figures are still coming in."

"Damn it, Mondago, how many so far? And what's the breakdown?"

Us hesitated. "I see no purpose in going into that right now."

"Damn it, Mondago, tell me!"

"Thousands," he reluctantly admitted.

"And the breakdown?"

"Really, O'Toole, there is no need to--"

"Answer me!"

I could feel him sigh. "The majority of the suicides so far have been among those in the home audience who were tuned into your channel," said Mondago. "The

percentage figures currently are at 86.3, but the programming analysis department isn't sure how much of that is due to the fact that Breck was better able to stand up to the assault than you were and how much is due to demographics."

"Demographics?" I said.

"They think that the more sensitive individuals among our home audience might have been tuned in to you, because of a greater affinity they'd have for you as opposed to Breck. However, I hasten to add that this is only speculation on their part and not supported by any hard data, so please don't try to take any of this on yourself. It was not your fault. Nor are you the only one that this has happened with. There have been other incidents."

"You mean with Chameleon attacking the home audience through other players?" I said.

"Yes," replied Mondago. "But to date, you and Breck are the only ones who have survived."

"That's it, then," I said. "It's gone far enough. Too far. If Chameleon can assimilate a biochip and learn to do this, so can other ambimorphs. You've got to shut down. You have to tell Coles to stop the game."

"That would be impossible."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"O'Toole, you have no idea what you're suggesting," said Mondago. "The game has become an integral part of society in many more ways than one. It isn't merely a function of public entertainment. It's much more."

"Yes, I know exactly how much more it is," I said bitterly. "It's about control, isn't it?"

"To be completely honest with you, yes, in part," Mondago said. "But only in

part. It's also about facilitating communication between Earth and the colony worlds. The playermaster satellite network and tachyon relay stations are used for much more than just the game. Moreover, people need the game. The home audience has grown pathologically dependent on it."

"A dependency that Psychodrome has been exploiting," I said.

"True," Mondago admitted. "But we did not create that dependency. We merely fulfilled a need; we did not engender it."

"That's a little like saying a pusher only provides the drugs, he doesn't make you take-them."

"The point is arguable. And also irrelevant. The game is necessary to keep the public entertained-"

"And under control," I said.

"The game is necessary to maintain the lines of communication in our society," he continued, as if I hadn't spoken, "and the game is necessary for our security. Besides, even if it were possible to shut down Psychodrome, it would not eliminate the threat. The shapechangers would still-be among us, free to strike out anytime and anywhere, at will. Psychodrome is our only means to fight them. The game must continue, no matter what the cost."

"Then at least you've got to warn the people," I said. "Go public with this. Tell them what's going on!"

"We've done that right from the beginning, remember?" said Mondago wryly.

"But you sold it to them as if it were part of the game!" I protested.

"But it is part of the game," Mondago said. "We've been playing it as if it were for real all along. If we were to go public with it now, they'd simply think it was part of the fantasy scenario, that we were manipulating death statistics to

make it appear as if a spate of unrelated recent suicides came about as a result of an ambimorph attack. They'd think we were incorporating real-life events into a fantasy adventure, as we've always done. We've been presenting them with fantasy scenarios and playing them as if they were for real for so long that no one would accept it if we said, 'Yes, but this time we really mean it.' It would be like the boy who cried wolf. We've even fooled the news media in the past and they're still smarting over it. They no longer take us seriously, which was precisely our intent, because we wanted to keep them from finding out what was behind the entertainment programming. How could we convince them now? Could we produce an ambimorph? No, they'd never believe it without proof. But even if we could make them believe it, the result would be an absolute disaster. Total chaos. Imagine the panic it would cause. Think of all the innocent people who would die as a result. No one would know who was really human anymore. We'd have mass psychosis. Paranoia on an unimaginable scale."

"So what the hell are we supposed to do?" I said, feeling utterly powerless.

"Continue with the game," Mondago said. "Believe me, the public is better off not knowing the truth. So long as they think it's just a game, we can use the game as a cover. And we can use the audience, as well, tuning in on them while they're tuning in on you."

"And how long do you think you can get away with that?" I said.

"As long as necessary," Mondago replied. "And in the meantime, we're anxious to find out more about the natives of Purgatory. Coles would like you to bring one of these Nomads back with you for observation."

I glanced at Tali. Mondago realized that she was listening, of course. "What Coles would like and what Coles will get might be two very different things," I said. "The Nomads are free to make their own choices. And if they choose to stay

here, I'm not going to argue with them. For that matter, you're liable to have a problem with Higgins, too. Seems he doesn't think having a biochip implanted in his brain is the great boon you guys always say it is. Grover Higgins is a very independent man and he's got his own agenda in these matters."

"I see," Mondago said, after a moment. "And what does Mr. Grover Higgins want?"

"I think he'd probably be happy with that quarantine you spoke about, for starters. It would serve to keep out the industrial consortiums. And I imagine he'd like a xenobiology research station to be established here, under his authority. I think you can probably work out a deal with him whereby the company would be able to use his facility to study the ambimorph problem in return for some considerations."

"We intended to put the quarantine in place anyway," said Mondago. "And we certainly don't need Mr. Higgins to establish our own research facility on Purgatory."

"True," I said, "but without him, you won't get the cooperation of the Nomads."

"You can inform Mr. Higgins that we'll be happy to give him what he wants," Mondago said, "subject to one condition."

"What is it?"

"That he return with you for debriefing with at least one Nomad to accompany him."

"Come on, he'll never agree to that, Mondago," I said. "It's not fair to ask him that."

"Fairness has nothing to do with it,-O'Toole," Mondago said. "We are at war and we cannot find the enemy. Apparently, the Nomads can. We'd like to find out how."

Tali touched my arm. I glanced at her.

"I will go back with you," she said.

"No, Tali," I said. "I can't allow it."

"O'Toole-

"Stay out of this, Mondago! Tali, listen to me. I don't think you realize what you're offering to do. You have a position of responsibility in the tribe. You have a family. If you went back to Earth with us, I couldn't say when you'd return. Or even if you would return."

"O'Toole, are you deliberately trying to frighten-

"I said, stay out of this or I'll ask her to cut you off again!" Mondago fell silent. "Tali, I'm trying to say that I couldn't guarantee your safety if you went back with us. I have no idea what Coles might decide to do with you."

"If I went with you, it would help my people," she said. "The human settlements that foul the air and break the land, Mondago and this man Coles could make them stop?"

"Tali, it's possible that you could make them stop," I said. "If you can enter my mind the way you do, then maybe all of you working together could-

"O'Toole, what you're doing could be considered treason," said Mondago sharply.

"So charge me," I said. "I'd love to see this one go to court."

Tali was shaking her head. "No, O'Toole," she said, choosing her words carefully. "Humans must make the humans stop. Humans must decide. It would be wrong for us to do to humans what the false one did to you."

"The false one?" said Mondago.

"It's what they call the ambimorphs," I explained.

"I see," he said. "Do I take it, then, that we have a volunteer?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I guess it seems that way. But you

can tell Coles that if anything happens to my wife, he'll answer to me."

"Your wife?" Mondago said. "That native, uh, woman with you is your wife?"

"Breck didn't tell you?" I said.

"No, he didn't." I could sense the puzzlement in his voice. "I ... I suppose congratulations are in order."

I grinned. "Thank you, Tolliver. And now if you don't mind, I'd like to resume my honeymoon, so I'll ask Tali to cut us off again. If anything important comes up, I'll let you know."

"Wait! O'Toole, I -"

But Tali had already slammed my mental shutters down and he was gone. I chuckled. Let him sweat it out. And let Coles bite his fingernails down to the bone, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

"O'Toole," said Tali, "what is 'hon-i-moon'?"

"Oh," I said, feeling flustered, "well, it's . . . it's . . ."

"I understand," she said, reading my mind. "A human bonding ceremony."

"Well, yes, I guess that's as good a way of putting it as any."

"You wish to do this now?"

"Uh . . . listen, Tali... you're very beautiful and I understand that we've been bonded and I don't want you to get the wrong idea, but I really don't think I could take another-"

"I could try the human way," she said.

I stared at her, taken aback. "The human way?"

"You have strong memory of a human female called Kami," she said. "I can learn from this memory, if you wish."

I tried to imagine how Kami would react to the idea of another woman taking

pointers from her by telepathically scanning my memories of our lovemaking and I declined as politely as I could. Some men might have found a situation like that sexually exciting, but not me. I don't believe in reducing sex to a recreational activity. It's far too intimate for that. Kami and I had shared something very special that perhaps neither of us had ever fully understood. She was the leader of a wild gang of scooter bandits whose first response to almost everything was violence and I was a down-on-his-luck gambler on the run whose first response to every threat I'd ever encountered was cowardly self-preservation. We made about as much sense together as a pair of mismatched Argyle socks, and yet together, we inexplicably managed to create a whole that was somehow more than the sum of its parts. And we both came away from it with pieces of each other in our hearts. After a relationship like that, sex for the sake of sex simply doesn't cut it.

Tali's ability to read my mind made such complicated explanations simpler, but it still took a little work. Her people, unlike mine, had a very high regard for mental privacy and even though the two of us were bonded, she was very circumspect about poking around inside my head. She seemed to feel some anxiety about our situation, not that I could blame her. She had been confronted with a choice that had made things very difficult for her-disregard the customs of her tribe or stand by and watch another being suffer. It hadn't really been much of a choice for her. Her empathy was very strong and her sense of ethics-though I doubt she thought of it that way-had not allowed her any other options. Now she was trying to make things right in the only way she knew. She was trying to find ways to strengthen the bond between us, making it more meaningful.

I was the problem. I kept thinking of our relationship as a marriage in the terms I was accustomed to and, of course, it wasn't that. Despite the fact that

Higgins spoke of his relationship to Tyla as a marriage, he had made a point of saying that it wasn't the same thing as the relationship we called a marriage.

But I kept getting hung up on the word. It was a word that always gave me trouble.

Tali tried to help me find a way to wrap my mind around it. We spent a long night trying to get to know each other. Of course, being able to read my mind, she had a considerable advantage, but she was hesitant to use it unless we started having trouble communicating. It was fascinating, having a conversation with someone who could look into your mind and find out exactly what you meant, but at the same time refrain from "rifling the files," as it were, to see what else was in there. If I had the ability to do that, I don't know that I could have resisted the temptation.

There's something about us that always seems to result in our trying to find out everything at once about the people we become involved with. Perhaps it's a function of our loneliness. We're so desperate to get close to someone that we have a tendency to rip open our shirts and bear our breasts, spill our guts in an effort to let the people we want to get close to see us as we really are in the hope that they will do the same. Tali could have easily found out everything there was to know about me in no time at all, but she was in no hurry. She didn't want to take any more than I was willing to offer.

The memory of Kami was something she had picked up involuntarily while we were .

. . well, mating, I suppose. I'd hesitate to call it making love. She was fascinated by the distinction that I drew. Nomads did not "make love." They mated. When they could "touch souls" the way they did, sexual intimacy came in a poor second. She found it interesting that human males were fertile all the time

and did not require "activation" by a female in order to have the ability to mate. I explained to her that, in a certain sense, we did, merely that the "activation" wasn't quite so drastic. It did not drive us into an uncontrollable sexual frenzy-generally speaking, anyway-and it did not necessarily take any voluntary action on the part of a human female. Sometimes just looking was enough.

What Tali found most interesting-and incomprehensible- was the fact that our human society was not structured along matriarchal lines, and that while equality was the official rule, in actual fact, the true power structure was still essentially male dominated. This puzzled her.

"You say that human males and females are equal in power," she said, "yet the tribal leaders are all male?"

"Mostly male, yes," I said.

"Then how are they equal?"

"That's something a lot of women have been asking for a very long time," I said.

"I guess a lot of human males feel the need to be in control all the time."

"Why?"

"That's another question women have been asking for a long, long time," I said.

"And no one answers them?"

"Generally not, I guess."

"Why do they allow this?"

"I know a few who don't," I said.

"Your mate-without-ceremony?" she said.

"My what?"

"The one called Kami."

"Ah. Yes, she's one."

"I wish to meet her."

"That might be arranged," I said. "I think she'd like you."

"Then I will like her, also."

"Strange how things work out," I said. "When Coles sent us out here to bring back an ambimorph, I figured just about anything could happen, but I never expected anything like this. Or anyone like you."

"Am-bi-morph," she said, trying on the word for size. "This is how you call the false ones?"

"Or shapechangers," I said. "Higgins told us they were pretending to be your gods, trying to manipulate you."

"And sometimes they pretend to be like us and stay among us," she said.

