

Neal Asher - PROCTORS

Mr Coti pulled his rain cape closer about his shoulders and looked nervously out from under his barley-bowl hat. Cloud occluded the light of the moons. The rain was coming down in sheets and, having turned the street into a quagmire, was now turning it into a stream. This was good for Coti's work, since as a board-cutter in the wilderness, he was much in demand at this time of the year, but the cutting of boards was the last thing on his mind at that moment. It was imperative he got to Chief Scientist Lumi before they found him. This was his only insurance of survival: once he had imparted his news, Cromwell would leave him alone. Cromwell would not dare to go up against C S Lumi.

Coti halted at the corner of Blue Street, the boards creaky and slippery underneath him, and for a moment thought he might be able to reach his destination without mishap — Lumi's house was only a street away — then he saw the caped figures lurking in a side alley and darted back for cover. Few options now remained to him. He could either make a run for Lumi's house while making as much noise as possible and attracting all the attention he could, but the probable result of this would be a dart in the back, or he could sneak there, using what cover he could, but he reckoned every access would be covered. He decided his best option was neither of these. He would hide until morning and try to get to Lumi when he came out. Cromwell's people always preferred the cover of darkness for their nefarious doings. Hugging a wall Coti stepped off the boardwalk and crept back down the alley he had been about to leave. Back that way he had spotted a suitable woodpile he could hide in, but before he reached it, a girl stepped out of a shadowed doorway.

The girl was young and innocent looking and Coti thought she might just live here and have nothing to do with Cromwell. When she grinned and said, "Mr Coti," he knew otherwise. Two bulky figures followed her out of the doorway and stepped past her to grab him. Coti pulled his board cutter and switched it on. It hummed in the rain, inset lights flickering from red to green and back again. He swung it at his nearest assailant, who screamed and fell back as a board-thick slice of flesh and bone peeled from his shoulder.

The second man dropkicked Coti in the chest. The cutter flew from his grip and landed sizzling in the mud. In a moment, the man had Coti on his knees with his arm wrenched up around his back. The girl stepped forward, pulling something from under her rain cape while the first man staggered to the wall to lean against it moaning while he clutched his half-severed arm.

"Hurt the fucker! Hurt him!" said that one.

She knocked away Coti's hat, grabbed his hair, and pulled his head back. Coti awaited the cut that would open his throat, but it never came.

"You know what a blade beetle is?" she asked him.

Coti managed to scream just before the blade went into his guts. He retched and choked at the feel of it cutting into him, the feel of it still there. The girl held up an empty handle before his face and when the man released him, Coti fell face down in the mud, clutching at the full wound in his belly. Why did they have to do it like that? They didn't have to do it like that. The pain and horror of the knife wound in his guts were redoubled with a blade that remained inside, and began to make a nest there.

C S Lumi had been working in his laboratory since dawn when his doorbell chimed. It was not that he was by nature an early riser, but that the privilege he had been granted brought with it a deep feeling of responsibility. He saved the information he had been collating, from his notescreen to his house computer, took a long contemplative look at the nautiloids feeding in their tank, then took off his lab coat and headed for the door. The Chief Constable stood waiting for him.

"Sorry to bother you so early, sir, but there has been a killing."

Lumi studied the constable's leather uniform and thought how closely it made him resemble a Proctor. He thought how one day he might write a paper on the psychological effects of this.

"No bother, Brown, come in."

Chief Constable Brown removed his leather helmet, wiped his feet on the door mat, and stepped into the hall to stand almost at attention. Lumi had no authority over the police, nor any position in local politics, but having been granted privilege by the Owner, he was looked upon with respect and deferred to by all.

"Was it anyone I know?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, yes, it was Coti, the board cutter."

Lumi looked around in surprise as he pulled on his jacket. "Why would anyone want to kill him? Where did this happen, and how?"

"It happened very close to here, in the alley leading to the wood yard." Brown paused, obviously uncomfortable. "We think he was killed with a blade-beetle."

"Cromwell," said Lumi, his expression grim.

"There is, of course, no proof of this. We