"Only you can recognize them and they don't know that. That's the part I don't quite understand. They can read your minds and find out how you represent your gods and take that form, but they don't know that you can see through their deception and recognize them for what they really are. You understand about what Higgins calls your primary and secondary brains?"

She nodded. "The part which speaks is that part which we let the false ones know. The part which touches souls is that part which we do not let them see."

"Or to use the terms Higgins came up with," I said, "the ambimorphs can read your primary brain, but they cannot read your secondary, more intimate, brain, because you won't let them. I wish to know how you prevented them." I frowned.

"In fact, if they don't even know your secondary brain is there, perhaps that could explain why they can't read it. They telepathically scan your primary brain, think that's all there is, and then don't bother looking any deeper. What I don't understand is if you are capable of recognizing them, no matter what

shape they've taken, why do you let them get away with it?"

"Because they have done us no harm," said Tali.

"But they pretend to be your gods because they want to take control here."

"Humans also wish to take control here," she said. "Not all humans. Not Higgins. Not Breck. Not you. But the others, across the desert. The humans and the false ones -the am-bimorphs-both wish to take control."

"And you're caught right in the middle," I said, with a sigh. "I guess we're no better than the ambimorphs. In fact, we're considerably worse. At least the shapechangers don't pollute or build developments." I grimaced. "They're a lot easier on the ecology, I've got to give them that. Makes it kind of hard for me to act like I'm one of the good guys."

She frowned with puzzlement, then her expression gave way to one of comprehension as she took a glimpse inside and saw what I meant.

"At times," she said, "the tribes compete for territory. One tribe chooses to settle in a valley with a river flowing through it, another comes and wishes to settle there as well, but there is no room nor game enough for both. They fight. This is the way. This we can do. But we will lose if we try to fight the humans, though humans may be the greater threat to us. So Dyla has met with other tribal elders and they have decided that we shall help the humans in their fight against the false ones in exchange for humans not taking our territory. And if humans accept our help and still try to take our land, then we shall help the false ones against the humans. We have no wish to join this conflict, but with three tribes all wishing to settle in the valley, the wisest one will play the other two against each other. And, if necessary, fight the weakened winner."

I stared at her, astonished, and I wondered once again what moron had decided that the Nomads were not as intelligent as we were. And I hoped Coles had enough

sense to realize that power politics was not a game one played with the natives of Purgatory. I hoped he had enough sense to take Tali very seriously. And I hoped to God that he didn't have any funny cards tucked up his sleeve. As the embers of the fire died down, we curled up together and slept in each other's arms. Just before sunrise, the shapechangers tried to kill me.

TEN

I wasn't sure what woke me; whether it was the noise outside or the shapechanger's cry of pain as Garr's spear struck it in the back with such force that about half its length came out through the creature's chest. In the darkness, the figure of a young Nomad male came stumbling two steps into the hut and then fell sprawling face-first onto the ground about a foot away from me. I scrambled for my weapons, which I had foolishly tucked away inside my pack. My hand was on the plasma pistol when Garr stuck his face inside the hut.

"Wait!" said Tali, stopping me just in time.

Garr stepped inside and glanced at me, then looked down at the body on the ground. He grunted with apparent satisfaction, pulled his spear out, grabbed the corpse's foot around the ankle, and dragged it back outside.

"What the hell?" I said, being unforgivably slow on the uptake.

"It was a false one," said Tali. "An ambimorph. It meant to kill you."

I got to my feet quickly, strapped on my holster, ducked down through the doorway, and went outside. The sky was gray with predawn light. Mist eddied like a tide just above the ground. Through the haze, I could make out the bodies of three Nomad males thrown in- a heap, one on top of another. Garr and several

other male Nomads stood around them, leaning on their spears and talking softly among themselves.

"Breck!" I yelled, alarmed.

"No need to shout, O'Toole, I'm right here," he said, stepping out of the fog and dumping another body onto the pile.

"What the hell is going on?"

"Nothing, at the moment," he said. "It's all over. We're merely tidying up a bit."

I stood there, staring at him and at the piled bodies. Tali came up beside me. I shoved my plasma pistol back into its holster.

"It seems we had a number of infiltrators," Breck said. "It was a rather close call. Fortunately, I'm a very light sleeper."

"I thought you said you could recognize them," I said to Tali.

"Yes," she said.

"Then why didn't you know about this?"

"We knew," she said simply.

"You knew?" I couldn't believe I'd heard right. I thought for a moment that perhaps she hadn't understood me, but of course, she had. "You knew there were ambimorphs among you and you did nothing!" I said, incredulously.

She stared at me steadily, without saying a word. It was suddenly very quiet.

Breck cleared his throat softly.

"I don't think we're in a position to demand any explanations here, O'Toole," he said. "Besides, they did not exactly do nothing. They did save your life, at some risk to their own."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly to steady my nerves. "I'm sorry," I said to Tali. "I didn't mean to seem ungrateful. It's only that I ... uh ..." I

trailed off lamely. Only that I'd been scared shitless. And there was no point in saying it out loud. She knew.

Tali spoke briefly to Garr and the other males. Most of the tribe had come out to see what the commotion was all about and we had quite an audience. Garr and the other males seemed to relax and I suddenly realized how out of line I'd been. Males did not mouth off at females around here.

"We knew that there were false ones among the young, unmated males," Tali said.

"They came in the night. They did not know that we knew them for what they were.

As they are curious about us, so we are curious about them. We did nothing because they had done nothing. Now they have offended. Now they are dead."

They started to drag the bodies away when suddenly someone cried out and I turned around in time to see a long tawny form streak across the clearing and leap straight at Breck . . .

It happened with incredible speed. Garr had his spear up in an instant, arm cocked, but Breck was even faster. His arm moved so quickly that I couldn't even follow it. Something went "hissst" and a bright sliver of metal flew through the air like an arrow, striking the beast in midleap, embedding itself in the sandcat's skull. The creature fell like a heavy sack to the ground at Breck's feet, a gleaming nysteel dart with metallic fletching stuck right between its eyes.

For a moment, they were all too stunned to move, then they gathered around Breck and the dead sandcat at his feet, kneeling over the huge beast and gazing with wonder at the gleaming dart. Garr tried to pull it out, but he couldn't budge it. It was stuck firmly in the bone.

"What is it?" one of the other males said.

"I do not know," said Garr.

"He threw it?"

"He had nothing in his hand! How could he have thrown it when he held nothing?"

Where did it come from?"

"To kill a sandcat with a thing so small!" said one of the others.

"It was not a sandcat," a young Nomad female said. "It was a false one."

And suddenly, with a shock as if a bucket of ice cold water had been dashed right in my face, I realized that they were speaking in their Nomad tongue and I could understand what they were saying!

Breck bent down and took hold of the dart firmly with his metal fingers, gave it a sharp yank and it pulled loose. He wiped it off on the sandcat's fur-the shapechanger had become "fixed" in death, as they always did-and then he ran his fingers over the metallic fletching, which retracted into the shaft of the dart and locked in place. As the Nomads watched with awe, Breck slipped the dart back into the tiny barrel built into the top of his nysteel wrist. He fitted it into the barrel, tapped it in lightly, and then made a motion as if he were contracting a forearm muscle and the dart went back up inside his arm with a sharp pneumatic hiss. The small barrel then retracted back into his wrist.

I had never seen him use that particular device before and under other circumstances, I might have been just as impressed as the Nomads, but I was absolutely flabbergasted by my sudden, inexplicable ability to understand their speech.

"Breck, I can understand them!" I said.

He glanced at me, grunted and nodded.

I stared at him, completely taken aback by his lack of reaction. "Did you hear what I just said? I can understand what they're saying!"

"Yes, I heard you," he said. "What did they say?"

"Well, they're amazed at the way you-what do you mean, what did they say? I understood them! I actually understood them, as if they were speaking English!"

"Yes, I know," he said.

"You know?"

"It's part of your ongoing bonding experience with Tali," he explained. "As she's learning English by reading your mind, she's also teaching you her language. It apparently happens on the subconscious level. Perhaps she did it while you slept. If you try speaking to Tali in her language, I think you'll find that you'll be able to, though you may have some trouble with the pronunciation for a while."

It was too much for me. I leaned back against a rock outcropping and rubbed the bridge of my nose. I was getting a splitting headache. Perhaps from my unusual form of sleep learning, if that's what it was. I was having a hard time assimilating all this. It all seemed so incredible. There were long tracks in the dirt where the dead bodies of the shapechangers had been dragged away moments ago and here we were, discussing telepathic language lessons. The whole thing was surreal. I looked up at Breck.

"How the hell do you know all this?"

"Higgins told me." He shrugged. "There was not much else for me to do last night except talk to Higgins. After all, I didn't have a date."

"Very funny," I said. "Where is Higgins?"

"Applying some first aid to one of the young males who was injured."

"Why doesn't anyone tell me anything?" I said, in exasperation. "Did you know about the shapechangers being here?"

"No, of course I didn't know," he said. "If I had known, then they would have known that I knew and they would also have known how I knew, and then they would have known that the Nomads knew, and the Nomads did not want them to know that."

I blinked and shook my head. "Huh? You want to run that by me again?"

"I'm not sure I could," he said, frowning slightly. "It seemed to make sense as I was saying it. In any case, the point is that I didn't know about them being here. They apparently came in last night, thinking they could slip in and pass unnoticed, only of course they were spotted right away. Unlike Chameleon, these were young ambimorphs and they weren't very experienced. Which was rather fortunate for us."

"How do you know they were young?"

"Educated guess, based on their relatively inexperienced behavior compared to some of the shapechangers we've run into and based on the fact that they breed not far from here."

"Oh. I see." I did a double take. "They what?"

"Really, O'Toole, I do wish you'd pay more attention so I wouldn't have to say everything twice. It seems the shapechangers have a breeding ground not far from here. We're going there today. Undoubtedly, that was what precipitated the attack on us. We did come here to capture one of them alive, if you'll recall. That was the point of the whole exercise. I thought we might bring Coles back a baby ambimorph."

I was beginning to realize why they called it Purgatory. Hell was just around the corner. The idea of a breeding ground for ambimorphs conjured up an image of an entire nest of the damn things, a creche, a colony of creatures each of whom was already a colony to begin with. And Breck proposed to waltz right in and bag one like going to a pet shop and picking out a puppy. Sure, why not? No problem.

Easy for a hybrid commando who was incapable of feeling fear. I, on the other hand, was not only capable of being afraid, I was real good at it.

The idea of invading the shapechangers' breeding ground didn't seem to bother the Nomads very much. After the remains of the ambimorphs had been disposed of, they held a meeting in the lodge to decide which of them would get to go on this junket and there was no shortage of volunteers. I wondered if any of them would be interested in taking my place.

Nomads had some rough similarities to us in the sense that they fell into the life-form classification we called humanoid and, in fact, there were many parallels between them and a number of primitive human hunter-gatherer societies, but in spite of some superficial similarities, they were really very different. Their form of marriage, for example, the mating and the bonding, was nothing like any marriage in a human society, not even a communal one. It was more like a sexual-metaphysical rite of passage into an extended family defined less by mating patterns than by a sort of telepathic spirituality, with the female holding things together at the center, functioning not only as a sexual catalyst, but as an intimate telepathic link between the other males in the relationship. The Nomad word for it was "tal-ken," roughly translating as "soul-tribe."

On one hand, the Nomads seemed to have an almost emotionless placidity about them. Yet, on the other hand, their sexual responses were frenzied and passionate beyond belief and their telepathic "soul touching" was incredibly intimate and tender. Their response to the situation that confronted them, to us and to the ambimorphs, was at the same time both coldly logical and confusingly nonsensical. They knew what the ambimorphs intended when they had infiltrated

the village, and they had prepared for it, yet rather than confront the threat immediately in order to deter the attempt on our lives, they waited until the ambimorphs had made their move, as if they needed that excuse to act, to withdraw the hospitality of the tribe, which apparently required a truly serious transgression, even though it had been accepted under false pretenses.

"We did nothing because they had done nothing," Tali had said. "Now they have offended. Now they are dead."

Cause and effect. The tribal etiquette implacably and ruthlessly administered.

Even with their telepathy, when they picked up the shapechanger's intent to kill us, that hadn't been enough. They had needed the initiation of the act itself before they could bring themselves to do anything about it. Cause and effect.

Simple.

But maybe it wasn't that simple. Perhaps it was the result of their telepathy.

At some earlier point in their development, they had to have confronted the philosophical problem of when a crime became a crime-when you thought about doing it, when you planned to do it, or when you actually started to execute it.

Perhaps they never actually thought of it in quite that way or in those terms, but it was something that they must have had to deal with.

Higgins's theory about their "primary" and "secondary" brains was not necessarily literally true. Of course, there would be no way of telling that for sure unless a Nomad was scanned or autopsied, but if nothing else, the theory served as an excellent analogy for the way their minds functioned as compared to ours. If they didn't actually have two brains, perhaps they had a bifurcated one that functioned as if it were two separate organs. In principle, their brain function could be similar to right brain/left brain dominance in humans, where in humans the right brain was the concrete-logical and the left brain was the

intuitive-creative, only it seemed that the Nomads had essentially divided brain function, as if there were two discrete channels that were complimentary, but that could also function independently.

"That which speaks and that which touches souls," as Tali had put it, trying to find words in my language to convey an idea they probably never even had to think about before because they took it for granted.

In a telepathic society, the need to preserve privacy and limit intimacy had to be intense. Even nature had conspired to impose limits on the Nomads. The males vastly outnumbered the females and they were rarely telepathic. They needed the females to link them in their soul-touching within the tal-ken. And beyond that, there were the customs and traditions of the Nomads, slightly different from tribe to tribe, but essentially the same in principle. Though there were certain things they probably couldn't avoid picking up, especially if someone was thinking very "loudly," Nomads didn't go around arbitrarily reading other people's minds, just as in human society you don't go around arbitrarily grabbing people and having sex with them. And if you do, the society has laws to deal with the likes of you.

The arrival of humans, and ambimorphs, presented the Nomads with some fairly serious problems. Humans, not being telepathic, were very sloppy with their thoughts. We thought the Nomads were savages. They thought we were unconscionably crude. We started to build permanent settlements as opposed to seasonal ones and we constructed factories that screwed up the ecology and it did not even occur to us to ask permission. Not that it would've made any difference if the Nomads had refused.

The ambimorphs, on the other hand, had followed their natural instinct to blend

in with their environment, which might have been a great deal more acceptable if they hadn't done what their survival instincts made them do-telepathically invade the Nomads' minds and try to turn them inside out in an effort to find out everything about them, so that their shapechanging deception could be complete. To a Nomad, this was even more insufferable than the barbarity of humans. They had shut down. Or at least they had shut down that part of themselves which they considered most intimate, what Higgins called their secondary brains, in effect allowing the ambimorphs to go only so far and no further. And the ambimorphs apparently never realized that they had only skimmed the surface and never gotten to the part that really counts.

It all raised a number of fascinating questions. How did the Nomads manage to shut out the ambimorphs? And could they continue to shut out the ambimorphs if the ambimorphs discovered that they were only reading the surface level? And then there was the most fascinating question of them all-how were the Nomads able to infallibly identify ambimorphs for what they were-"the false ones"-without the shapechangers catching on?

Part of the answer had to do with circumstances. Ambimorphs did not often try to pass as Nomads. They had arrived on Purgatory by passing as humans. In the controlled environment of the Purgatory settlements, it would have been difficult for them to breed unnoticed, so they had found safer places to breed out in the wild high country. While they were developing, it was easier for them to take on the aspect of the various small creatures indigenous to the high country and the desert. In this manner, they survived until they matured and became large enough to take on human form and infiltrate the human settlements, which was their main priority. Until recently, there had been no reason for them to infiltrate the Nomad tribes. They were at war with us, not with the Nomads.

However, it had apparently occurred to them that if they could exert a controlling influence upon the Nomads, they could conceivably turn them against the human settlements, and so some of them had started trying to infiltrate the tribes in Nomad form.

Only it wasn't working. Because the males so vastly outnumbered the females in the Nomad tribes, the ambimorphs naturally attempted to infiltrate the tribes by taking on the form of Nomad males, hoping to get lost in the numbers. But while they had no trouble getting in, they had trouble staying there for any length of time, because the moment they tried to do anything, they were taken out. So long as they remained within the tribe as young, unmated Nomad males, the Nomads accepted them and didn't bother them. But the moment they tried to do anything to exert any influence within the tribe, the shapechangers ran into a dead end.

They could not take on the form of Nomad females because every Nomad female was known by every other male and female within the tribe and the only way to supplant one of them would be to kill the original and take her place. Much easier said than done, especially when your quarry can read your mind without your knowing it. And males did not have any voice in a matriarchal tribal leadership. If the ambimorph imposters tried to press the issue, they were immediately challenged by other young Nomad males and killed. The manner in which it was done made it appear as if it were a perfectly normal part of tribal life-unmated, young males frequently challenged one another in an attempt to prove themselves in the eyes of females who might consider them as potential mates and these ritual combats were always to the death. A bit extreme, perhaps, but males were a surplus commodity and the weaker ones were expendable. It improved the tribal gene pool. These ritual combats between unmated males

invariably resulted in the defeat of ambimorphs trying to pass as Nomads, because they were at a marked disadvantage. They could not take on any other form without revealing themselves for what they were and their telepathy did not avail them in trying to win these fights, because there was always at least one female watching the contest and she would telepathically anticipate the next move the ambimorph imposter would make and communicate it to the Nomad male it was fighting via the secondary brain. And the ambimorphs never realized what was going on.

The shapechangers had not yet managed to catch on that they were being systematically "weeded out" of the tribes in this manner. But it was only a matter of time before they'd figure it out and the Nomads knew that. For the time being, some of the ambimorphs were trying out the strategy of taking on the form of Nomad gods, taking their cues from the representational art and ritual dances of the tribes, but when it became clear that that wasn't working either, it would have to occur to the ambimorphs that something was going on that they didn't know about. They had never before encountered a species that could recognize them in any guise and they were confused. But eventually they'd figure it out. The Nomads knew they would not be able to remain neutral any longer. They had to take sides.

Why us? Because we were the logical choice. They knew their odds of coming out ahead were far greater if they came in on our side than if they helped the ambimorphs.

"It makes perfect sense," said Breck. "For one thing, the shapechangers never asked for their help, they tried to compel it. Bad mistake. They were even more invasive than we were. We only came in and took some of their land. The shapechangers tried to take their identities. But beyond that, if the Nomads

were to fight with the ambimorphs against us, they'd be much more vulnerable because they couldn't shapechange and they'd have damn little defense against our weapons. On the other hand, we'd cut just about any deal with them if it would help us against the ambimorphs, including pulling out of Purgatory and probably providing them with some technological support and weapons systems. That way, they could not only use any weapons we gave them against the ambimorphs remaining here, they could also turn them against us if we ever tried to double-cross them. Trusting us is still a risk for them, but it's a calculated one. And it looks as if we need them a lot more than they need us. I'd say they've thought it out quite well and made the best possible decision. They learn quickly."

The sun was getting high as we walked up the mountain trail. I felt exposed and uncomfortable in my hand-me-down Nomad hides. Even though they had belonged to a very young male in Tyla's tal-ken, they were way too big for me. The proportions were all wrong. Nomad males were truly massive in the chest and shoulders. Their arms and legs were longer and thicker than ours. They were generally size extra extra large. A child's hides would have been too small and the only other alternative would have been to wear female clothing, which would have looked even sillier on me than the outsize hides. I looked like some sort of futuristic barbarian with my weapons strapped on over my hides. A futuristic barbarian who could have done without the cold drafts finding their way into my ensemble. There were about two dozen Nomad males with us, along with four females, including Tali and Tyla. All were armed with their long spears and stone axes. Breck and I carried our plasma pistols and semiautos, with as many extra magazines loaded with frags and stunners and as many plasma charge paks as we

could carry. I noticed that several of the males had curious-looking bundles of woven scrub branches tied to their backs and my curiosity finally got the better of me. I asked Higgins what they were and immediately wished I hadn't.

"Torches," he said.

"Torches? But it isn't even midday yet," I said. "How far is this place?"

"We're almost there," said Higgins.

"Then why the torches?"

"Because it's underground."

"What?"

"Underground. In a cavern."

There was a tight feeling in my chest and it suddenly seemed difficult to breathe. Underground. In a cavern. It all came back to me with a sickening feeling of déjà vu, that cavern on Draconis 9 where I had hung over a bottomless chasm, clinging by my fingertips to a pile of loose rock while a murderous crystal hunter had blazed away at me. The cavern where Stone had died, buried under tons of rock and shimmering crystal.

I glanced at Breck, walking several yards ahead of me on the mountain trail. I wondered what it must be like to have never felt afraid in your entire life, to be literally incapable of feeling fear. Breck had told me once that Special Service commandos were fascinated by fear because it was an emotion they could never feel. A good way to get a hybrid commando to stand you to a drink or two was to tell him about some time in your life when you'd been paralyzed with fear or terrified half out of your mind. Breck was no exception. He read horror fiction voraciously, trying to analyze and understand what it was that frightened people. He enjoyed discussing people's nightmares with them and he was fond of tuning into reruns of Psychodrome adventures where the players had

been scared to death, in some cases literally. I once asked him what he felt when he plugged in and vicariously experienced someone else's fear and he had told me that he had vicariously felt some of fear's physical symptoms-the strange tightness in the chest brought on by stress, the racing pulse, the quickened respiration, the clammy skin, the knot in the pit of the stomach-but he was never able to get out of it that essential psychological trauma that was the essential fear experience. He never knew what it was to panic. He had been designed not to and someone else's fear experience simply didn't translate. He had worked out an intellectual understanding of it, but he could go no further. He couldn't feel it. I envied him that. I told him so once and he said, "You shouldn't." When I asked him why, he said that the ability to feel fear also brought with it an ability to feel an incredible euphoria that came in the aftermath of surviving a terrifying experience.

"It's apparently much more than simply experiencing an adrenaline rush," he told me. "As I understand it, it's a sensation of incredible vitality. It's been described to me as a thrill that has no equal, an intoxicating joy at having confronted your own mortality, of laying it all on the line and surviving." He shrugged. "I wish to hell I knew what that was like. I've laid it all on the line more-times than I can count and I've felt no worse, no better. No one experience seems more memorable than any other and none has left me feeling thrilled. They were merely situations in which I might have died and didn't. People envy my being able to take these things in stride. They call it courage." He shook his head. "They're quite wrong, you know. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the ability to confront one's fear and go on in spite of it. You can be courageous, O'Toole. I can only be fearless."

The distinction had seemed a subtle one to me at the time, but I understood it better than ever now. In spite of all his wry jibes and ironic taunts, Breck actually respected me because I was a coward.

"What was it Shakespeare wrote about a coward dying a thousand times and a hero dying only once?" he had said. And then he'd smiled. "Hell, dying once is not so hard. Dying a thousand times? Now that takes guts."

At the moment, my guts were tying themselves in knots. The Nomads carrying the bundled torches on their backs had unshouldered their burdens and were passing them around. I looked up at the rock wall rising above us. It was honeycombed with caves. Apparently, we'd reached our destination. In a manner of speaking, it was all downhill from here.

"How did they find out about this place?" I asked Higgins.

"Simple," he responded, tapping his forehead with his index finger. "They learned about it from the ambimorphs who had tried to infiltrate the tribe. And this also happens to be the site where some of the god manifestations had occurred. The ambimorphs wanted the tribes to think that this was sacred ground. They paid lip service to the myth while they actually read the shapechangers' minds and found out what was really going on here."

"I wish they could teach us that trick," Breck said. He looked at me and grinned. "Well, what do you say, O'Toole? You ready to bag yourself an ambimorph?"

Bag was the word, all right. A lot of thought had been given to how we were supposed to contain an ambimorph once we managed to catch one. The assumption was that we would use stunners to immobilize the target, then literally bag it in a self-sealing plasteel polymer container. The plasteel polymer was flexible and microporous, so it would stretch and still retain a very high tensile

strength. Presumably, the creature would be able to breathe inside it.

Presumably, the shapechanger would not be able to break it or somehow seep through the microscopic pores. We were assured that based on what we knew of ambimorphs, that wasn't very likely. But then, we didn't know much about ambimorphs, so what the hell did that mean? We didn't even know if stunners would be effective against them. Presumably-there was that word again-if the ambimorph was in human form, or the form of any creature against which stunners had previously proved effective, then they would work. They had not seemed to work all that well on "Jarrett." It seemed to me that Coles and his xenobiologist advisors were presuming a great deal, but then nobody asked me. They just sent me and Breck out with some hardware that was supposed to knock out an ambimorph and a hi-tech sandwich bag that was supposed to keep it from escaping and we were supposed to take care of the rest. They didn't bother with the pesky little details.

"I don't suppose anyone has any idea of how many am-bimorphs we're liable to run into in there?" I said.

"Oh, I imagine that there'll be a few," said Breck, gazing thoughtfully at the cavern mouths. Huge, gaping mouths with stalactite teeth, waiting to swallow us up.

"How the hell are we going to keep from shooting at each other in there?" I said, feeling the cold dampness on my back as fear sweated through my pores.

"The females," Breck replied.

"What?" I said.

"Tyla and the others are going to link us all telepathically," Higgins explained.

I swallowed hard and nodded.

"Afraid?" said Higgins.

I stared at him. "Aren't you?"

"I'm scared spitless," he said. "But I wouldn't miss this for the world. No scientist has ever had a chance to observe a live ambimorph. No one has ever seen one in its natural state and I'm going to be the first to actually see them breeding! It's an incredible opportunity!"

I shook my head. "Yeah, to get killed," I said. "I'll never understand scientists."

"You don't want to go in there, do you?" Higgins said.

I snorted. "Whatever gives you that idea?"

"But you're going to do it anyway."

I sighed. "Higgins, I can't begin to tell you how much I want not to go in there," I said. "But you're right, I'm going to do it anyway. And you're going to ask me why and I'm going to tell you I don't know and you're going to suggest that maybe I'm not all that different from a scientist such as yourself. Only it isn't the same thing. You're scared, but you're going to do it because your enthusiasm, your scientific curiosity, outweighs your fear. With me, believe me, nothing outweighs my fear. I'm so goddamned scared that I may start to cry at any moment, but much as I don't want to do this, I've got to. I have no choice."

"Why?" said Higgins.

"To be perfectly honest with you, I don't really know. Because it's my job, I guess. Because Breck is going to do it and I can't let him go in there alone."

"But he isn't going to be alone," said Higgins. "And Breck is a hybrid. He's incapable of feeling fear."

"That makes no difference," I said. "We're a team. Partners. And partners don't

let each other down. And I guess maybe there's more to it than that. AH my life, I've been a gambler. A hustler, strictly small-time, until I got into a game that was way over my head and that led me to what I'm doing now. The game's not over. The pot in the center of the table simply keeps on getting bigger and bigger, but the game goes on. And I just can't throw 'em in and fold so long as I've got money on the table. That make any sense to you?"

"I think I understand," he said, with a smile. "We're not really so very different after all, you know. A scientist is a great deal like a gambler, in a sense. You don't really know the outcome of what you're doing. But you don't merely stumble along blindly, either. You play the odds. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. And in science, as in gambling, you probably lose more often than you win, but you keep going, hoping to at least break even, going for that win because it's worth it and because it feels so satisfying. And there's that special thrill when you know you've played the long shot and it's paid off.

"And then, aside from that, there's also a certain sense of duty," he continued.

"Like the responsibility you feel for your partner, Breck. It's my job, too, O'Toole.. And I can't let down all the other scientists out there who need to know what only I am in the position to find out right now. So perhaps you understand scientists a lot better than you think. We're gamblers, too. The only real difference is that most of the time, we don't stand to lose as much as you do. Except maybe in this case."

I watched the Nomads light their torches and felt my heart inching its way up my throat.

"I guess I never thought about it that way before," I said. "But it makes sense to me."

"What I don't quite understand," said Higgins, "is why he does it." He glanced at Breck. "He's not a scientist and he's not a gambler. Risk holds no thrill for him. Hybrids can't feel fear, so it can't be a danger high that motivates him. What is it with him, duty? Patriotism? A test of his abilities? What?"

"All of those, I guess," I said. "But mostly it's what he does best. He's a soldier. It's what he was trained to do, what he was designed to do. I was a soldier once, myself. Not like Breck, of course, but I think that soldiers-regular army soldiers, that is-probably understand hybrids better than anybody else. Better even than the people who designed them. They're different from ordinary people, sometimes in very obvious ways, sometimes in very subtle ones. And it goes beyond the biological differences between us. You and I are not the result of a carefully designed genetic matrix created in a laboratory.

We had parents. We had a family life. We had roots. Hybrids had none of those things. Behind all their strutting elitism, their arrogant nonchalance, is a very real and very painful awareness of the fact that they were shortchanged in some fairly important ways. And they're also painfully aware that in a certain sense, they were never really born so much as made. They can never have children of their own. There are certain emotions, such as fear, that they can never feel. And they know that something's missing."

I watched Breck giving- instructions to Tali, who passed them on telepathically to the others. An officer giving a final briefing to his troops. He was in his element.

"He can do more with that artificial arm of his than anyone could do with one made of flesh and blood," I said, "but technically, he's disabled and that means the SS can't use him anymore except in some administrative capacity. They designed him to do just one thing and then when he got hurt in the line of duty,

they told him he couldn't do it anymore." I glanced from Breck, standing with the Nomads, to Higgins, standing next to me and watching him. "A lot of hybrids commit suicide after they leave the service, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't," he said. "I thought depression was stress-related, like fear. I would have thought they couldn't feel it because of the way they were designed."

I nodded. "True, but I don't know what's worse, being depressed and feeling despair or not feeling anything at all. Except maybe that you're useless."

"God," said Higgins, softly.

"Breck's one of the lucky ones," I said. "He's found another way to keep on fighting battles, to continue being useful. And he's a glamorous star, famous and incredibly wealthy. A lot of people think he's got everything. But you know what? I think he'd trade it all to know, just once, what it was like to feel afraid."

Breck was beckoning to us.

"Poor bastard doesn't know what he's missing," I said wryly, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly in an effort to steady my nerves. I moistened my lips and checked my weapons. "Shit. Let's go."

ELEVEN

How do you sneak up on creatures who can read your mind? The answer is, of course, you can't. To some extent, the Nomads could keep their thoughts secret from the ambimorphs, but they couldn't hide their presence. They could shut down their secondary level of intelligence, but the ambimorphs would detect their primary mental energy. And Higgins, Breck, and I couldn't do anything to hide.

Tali could try to shield me telepathically, as she had done before, but I'd need all my faculties intact to get through this one. I couldn't take a chance on not being completely in control. Besides, Coles wanted both Breck and me clearheaded, so we could transmit our experiences back to Game Control. That way, even if we didn't make it, Coles would still have a record of what happened and the public would get one hell of a show-never suspecting it was real. And if we died, the official story would probably be that we had succumbed to the mental stress of a hallucinact computer simulation. Another case of psycho stars dying for the public's entertainment. Hey, that's show biz, folks.

I recalled the nightmare in the mountain cavern on Draconis 9, when I'd come so very close to dying. The raw fire crystal that veined the cavern walls had kept Game Control from picking up our signal. Fire crystals were used for focusing the tachyon beam transmissions and the crystal formations in the cavern had kept our signals bouncing around inside the mountain. Fire crystals were not to be found on Purgatory, so there was no reason why Coles and Mondago couldn't follow all the action back at Game Control. Coles had insisted that under no circumstances were we to allow the Nomads to shield us telepathically. He didn't want to miss this for the world.

I tried to imagine what the scene would be like back there, Mondago at the playermaster's console in the darkened room, Coles standing tensely behind him, plugged into an auxiliary psych-fidelity channel, watching the screens intently as the scan team monitored the readouts. Meanwhile, the xenobiologists and psychocybernetic engineers would all be glued to their own sets, plugged in and fail-safed, their access terminals on stand-by to receive the data as they fed in their impressions of what they would vicariously experience through us.

I felt as if I were some kind of remote probe being sent into unexplored

territory to record as much information as possible before the hostile environment destroyed me. In effect, that's exactly what I was to them, no more, no less. If I stopped functioning, at least they still had Breck. And if Breck was killed, they would all sigh collectively and go analyze the data we'd sent in while Coles lined up a couple of new probes. I didn't harbor any illusions that we meant anything to him or any of the vultures back there. We were nothing more than a means to an end. With any luck, not our end.

As we went through the cavern mouth and the torchlight cast ghostly shadows on the rock walls, I wondered if Chameleon was tuned in.

There was a time when I felt a certain sympathy for the ambimorph Coles had appropriately named Chameleon. He could easily have killed us in the Fire Islands or later on Draconis 9, when we believed him to be a crystal hunter named Nikolai Razin, but he hadn't, although he certainly had reason to.

How would humans have reacted if we were confronted with aliens who came to Earth as if they owned the place and started hunting us for food? The idiots in the first survey party sent out to Draconis 9 had decided that the herds of large, slow-moving, placid creatures they had found there looked enough like steers to barbecue. The meat was apparently quite tasty, so the fools had continued to shoot the animals for food. And the ambimorphs, who made up a large part of the herds of peaceful quadrupeds, started to shapechange to human form in self-defense.

I recalled how "Razin" had revealed himself to us and I recalled how he had said, "We want only to survive." I could understand that. I could even sympathize. But the trouble was, being telepaths, they knew us well enough to realize that we could not trust them and they could not trust us.

There seemed to be no way around it. A shapechanger was a shapechanger and a human was a human and the universe, absurdly, did not seem big enough for both of us. We did not want them among us, pretending to be human, living with us, working with us, marrying our daughters, God forbid, and they did not want to take us at our word that we would not reduce Draconis to a cinder if they all went back to where they came from. Because, the sad truth of the matter was, that's probably just what we'd have done.

And so the game continued-a game within a game within a game, with bystanders like the Nomads getting dragged in against their will. So long as there were ambimorphs among us, we could not attack their home world for fear of their unleashing war the like of which the human race had never seen. Something they had learned from us. And what kept the ambimorphs from all-out warfare was the fear that we would then destroy their home world. An impasse.

Meanwhile, we tried to protect people from the truth, to pretend that none of this was really happening, to convince them all-with a massive cover-up and propaganda reinforced with covert mind-control techniques-that it was merely another game scenario of Psychodrome. And as we played for time, working desperately to find a way to ferret out the ambimorphs among us, they increased their number and made their presence felt with acts of terrorism here and there, such as the sabotage on Purgatory. Except at least one of them, Chameleon, had started to escalate the game.

Could anybody win? Hell, I didn't know. I was still trying to figure out which was worse, living in a world where you never had any way of knowing if the person you were with was really human or living in a world where everyone was hardwired with a biochip and you never had any way of knowing if someone was accessing your mind. The way we were going, we'd probably wind up with both. An

ambimorph could read your mind, a man like Coles could program it subliminally.

Christ, no wonder Higgins wanted to remain on Purgatory.

"Never mind me," Higgins said, "just keep your mind on what you're doing."

I jerked and spun around to face him, startled to hear him say that, and then I realized that he hadn't actually said it. He had thought it.

"Tali's got us mindlinked," he said, though he said it in my mind and not out loud. The phenomenon was similar to the effect of Coles or Mondago contacting me via my biochip. I could actually "hear" him, though, of course, I wasn't really hearing him at all. Tali was picking up his thoughts and relaying them to me.

"It feels strange at first" Higgins continued thinking at me, through Tali, "but being accustomed to a biochip, you and Breck should make the adjustment pretty quickly. Try not to let your mind wander. Otherwise, that makes it difficult for Tali. Concentrate. Discipline your mind. Think only about the job at hand."

I tried to push all extraneous thoughts out of my head and concentrate only on the damp, downward-sloping tunnel floor before me. It was not an easy task. I was nervous as all hell—frankly, I was scared to death—and at such times, my mind has a tendency to bounce from train of thought to train of thought like a ping-pong ball. But I had to make an effort to "empty my mind," as the Zen roshis in Japan would say, and open myself up only to the here and now, to the sights and smells and sounds inside the cavern tunnel.

The four Nomad females who had accompanied us were the four most gifted telepaths in the tribe. And their job would be a great deal more difficult than ours. Between the four of them, they not only had to link the rest of us together telepathically, so that the ambimorphs would not be able to confuse us, but they had to be prepared to defend themselves, as well. And having three

humans in the telepathic matrix made things much more difficult for them than if all of us were Nomads. We were the weak link. We had the least amount of mental discipline. Except for Breck, whose will and self-control were superhuman. I breathed deeply as I walked and forced myself to relax as much as possible under the circumstances. I think Tali helped. Or maybe it was Breck.

It was an incredible experience. In a sense, it was roughly similar to the experience that someone in our home audience might have. It was like being tuned in to someone else, sharing their perceptions, their feelings, and even their thoughts, which was something psych-fidelity did not offer to the fans. My audience at home, apparently because I was a better "projector" than most, had a superficial sense of what it felt like to be me, to feel about things the way I did and to experience my emotions, but they could not literally read my mind. In this case, we could do that. I could tell what Breck was thinking. Breck knew what Higgins thought. And Higgins was able to share Garr's thoughts and so on and so on, all of us linked in a gestalt that gave us shared thoughts and perceptions. It had to be incredibly exhausting for Tali and the other females, Tyla, Lina, and Tola, one of Tyla's daughters with her husband Zaal-who was also with us. I wondered how long they would be able to keep it up and was immediately reprimanded by Higgins once again, who told me-or thought at me-to keep my mind on the business at hand and stop plugging up the matrix with my anxieties.

Sure. Easier thought than done. I sensed Tali's displeasure and tried to concentrate on our surroundings.

The mountain was honeycombed with caverns. Smaller tunnels created by volcanic action met up with ours from time to time and I hoped we'd be able to find our way out again-no, stop that, don't think about that stuff, just pay attention to

everything around you-there was a barely perceptible, cool breeze against my cheek, coming up from the caverns somewhere still ahead of us, which meant that there were other openings connecting with the cavern. It was just like that cavern back on Draconis 9, when we-no. I swallowed hard and concentrated on the present.

The torchlights flickered ahead of me as the Nomads in the vanguard descended down into the tunnel, heading deeper and deeper inside the mountain. I saw their shadows lengthen on the rock walls as they turned around a bend. The tunnel floor was sloping much more sharply now and the breeze coming from below seemed stronger. I slipped slightly on the steep grade and put my hand out to steady myself on a large thick stalagmite to my right . . . and immediately jerked back my hand as it encountered something slimey.

I stopped abruptly and brought my hand up in front of my face, staring at it in the torchlight. It was glistening, covered with a slippery, slimey, clear substance of some sort. I was suddenly overcome with revulsion and I started frantically wiping the stuff off on my hides.

"O'Toole ..."

Behind me, Higgins was holding his torch close to the stalagmite. The entire rock formation was coated with the slick, glistening slime. My stomach felt queasy.

"What is it?" I thought.

Higgins shook his head. "I don't know." He brought the torch down lower, illuminating more of the stalagmite, closer to the ground. The glistening slime coated the stalagmite down to its base and then it went across the tunnel floor and up the opposite rock wall, ending at a large crevice high up in the wall.

"Jesus," Higgins thought. "It's a trail, like what a slug would leave or . . .

. . . He glanced back at me. " . . . an ambimorph in its natural state?"

I shivered and started wiping my hand against my hides again.

"Come on, you two" Breck's voice came to us in our minds. "You're falling behind."

"Breck," I thought intently, "there's a-"

"I know. Keep your eyes open and your weapon handy."

I pulled my plasma pistol out of its holster and checked the charge pak again.

Then I flicked the safety off. Unlike Breck, I could only handle one weapon at a time. I was never any good at that fancy two-gun stuff, so I had given my semiauto to Higgins, along with a pouch containing spare magazines. They were color coded. The black magazines contained the stunners. The red ones held the fragmentation rounds.

"If the stunners don't get the job done," I had told him before we started down, "forget about taking one alive. Jack out the magazine and slap in one of the red ones. The frags will stop 'em."

"Assuming I can hit anything with this," Higgins had said wryly. "I don't have much experience with firearms. Maybe I'd be better off with the plasma gun."

"Are you kidding? If you start shooting wild with that thing, we're all going to cook! If you're not sure what you're doing, you're better off with the semiauto.

It's lighter and a lot easier to use."

"There's only one problem," he had said. "You know what's liable to happen if I start popping off with exploding rounds inside a cavern?"

"Would you rather carry a spear?" I had said.

"Might be a whole lot safer," he had replied.

"Yeah, for the ambimorphs. Just take the damn thing and make sure you hit what

you shoot at. Wait till your target's close enough to spit at if you have to.

Whatever you do, don't panic and start spraying frags all over the place. That's liable to get real messy."

He had looked at the gun as if it would bite him.

"Christ, what the hell do you use when you go out in the desert all by yourself?" I'd asked him.

He had reached into his pack and pulled out a small canister about ten inches long with a circumference only slightly larger than that of a small billy club.

"What the hell is that?". I'd said.

"XQ-4," he had said. "Chemical irritant. It's got good range, you don't have to be all that accurate. It discourages most creatures without harming them."

"Well, what happens if you get a stubborn one that just keeps right on coming?"

He had reached into his pack again and took out a leather bootsheath, from which he had pulled a huge honest-to-God Bowie knife. I had stared at it with disbelief.

"You're kidding," I'd said.

He had frowned slightly. "Why, what's wrong with it?" he had asked.

"Nothing, if you want to whittle tent pegs or chop carrots. But as a serious weapon, it leaves something to be desired."

"Breck's got knives," he had said.

"Breck's got reflexes that are at least three times as fast as yours, to say nothing of his strength," I'd told him. "Do yourself a favor. Forget the pigsticker and take the gun."

He had the semiauto in his hand now, but he had also tucked the Bowie down into his boot.

"O'Toole!" Breck's voice in my mind snapped me out of it. "You hear it?"

From somewhere up ahead of us came a roaring sound that echoed through the cavern.

"Water," Higgins thought as he came up behind me. "It's an underground waterfall!"

As we rounded the bend, the tunnel opened out into a large cavern. The torches we carried could not begin to illuminate it all. I could feel the spray from the waterfall on my face. Its roar was deafening.

Breck fired his plasma pistol at the roof of the cavern. The charges slammed into several large stalactites, superheating them and causing them to ignite, the mineral deposits in them burning with a white-hot flame and lighting up the cavern all around us.

The waterfall roared down from a fissure in the wall about sixty feet above us. It crashed down into a depression about forty feet below. Billowing clouds of misty spray came rising up from the churning water. The crumbled rocks around the waterfall's base were glistening, but not only from the spray.

One of the Nomads started screaming, batting at himself wildly. A dozen or more translucent, silvery lumps of protoplasm clung to him, creatures that looked less like slugs than like fist-sized globules of mercury. A large rock outcropping next to which he'd stood was covered with them. It glistened with slime as they moved over it, some of them the size of grapefruits, others larger, more oblong, up to several feet in length. The Nomad scrambled back blindly from the rock outcropping, screaming and tearing the creatures off his body, and before anyone could stop him, he slipped over the edge and fell to his death onto the rocks below. As I stared down in horrified fascination, the rocks began to squirm and writhe. They rose up over the body of the fallen Nomad and

covered it completely as they started to assimilate it.

The other Nomads were jabbing with their spears at the silvery globules on the ground around them, hammering at the creatures with their axes and thrusting down at them with their torches. The torches were having more effect. Some of the smaller globules began to bubble and run, like plastic melting. The other ambimorphs escaped by turning into insects and rapidly scuttling away or shapechanging into various small animals and reptiles native to Purgatory-lizards, sandstriders, and other creatures I'd never even seen before. A number of them turned into leather flyers similar to birds. A bunch of them flew at my face and I cried out as I backed away, shielding my eyes. I felt stinging pain in my hands and on my arms and when I looked at them, they were bleeding in a dozen places where the flesh had been torn away.

"O'Toole! Help me! I've dropped my gun!"

Higgins was backed up against a wall, an expression of stark terror on his face as several of the creatures crawled toward him, shapechanging into voracious multilegged sandstriders as they came. He reached out to me desperately.

"Throw me your gun, quick!" he shouted.

Without thinking, I almost did it when a voice inside my mind cried, "No!" and a Bowie knife came whistling through the air past my ear and thudded into his chest, embedding itself almost completely to the hilt. He cried out and clutched at the huge blade, then sank down to his knees and fell forward onto his face. I turned, stunned, to see the real Higgins standing a short distance behind me, waving me on.

"Think, O'Toole, don't talk!" he thought at me through the mindlink. "Remember, ambimorphs can't send!"

He fired several stunners, clicked on an empty magazine, jacked it out, and slapped in a red one.

"Higgins! That's a frag-"

"I know, damn it, the stunners aren't even slowing the damn things down!"

Breck came plunging past me, carrying one of the plasteel polymer sacks in his right hand. Something inside it was squirming.

"Let's go!" his voice came through the mindlink, "I've bagged a couple of them! Everyone get out! Get out now!" He passed me, firing as he ran.

I fired a plasma charge at a cloud of cluttering insects that came down at us from the ceiling of the cavern. It incinerated most of them and steamed into the waterfall. Breck was firing down at the rocks, where the creatures were breeding. The larger ones were dividing rapidly, stretching like glistening translucent taffy and breaking apart like globules of quicksilver. They bubbled as the plasma charges whumped into the rocks, frying them and igniting the mineral deposits.

The entire cavern was in flames. Plasma commingled with the spray mist filled the underground chamber with fire and steam. There were loud popping sounds as rock cracked and shattered from the intense heat. Spray hitting the burning plasma filled the cavern with a hissing as if the place were filled with thousands of gigantic snakes.

I felt something winding itself around my leg. The nightmare plucked from my subconscious coiled itself around me, its jaws gaping wide. I incinerated its head with a plasma blast, wincing as the wash of heat blistered my skin. My hides were smoking. I heard the sound of Higgins firing the frag rounds, the echoing blasts as they went off, and then the ominous rumble from the rock walls.

A Nomad was suddenly in front of me, holding a spear. I leveled my pistol at him. "Who are you?" I thought at him, and he made the mistake of replying out loud, in English.

"Don't shoot, I'm Garr!"

"Wrong answer," I said, and fired point-blank at his chest.

The creature screamed briefly as the plasma whumped into its torso, burning a huge hole straight through it. The body burst into flames and fell backward, a charred hulk of crackling, steaming flesh. And then I heard shrill screaming as Tyla and several of the male Nomads became engulfed by an army of tiny shapechangers in the form of sandstriders.

The voracious crablike creatures swarmed over them, turning their bodies black with their wriggling hairy forms. The Nomads screamed in terror and agony. Tyla panicked, sending waves of searing pain and hysterical fear through the mindlink. Higgins screamed out her name and lunged toward her. Two Nomad males grabbed him and started to pull him away as he struggled, screaming her name, and then I felt her shrieking terror in my mind, her unspeakable agony as the sandstriders ate her alive. I leveled my plasma pistol at her and fired a blast on wide dispersion.

For an incandescent second, I "felt" a wash of unbelievably intense, searing heat all over my body and then she was gone and Higgins was screaming as the Nomads carried him away. I kept firing ceaselessly, feeling the pistol growing hot in my hand as creatures of every size, shape, and description scuttled, crawled, flew, and slithered toward me as the cavern burned and clouds of steam obscured my vision and choked my lungs. Then there was a rumbling that was even louder than the roaring of the waterfall and the hissing of the steam and I

turned and ran, the last one out, my legs pumping as I followed the bobbing torches ahead of me down the tunnel. The entire damn mountain was coming down, the rock groaning like some gigantic beast in its dying throes, and then it roared its last as tons of stone cascaded down behind me.

It was happening again, just like the last time, when the wall of rock came down and crushed our skimmer, burying Stone. I ran blindly, ignoring the pain as I sideswiped a rock outcropping and scraped my side raw. I ran, my lungs bursting, stark terror driving me as the tunnel shook and I felt tremors in the ground beneath my feet. Behind me, there was a sound like thunder, like a bomb going off, and the ceiling of the tunnel started to cave in on me.

I felt the rocks raining down, the shards of stone lacerating me ... and then Tali was there, inside my mind, urging me on, giving me a fresh burst of energy and speed and I saw daylight up ahead. As I burst out of the tunnel, I felt powerful hands grab me underneath my arms and lift me as two Nomads, Garr and Zaal, picked me up and ran with me down the slope. Then we were falling, tumbling head over heels as the ground shook and the mountain collapsed in upon itself.

I gulped in air as I lifted my head and saw Breck on his hands and knees, still holding onto the plasteel polymer sack. The creatures in the sack were squirming, trying to break free, but the material held. Breck slammed the sack savagely against the ground several times and they stopped squirming. Tali and Toli had both made it out. Toli had collapsed upon the ground. She looked unconscious. There was no sign of Lina. Of the males, only six were left and all of them were wounded, two of them badly. Breck was breathing hard and his face was ashen. I'd never seen him look that way before.

"I felt it," he said, swallowing hard, his chest rising and falling as he

breathed deeply. "Her fear, her terror, I actually felt it! So that's what it's like! I had no idea! I never knew anything could be so incredibly ..." His voice trailed off as he failed to find words to describe an emotion he had never before experienced and then he saw Higgins sitting on the ground, staring at him with a stricken expression. "My God, I'm sorry, Higgins," Breck said. "I'm truly sorry."

I tried to lift myself up off the ground, but I had nothing left. Nothing whatsoever. Tendrils of smoke curled up from my blackened hides. My face, arms, hands, and legs were scored with scrapes and lacerations. I felt blood running down from a large gash in my forehead. My right side was badly bruised from a collision with a rock outcropping and it felt as if I might have fractured several ribs. The plasma pistol, still gripped tightly in my right hand, was so hot that the grips had melted and burned into my flesh.

I felt Tali gently easing her way into my mind, shielding me, enveloping me, shutting me off from the agonies of my battered body. I felt as if I were drifting, cut loose from myself and floating in a warm and soothing darkness. I heard Breck saying something to me, but I could not make out the words. They seemed to echo in my mind. I could no longer see, I could no longer feel. The last thing I heard was the far-off sound of Higgins softly sobbing.

TWELVE

The plasteel polymer tape around my chest felt tight, which was the general idea. I wasn't supposed to move much, not with three fractured ribs. My right hand was tightly wrapped, as well, where the plasma pistol grips had melted and

burned into my palm. My arms and legs were bandaged, my face felt swollen, and I ached all over.

"How do you feel?" said the doctor.

"Like a mountain fell on me," I said.

"I've given you something for the pain," the doctor said, "but it won't knock all of it out and I wouldn't want it to. I want you to hurt a little, so you'll take it easy for a while."

I was strapped down onto a gurney inside some sort of small room. I was still feeling slightly disoriented. I seemed to feel a sensation of motion. I looked around. "Where am I?"

"In the cargo compartment of a desert sled," said the doctor. "Perhaps not the fastest way to travel, but it's the best thing I could come up with on such short notice. My name's Shulman. Dr. Jay Shulman. Your friend Breck is up front, driving. Your Nomad girl is sleeping up front in the passenger seats, along with Higgins. He's a bit banged up, but nowhere near as bad as you are. The Nomad girl's not hurt; however, she was totally worn out. She looked on the verge of collapse, but she wouldn't leave your side. I had to plead with her to take a rest."

"How did you find us?" I said. "Who-"

"I received a priority-red tachyon transmission from a man named Coles," said Shulman. "I've never received a priority-red transmission in my life and I didn't even know anyone who had, so you bet I sat up and took notice. I took even more notice when your Mr. Coles offered me the equivalent of a year's salary and an appointment to the staff of a corporate medical facility on Earth if I dropped everything I was doing and immediately took a medevac across the desert to some Nomad village in the high country."

"Coles did that?"

"Indeed, he did. You've got friends in high places, O'Toole. And it's a good thing, too. You're going to need them."

"What do you mean?"

"You've got the people out here in a pretty ugly mood. There's a warrant out for Breck's arrest on a charge of murder. He's been accused of killing a man named Strang and a young woman named Jane Carmody, who worked for Cody Jarrett. You and Higgins have been charged as accessories, along with that Nomad wife of his. What's more, Jarrett's disappeared and everyone knows he went out into the desert, after you. People think you did him in, as well."

"What do you think?"

"I think I sure would like to get off this goddamned rock and back to a well-paying appointment as a medical director back on Earth," he said. "That thought pretty much occupies my mind right now. Beyond that, I don't think anything."

"You've told Breck all this?"

Shulman nodded. "He didn't seem terribly concerned. He said he expected it. He assures me that your Mr. Coles will take care of the problem. Or should I say our Mr. Coles?" He smiled. "I'd just about given up on ever getting out of here. I'll tell you something, O'Toole, for what your friend Coles is offering, I'd help you get off planet even if you did do it."

"So then you don't believe we did it?"

"If you did, do me a favor and don't tell me. My conscience will rest a little easier if I continue to believe you're innocent."

"Well, in that case, Doctor, your conscience can rest easy. I can swear to you

on a stack of Bibles and my mother's grave that we didn't kill any people on Purgatory."

"That's good enough for me," he said. He got up and went over to a rack of storage bins built into the bulkhead. "However, in case it's not good enough for the security boys . . ." He lifted the lid and reached inside. He pulled out an assault rifle.

"I've got four more of these in here," he said. "Never a good idea to go out into the bush unarmed, you know. Lots of dangerous creatures out here." He put the rifle back inside the bin, then reached in again and took out a couple of objects that looked like very large bright-red eggs. "And I figured I'd bring along a few of these as well," he added.

My eyes widened. "Where the hell did you get those?" They were plasma incendiary grenades. "Those are supposed to be military issue only!"

Shulman shrugged. "Supply-side economics," he said.

"What?"

"I created a demand, and there arose an outlet of supply."

"What the hell kind of doctor are you?" I asked him.

Shulman raised his eyebrows. "A surgeon, of course."

Higgins came into the back. "How's he doing?" he said.

"Ask him yourself," said Shulman. "He'll be okay if he takes it easy for a while. I'll keep him strapped in till we get to the spaceport. With any luck, we'll be off planet before anyone even knows you're back."

Higgins looked down at me. "You okay?" he said.

I nodded. "I'll live. Listen, Grover, about Tyla . . ."

He shook his head and held up a hand to stop me. "It's all right," he said, his face expressionless. "You did what you had to do. I understand. If our roles

were reversed, I'd have done the same. She was dead, anyway. You just saved her a lot of pain." He closed his eyes briefly, squeezing them shut, and clenched his teeth. A moment later, he had himself in hand again. He looked at me and nodded. "It's all right," he said again. "I guess there's nothing to hold me here now. I'm going back with you."

"How's Tali?"

"Exhausted," he said. He looked pretty bad, himself. "She kept you under until Doc Shulman was able to get out to us. That, plus the mindlink, has taken it all out of her."

"I owe her a great deal," I said. "She saved my life. And I'm making it up to her by taking her away from her home world, away from her people and everything she knows."

"Don't lay that on yourself," said Higgins. "You're not taking her anywhere. She's going because it will help her people. And also because she wants to. You couldn't do anything with her against her will. She's glimpsed bits and pieces of human society through telepathic communion with you and she wants to learn more about it, to experience it for herself. Don't worry about Tali. She knows exactly what she's doing."

"I don't know, maybe you're right. But I can't help feeling as if I'm taking a young girl away from her home and family, like I'm robbing the cradle or something."

"True, she is young," Higgins said. "For a Nomad."

"What does that mean?"

"It means she's not quite as young as you might think. Their lifespan is considerably longer than ours," said Higgins. "If anyone's doing any cradle

robbing around here, it's her."

"How old is she?" I said.

"Difficult to tell," said Higgins. "Nomads aren't too concerned with things like counting birthdays. She's probably got at least twenty or thirty years on you, maybe more. By Nomad standards, O'Toole, you're just a child."

"We're approaching the terminal," Breck's voice came over the speaker. "And it looks as if we've been expected. They've got the shuttle hangars blocked off."

Shulman started breaking out the arms and slapping in the magazines, checking them very professionally.

"Are you sure this guy's a doctor?" I asked Higgins.

"I served with eighteen different M.A.S.H. units in thirteen corporate mercenary wars," said Shulman, tossing Higgins an assault rifle. "I've seen about every kind of wound and injury there is. If you're busted up so bad that I can't patch you up, believe me, no one can."

"Doc Shulman's about the best we've got out here," said Higgins. "His bedside manner leaves something to be desired, though."

His wasn't the sort of background that would appeal to most medical institutions, I thought, but it would impress a man like Coles, who dealt in the harsher realities of life. The sled settled to the ground with a diminishing whine of engines. Shulman came over to my gurney and released the catches on the straps.

"Sit up slowly now," he said, helping me up with one hand and holding an assault rifle in the other. "Feeling any pain?"

"Some," I said, wincing as I sat up. And, abruptly, the pain all went away. I glanced up and saw Tali standing in the companionway.

Shulman noticed her and pointed an admonishing finger at her. "Now don't you go

blinking out all his pain again," he said. "He needs a little pain to warn him when he's pushing himself too far. Let him feel at least a little of it, otherwise he might injure himself worse. You understand?"

She nodded. "I understand. Enough pain to warn, but not enough to suffer."

"You got it," Shulman said. He shook his head. "Boy, I wish I had her with me in some of the M.A.S.H. units I served with. Telepathic anesthesiology, would you believe it? Mental acupuncture! Christ, these people would be invaluable in battlefield conditions!"

"You didn't seem so interested when I asked you to fly out to their village with me and treat some of their sick," said Higgins.

"Are you going to start with that again?" said Shulman. "Look, I told you, I was being paid to patch up workers who kept opening each other's skulls with lug wrenches and getting injured on the job. I wasn't getting paid to fly out across the desert and give antibiotics to the natives because you 'd infected them with a cold virus."

"What about your Hippocratic oath?"

"Hippocrates didn't pay my tuition to medical school. And nowhere in the oath does it say that people are entitled to the fruits of my labors for free."

"What about charity?" said Higgins.

"Charity's worth exactly what you pay for it," said Shulman, slamming back the bolt on his rifle. "Let me tell you something, Higgins, people don't value anything unless it costs 'em." He glanced out the window and snorted. "Got ourselves a bit of a mob out there," he said. "Lots of familiar faces. I've patched up over half those guys at one time or another."

"And now you're going to shoot them?" Higgins said.

"Hell, I put 'em together, I can blow 'em apart," said Shulman. "Look, treehugger, I know those people out there. They're a rough bunch and they're mad. Pointing a gun at them isn't going to stop them. You'd better shoot. Otherwise, give the rifle to O'Toole here. He doesn't look like he's afraid to pull the trigger."

"I'm not afraid," said Higgins, tightly. But he put down the rifle just the same and took the semiauto I'd given him out of its holster. "But I think I'll use this instead. I've loaded it with stunners. I don't want to kill anyone unless I have to."

"Suit yourself," said Shulman. He glanced sharply at Tali as she picked up the assault rifle Higgins had put down. "Hey, be careful with that!"

She slammed back the bolt the way she'd seen Shulman do and looked at him questioningly. "Now it is ready to function?" she said.

Shulman looked at her steadily for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, just point it and squeeze the trigger," he said, indicating the trigger on his own weapon. He glanced at me. "Like I said, I could've used her in my M.A.S.H. units."

From outside, a voice blared over a bullhorn. "Come on out, Breck! We know you're in there! If you try to take off again in that sled, we'll open fire and blow your fuel cells!"

Breck came into the back. He glanced at me, sitting up on the gurney, looking like a wounded caveman in my hide loincloth, taped chest, and bandages. "How do you feel?" he said.

"A little stiff, but I'll manage," I said.

"Here, take this," he said, handing me his semiauto.

I took it with my left hand. I glanced at the grip indicator and saw a strip of red through the clear plastic. It was loaded with frags.

"Can you shoot left-handed?" Shulman said.

"I can learn," I said. I looked at Breck. "Isn't there any way we can avoid this?"

"I'm open for suggestions," he said.

I didn't have any.

"When's the next shuttle due out?" I asked Shulman.

He gave me a wry look. "What do you think this is, O'Toole, a commuter route?

We're not exactly on the main line out here, you know. There's no schedule. A ship comes when it comes and then they send a shuttle up. Or one comes down.

Your friend Coles said to get you to the terminal. All right, I got you to the terminal. Next move is up to him. And I hope like hell he makes it soon."

"We might have a long, long wait," said Higgins. "And those people out there don't look very patient."

"That's their problem," Shulman said, lining up a row of frag magazines on top of the storage bin beside him.

"Breck!" the voice on the bullhorn called again. "This is Security Chief Blaisedell. We have a warrant for your arrest, and the arrest of Arkady O'Toole, Grover Higgins, and the Nomad female known as Tyla. Now we know you're in there. Come on out and nobody will get hurt."

"I wonder what your friend Coles had in mind," said Higgins, glancing out the window nervously. "If any of those men out there are armed with plasma weapons, we're going to fry in here."

"The consortium wouldn't risk arming Blaisedell or any of his thugs with plasma weapons," Shulman said. "Still, you never know. Things manage to get smuggled in." He snapped a plasma grenade onto the launcher attachment of his assault

rifle.

"Breck, O'Toole, stay put," said Coles, speaking to us through our biochips.

"I've got a light battle cruiser heading your way. I've had it stationed out there in an asteroid belt, where the scanners on Purgatory couldn't pick it up. They should be there any moment."

"Well, I hope they hurry," I said.

"What?" said Shulman. "Who're you talking to?"

"Coles," I said. I tapped my head.

Shulman understood. "Well? Is he sending help to get us out of here or isn't he?"

"A light cruiser's on the way," said Breck.

"A battle cruiser?" Shulman said. "God damn! I might get off this lousy rock yet!"

"Breck! I'm only gonna give you one more chance . . ." Blaisedell called over the bullhorn.

Shulman slid open the window. "Blaisedell!" he shouted.

"That you, Doc?"

"Yeah, it's me. You'd better back those people off if you don't want 'em to get hurt!"

"Can't do that, Doc. You're making a mistake. I don't know what they've offered you, but believe me, it's not worth it."

"Oh, yes, it is."

"They killed a girl, Doc. And they murdered Strang and Jarrett, too."

"They tell me they haven't."

"We got proof."

"Fine. Come on in and show it to me and I might reconsider."

"Now don't be a fool, Doc. You come on out. And tell those people in there with you that if they're smart, they'll come out, too. There aren't any ships up there. Nobody's going anywhere. You'd never even make it to the shuttle hangars."

"I hope Mr. Coles knows what he's doing," Shulman said softly. Then he yelled out the window, "I'm warning you, Blaisedell, you better back those people off. We're armed with assault rifles in here, just like you are. And we've got some plasma, too. You start shooting, we're gonna have to shoot right back."

"You always were a lousy poker player, Doc! You're bluffing!"

"Call it, then!"

"You asked for it, Doc!"

Several rounds of fragmentation fire hit the sled. The rounds exploded and blew jagged gaping holes in the bulkhead.

"Read 'em and weep, Blaisedell!" shouted Shulman, firing the grenade launcher out the window. It made a hollow, metallic, chunking noise and a moment later, it went off with a tremendous WHUMP! A huge cloud of orange and black flame blossomed on the tarmac behind the crowd and they scattered in all directions.

"This isn't necessary!" Higgins said. "Can't we explain it to them? They don't understand!"

"Even if they gave us a chance to explain," said Breck, "they'd never believe it."

"You could show them!" Higgins insisted. "You could show them the living proof!"

"And risk having them escape after all we went through to capture them?" Breck said. He shook his head. "I don't think so, Higgins. There's far too much riding on this. I'm not taking any chances."

"You figure Coles is going to broadcast this?" I asked Breck.

Breck grimaced. "Somehow, I doubt it. Shooting up innocent civilians can't be too good for our image."

He broke a window with his nysteel hand as sporadic fire broke out and let loose with several bursts from his assault rifle. Tali watched him carefully for a moment, then went over to another window, opened it, and started firing her rifle in short bursts to keep the barrel from overheating, just like Breck was doing.

Shulman snapped on another plasma grenade and fired the launcher. Chunk . . .

WHUMP! Another flame cloud burst upon the tarmac, making a huge burning crater just in front of the terminal building. The terminal caught fire. I started to get up off the gurney, but Shulman waved me back down.

"You stay right where you are, O'Toole," he said. "I don't want you ruining any of my good work."

Several fragmentation rounds hit the sled and sent shrapnel flying through it, missing me by inches. I ducked down and winced at the pain in my ribs.

"I don't think it's much safer back here," I said.

The sled was starting to resemble a cheese grater. I was bleeding from my shoulder and my forehead, where I'd been hit by flying shrapnel. Breck was bleeding on the side of his face and Higgins had been hit, as well. He was tying a makeshift tourniquet around his left arm.

"If they manage to hit the fuel cells, we've had it," he said.

"We can't sit here and wait any longer," said Breck. "We'll have to make a run for one of the shuttles and get airborne."

"We'd never make it," Shulman said. "They'd cut us down before we were even halfway there!"

"Not if we take the sled," Breck said, heading for the cockpit.

"If we lift off and retract the landing struts, it'll expose the fuel cells,"

Shulman said.

"So we won't retract the landing struts," said Breck, starting the engines.

"Are you crazy?" Shulman shouted over the whine of the engines. "This thing doesn't lift any higher than six feet off the ground! The struts are five feet long! If we catch one, it'll flip us over!"

A burst of frag fire stitched the bulkhead about a foot away from him, blowing a huge hole in the side of the sled and sending shrapnel flying across it to penetrate the bulkhead on the other side. Shulman screamed as shrapnel lacerated his face and chest.

"Ahhhh! Jesus! Shit, go for it!"

I felt the sled start to lift as Shulman propped himself against the bulkhead, beside the huge hole that had just been blown in it, and fired several plasma grenades in rapid succession. Tali fired repeated bursts with her assault rifle. Her hair was matted with dark blood. Higgins stood beside me, steadying me.

"This is madness," he said, shaking his head helplessly. "Those people don't know, they don't understand . . ."

"I know," I said, patting him on the shoulder with my right hand, forgetting it was injured and wincing with pain the moment I did it. I was hurting a lot more now that Tali's attention was occupied and the drugs Shulman had given me were wearing off.

Another burst of frag fire slammed into the side of the skimmer as Breck turned it around its own axis and I was thrown off the gurney onto the floor. Higgins was knocked off his feet as well. I yelled with pain, clutching at my chest.

Tali was there in an instant, lying beside me, sheltering me with her body. I felt the pain begin to ebb as she shut it off inside my mind and then I glanced at Higgins. The entire left side of his face was bloody and there was a large jagged piece of shrapnel stuck in his upper arm. He was grimacing, gasping with pain.

"Tali..." I said, glancing at him, and she nodded. Higgins breathed deeply and looked up at her gratefully.

"Can you manage both of us?" he said.

"I will manage," she replied, picking up the pistol I had dropped and tucking it inside her belt at the small of her back. "For a while."

"A while should do," I said. "I hope."

"God damn it, Breck, keep her steady!" Shulman shouted as the sled lurched and almost banged a landing strut into the tarmac. He launched another grenade, trying to make it hit the tarmac between us and Blaisedell's men, so that the flame cloud would temporarily obscure us from view. The sled hovered six feet off the ground, moving toward the shuttle hangars. Blaisedell had the hangars blocked off with a row of vehicles.

"Doc!" Breck shouted from up front. "I'm going to turn her broadside for a moment! I need you to clear the way!"

"Got it!"

Breck brought the sled around and Shulman took aim with the grenade launcher and fired. He scored a direct hit on the row of carts and trucks and they exploded in a cloud of black and orange flame. Now all we had to do was drive right through it.

"Hang on!" Breck shouted. He straightened the sled and gave it full throttle forward.

"Oh, shit!" said Shulman, throwing himself down onto the floor.

Smoke and flame billowed through the gaping holes shot in the bulkheads as we drove through the burning wreckage. One of the struts caught on something briefly and we heard a horrible scraping sound as the sled lurched sideways, almost flipped, and then lurched straight ahead again as the strut was pulled free. Breck brought the sled up alongside the hangar, then fired his plasma pistol through the cockpit windows at the hangar door. White flame billowed against the side of the sled briefly as the plasma melted through the door, then Shulman was leaping down, jumping through the glowing hole in the hangar door, and opening it from inside. Higgins and Tali helped me down and then the sled moved off once again. Higgins stared after it in disbelief.

"What the hell is he doing?" he said.

"He's got to get the damn thing out of the way, doesn't he?" Shulman said.

We watched as the sled started to head off in the direction of the terminal, where most of Blaisedell's men were, then Breck came leaping down out of it, running across the tarmac toward us, and drawing all their fire as the sled veered crazily out of control.

"Come on, let's go!" Breck shouted.

We climbed aboard the shuttle and started running down the companionway toward the cockpit when the door at the far end opened and Gil Cavanaugh stepped out, holding a rifle.

"Don't even think about it," he said. "I'll know it in a second. Drop your weapons."

"Cavanaugh!" said Higgins.

"No, not Cavanaugh," Breck said. "There may have been a Cavanaugh once, but not

anymore."

"You suspected me right from the first," the creature said. "But you weren't sure, were you? I, on the other hand, never have that problem. I can see all I need to see by looking in your mind. You have something inside a special container in that pack of yours, Breck. Take it out and open it."

"I don't think so," Breck said. "Why don't you come and get it?"

"Don't be a fool," said the ambimorph. "I-don't, Doc! You'll never reach that rifle. Remember, I can read your every thought. The first one of you who even thinks about trying anything will-"

Tali quickly reached behind her, pulled out the pistol she had tucked into her belt, and fired four times point-blank into the creature's chest. It dropped the rifle and went flying back against the cockpit door as the frag rounds hit its chest and exploded.

"It could not read every thought," she said.

"Damn!" said Shulman. "Let's go! Let's get the hell out of here before Blaisedell comes down on top of us!"

Breck ran into the cockpit and we all crowded in behind him.

"I sure hope you know how to fly this thing," said Higgins as Breck sat down in the pilot's seat and started flicking switches. The engines began to whine.

"I think I can manage," Breck said. "If we have the time."

As we started to roll out of the hangar, we saw several carts and trucks come barreling across the tarmac from the direction of the terminal, veering around the burning craters and heading straight for us.

"We'll never make it," Shulman said. "They know we can't return their fire from in here. Shit! I knew I'd never get off this goddamned rock!"

The front part of the shuttle cleared the hangar doorway and Breck had to turn

sharply to avoid the burning wreckage in front of us. We were moving, but we were moving far too slowly. Blaisedell's men were closing the distance fast and we could hear the sound of their weapons firing.

"Come on, come on . . ." said Higgins.

"They're going to cut us off!" said Shulman. "Damn you, Blaisedell, you son of a bitch ..."

Suddenly the lead two carts veered crazily as two huge bursts of plasma struck the tarmac on either side of them and six more orange and black clouds erupted in twin, parallel bursts, bracketing the other vehicles as the fighter banked low over the tarmac and veered away, turning to make another run as a second fighter came in behind it. Shulman let out a whoop.

"All right, Navy!" he shouted. "We're going to make it! We're going to make it!"

He slapped me on the back and I saw stars. "Oh, hell, O'Toole! I'm sorry! I forgot!"

He and Tali eased me down into a seat and strapped me in. I felt the shuttle lifting off seconds before I lost consciousness.

EPILOGUE

It had been a while since I had lived with a woman. I suppose it's arguable whether you can correctly refer to a nonhuman female as a woman, since "man" and "woman" are distinctly human terms, while "male" and "female" are not. In any case, that's what the xenobiologists tell me. I try not to get hung up about it. Everyone else-except the xenobiologists, of course- tends to think of Tali as a woman, which is fine with me because I prefer things to be uncomplicated. My

life is confusing enough as it is. Most people who meet Tali don't even realize that she's not human. She looks more human than a lot of people you see nowadays, especially the cyberpunks with their rad, hardwired mods. Some of their style has caught on with the social set and those who don't know that Tali isn't human merely assume she's being fashionable.

We didn't get to see much of each other for the first few weeks after we got back to Earth. I required some medical attention and anyone trying to see Tali would've had to beat the xenobiologists off with a stick. Still, we got to see each other for at least an hour or so each day. Tali had insisted upon that, otherwise she'd refused to cooperate with them. And when two people can achieve telepathic intimacy, you'd be surprised how much you can accomplish in an hour.

For all their theoretical knowledge, the xenobiologists had a hard time understanding that. They kept apologizing to me for keeping my wife in protective quarantine until they could determine if it was safe for her to wander abroad in our highly infectious society. They were frustrated because she wouldn't let them simply poke and prod at will and she demanded explanations for everything they did. Her being telepathic also made them nervous. It led to some amusing incidents.

One young xenobiologist became so taken with her feral beauty that he could not keep from having sexual fantasies about her and despite Tali's respect for other people's mental privacy, he was so "loud" a thinker that she could not help picking up his thoughts. I had explained to her that it would not be considered improper for her to use telepathy to assist them in their scientific research, because it wasn't really personal, but I hadn't quite anticipated anything like what happened. Since the human proclivity for sexual fantasizing was something Nomads didn't share, under the circumstances, Tali interpreted the young

xenobiologist's erotic fantasies as scientific interest. And since he was so intent on contemplating what it would be like to mate with her, she decided to satisfy his curiosity. She gave him a telepathic mating experience, non-physical and nonemotional, but complete with all the sense impressions and sensations, which allowed him to vividly remember doing something he had never actually done. The poor guy was thrown for such a loop, he didn't come in to work for two days and when he finally returned, he couldn't even look at her without blushing and breaking into a frightful stutter.

When they were satisfied that Tali could survive living on Earth-and that she had not brought any nasty organisms with her that we did not have here-they released her from protective quarantine and she moved in with me. She was just as curious about the way we lived as the xenobiologists were curious about her. We divided our time between long sessions with the scientists and occasional outings in the city. There were some minor problems, such as her outright refusal to eat cooked meat in restaurants and her dismay at realizing that there wasn't anywhere she could go to kill her own fresh game. We had a bad moment with someone's pet poodle in a park once, but after that, Tali resigned herself to eating the raw meat I brought home from the market. She liked the better cuts of steak, although she missed lapping up the warm blood.

What disturbed her most was the cacophony of human thought, especially in a crowded city like New York. She didn't understand the crowding, either. She failed to comprehend why anyone would want to live in such close quarters or in such a noisy, filthy environment. And human social interaction was a constant fascination and a puzzle to her. Our communications systems were a source of endless wonder to her and one of the first things that she had me do was put

through a call to Kami at The Pyramid Club in Tokyo.

The two of them hit it off at once and they talked for about an hour, which astonished me because Kami was the least talkative person I had ever known. She wanted us to fly out to Tokyo and visit her on the Ginza Strip, but we couldn't get away from Coles and his researchers and Kami couldn't leave her gambling empire with the Yakuza still trying to wrest control back from the bandit gangs.

I wondered if the day would ever come when we all stopped fighting battles.

As fascinated as the scientists were with Tali, they were simply blown away by the two young ambimorphs that Breck had captured. They had built a special maximum security lab for observing them, complete with a sealed clean room with a sophisticated environmental system in which the creatures were kept.

Microporous double airlocks were used for introducing food and other things into the chamber and every fail-safe system that anyone could think of had been built into the lab. They showed it off to Breck and me and were proudly telling us how impossible it would be for the creatures to get out when they looked inside and saw to their horror that in spite of all the elaborate precautions they had taken, the shapechangers had somehow managed to escape!

Alarms went off all over the place and sealed doors came down and everything was pandemonium until Breck asked them if the ambimorphs had ever left their food uneaten. And, of course, they had eaten their food. They had merely assumed its shape in an attempt to fool their captors, which they very nearly succeeded in doing. It shook the smart boys up a bit, but it taught them that all the fail-safe systems and security precautions in the world were only as good as the guy who controlled the on-and-off switch.

One of the first things they learned about the creatures was that they did not leave the sluglike slime trails in their natural form. The slime, which the lab

boys were extremely curious about since they'd never seen it firsthand, was thought to be part of the creatures' reproductive process. The xenobiologists were all anxiously looking forward to the day when the shapechangers would mature and divide into more shapechangers, slime and all. Their worst fear was that the ambimorphs would not reproduce in captivity. I had to laugh. Here we were, trying to find ways to kill the creatures off, and the xenobiologists were anxious to breed more of them. I hoped to hell they knew what they were doing. They had all the requisite degrees, but I was always more impressed by street smarts than by sheepskins. For now, they had their hands full with the creatures and the ambimorphs weren't even fully grown yet. Eventually, they'd tire of changing into laboratory mice and rats and rubber balls and wooden blocks and they'd grow large enough to take on human form. And then the scientists would really get an education.

Higgins and Coles despised each other at first sight, though each had a grudging respect for the abilities of the other. Coles wanted Higgins on the research staff and Higgins wanted badly to accept, but there was an obstacle to their negotiations that at first seemed insurmountable. Higgins categorically refused to be implanted with a biochip and Coles would not have anyone around who could not be monitored. He was-not unreasonably, I suppose-terrified that shapechangers would infiltrate his nerve center. They finally found a way to reach a compromise. Permanent residential quarters would be set up for Higgins inside the maximum security Game Control nerve center-and Higgins would never set foot outside. It astonished me, but he actually agreed to those conditions. "It's the work that matters, O'Toole," he told me, philosophically. "It's all right. I'll be comfortable here."

"But, Jesus, Grover," I said, looking at his rugged outdoor complexion, "you'll never be able to go outside! You don't know Coles. He wasn't kidding. If you so much as set foot below the maximum security levels of this building, you're out. Finished. You'll never get back in again. He's so paranoid, he won't even accept it if Tali clears you."

"Actually, he knows damn well that if Tali vouched for me, I'd be okay," said Higgins. "No ambimorph could fool a Nomad. That's not what this is all about. This is an issue of control. He thinks I'll break down and accept a biochip implant, but I simply will not allow anyone access to my mind."

"But that means you'll have to play by his rules," I said.

"Are they his rules?" said Higgins, smiling. "So long as I've got something he wants, he plays by my rules. Otherwise I just take the tube down to the lobby and I'm out of here. I'm not a prisoner; I'm free to go if I choose. But what's on the outside for me? City streets? Residential towers? Pollution, traffic, people?" He shook his head. "There's nothing out there I want to see, O'Toole. Coles and I have cut a deal. When I'm fed up with this place, he buys me a one-way ticket to anywhere there's mountains and the animals haven't learned to run away from people yet. Meanwhile, he picks up room and board and provides me with the greatest scientific opportunity of my entire career. Believe me, it's not such a bad deal."

As for Purgatory, Coles kept his part of the bargain. The factories and waste dumps were closed down and the human settlements were evacuated under military supervision. Purgatory Station became a military garrison manned by the hybrid soldiers of the Special Service and the Nomads worked with the commandos to keep any shapechangers from leaving Purgatory in human form. Those in charge of the evacuation were shocked at the number of ambimorphs among the workers on

Purgatory. The Nomads were able to pick them out as they went through and a lot of them were killed, but many of the shapechangers managed to escape into the desert. Several SS units remained on the surface of the planet, taking over the largest of the residential complexes and establishing a permanent military ground base, so that they could work closely with the Nomads in an attempt to clean out all the ambimorphs. It was going to be one hell of a big job, one that would undoubtedly take years to complete-assuming that it could ever be completed-but if they succeeded, it would be the first indication that we could accomplish the same thing on Earth and in the colonies. Perhaps it wasn't much, but at least it was a start. Now, for the first time, thanks to the Nomads, we had a chance. The sad part of it all was that the lifeway of the Nomad tribes would be irrevocably changed. Civilization had arrived, with all of its complexities, and Purgatory would never again be the savage, unspoiled, primitive world it was when I had first arrived there. I never thought I'd say it, but I'm not sure the change is for the better.

The people who had lived and worked on Purgatory were a problem. They were far from thrilled at the prospect of losing their jobs and homes and once the evacuation got started, it became impossible to keep them from finding out the reason for it. When the person who's in front of you in the line waiting to get aboard the ship suddenly turns into a swarm of bugs and gets incinerated by a plasma blast on wide dispersal that passes by so close you get a tan, it's a little hard to accept being told, "It's nothing, don't worry, just keep the line moving." The only way to keep things under control was to declare martial law on Purgatory and brainwash everyone who'd been there.

They each received a biochip implant and some programming to qualify them for

positions elsewhere. And while the programmers were at it, they "installed" some artificial memories which suppressed the real memories of what had occurred on Purgatory. So far as any of the workers knew, the consortium had simply decided that the Purgatory plants were no longer cost effective and the ambimorph invasion was merely one of Psychodrome's adventures. And so the game continued. But cracks were starting to appear. It was inevitable. There was no way they could keep such a momentous secret and it was all about to bust wide open. There were only two ways to infallibly suppress a memory-murder or total mind wipe, which amounted to the same thing. Every one of the people who had been on Purgatory was a potential risk. Any one of them could break through the installed artificial memories and remember what had really happened, but there was nothing to be done. Coles knew it. From the start, it had been a waiting game. Sooner or later, it was bound to hit the fan and all that Coles was hoping for was that the truth disguised as media adventures would have enough desensitizing impact on the public that when the whole thing blew wide open, they wouldn't all go bugfuck. I wasn't sure if it would work or not. I knew that some people had a tendency to confuse media reality with real reality, but actually using real reality disguised as media reality to condition the public was a new one on me. Maybe it would work. Maybe not. But the news media was already beginning to smell the cover-up.

The broadcasts were beginning to have a strange effect on the home audience. A lot of them were starting to believe it and buy into the mindset. There had always been those who believed what they experienced on Psychodrome. We called them the "borderliners." They were the ones who always came up to us in public and greeted us like old comrades in arms, wanting to slap our backs and reminisce about the last adventure they had shared with us. We always tried to

humor them. You'd be surprised how often you can have a friendly conversation with someone without letting on that you don't know their name. But I had always more or less assumed that most people were capable of differentiating between reality and fantasy. Now, I wasn't even sure that I could do it. Psychodrome was erasing all the borders.

Something was getting through to the home audience, something that was feeding the little paranoias that we all have deep inside us, even those of us who like to think we're well adjusted. The ratings on the alien invasion "game" were skyrocketing. As of the last scenario, Breck and I had become the number one rated psycho stars. What we were going through was scaring the hell out of people. And they kept coming back for more. The news media had started paying attention.

They began reporting on what they called "the terror broadcasts," cases of home viewers who had tuned in on the game and shortly thereafter committed suicide or gone out and done some violent act. The old argument of violent entertainment engendering violent behavior was trotted out again and the question of whether or not we were desensitizing our home audience to violence and death was hotly debated in one forum after another. Coles paid very close attention.

Something was getting through to them. And the more the news media talked about the "potential dangers" in "the latest ultra-violent offering from Psychodrome," the more people tuned in.

Breck finally understood now.

"I tell you, O'Toole," he told me over drinks, his eyes blazing from the bang smoke, "it was the most significant experience of my entire life. I'll never forget it. I don't mean to sound insensitive or morbid; I grieve for Tyla, but

I'll always cherish the memory of her terror as she died." He looked down into his drink. "I suppose that sounds a bit sick, doesn't it?"

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "No. Not to me. Not coming from you. I understand, you see. But I wouldn't talk about it to anybody else if I were you."

Breck smiled wryly. "There are times, O'Toole, when I feel as if we've known each other all our lives." He gazed off into the distance. "For the first time," he said softly, "I understand what was taken from us hybreeds when our genetic template was designed. Perhaps 'taken' isn't the right word, since we never had it to begin with, but, nevertheless, we were egregiously deprived."

He inhaled deeply on his bang stick and his eyes flared. He held the smoke in his lungs for a long moment and then exhaled heavily.

"It's astonishing to me how most people fail to understand the compelling attraction of violence," he said. "How they are ignorant of the pathology of fear. Perhaps it's because many of them don't really think. They merely react. The fact is that humans are a savage species. They had to be in order to survive. Other animals were bigger, stronger, faster, more resilient. . . humans were afraid of them, and so they became smarter and more vicious. Man is nature's most successful predator. Modern citizens don't like to hear that, though. We are all nonviolent and civilized these days. And yet children still tear the legs off spiders and adults dismember one another in the boardrooms."

He smiled. It was a sad smile. The smile of an outsider who understood the rest of us only too well.

And then, of course, there was Chameleon.

After his long-distance attempt against us while we were on Purgatory, the most dangerous shapechanger of them all seemed to have gone back underground. For a

while, with Tali occupying all of my attention, I had almost forgotten all about him. Until the night I woke up screaming.

It was a nightmare that refused to go away when I woke up. There were hundreds of snakes writhing on the floor around our bed. Sandstriders were scrambling out of the walls by the dozens, their multijointed, hairy legs wriggling through and pulling their fist-sized, hairy black bodies after them. They dropped down onto the floor and climbed up on the bed, scuttling like crabs across the bedsheets, their bone-crushing jaws snapping, and I could feel them crawling over me. The ceiling started to tremble and buckle. It had turned into the ceiling of the cavern back on Purgatory and shards of rock rained down upon me, bruising me and lacerating my skin.

I felt something grabbing me and pulling me down and I kept screaming and fighting until I realized that it was Tali holding me, pushing me back down onto the bed, entering my mind and soothing me, alarmed at the terrors that she saw there. The nightmare visions faded and then we both heard it in our minds, as cold and ominous as an echo in a tomb.

"Nomad . . . you cannot protect him. Your help will not avail. There's no place to hide, O'Toole. There's nowhere to run. I can reach out and find you anytime. I want you to give your Mr. Coles a message. Tell him that I have not even begun yet. And there is nothing he can do to stop me!"

The voice seemed to fill the room and suddenly he was standing there, at the foot of our bed, looking exactly as he had appeared when he had taken the form of the crystal hunter.

Nikolai Razin. The massive muscular frame was dressed all in black, the head was shaved, the eyes were cold and hard. As I stared at him, knowing it was an

induced hallucination, I still felt sweat breaking out all over me. His form blurred and long jet-black hair sprouted from his skull. The proportions of his body shifted, the features changed into the lovely contours of Stone Winters's face and, for a moment, she stood naked at the foot of our bed, beautiful and incredibly seductive. Then her facial features melted and she leaped, turning into a snarling sandcat in midair. The image faded as Tali forced it from my mind and we heard the haunting, far-off echo of Chameleon's laughter.

"This is only the beginning, O'Toole," the ghostly voice promised as it seemed to recede into the distance. "Only the beginning ..."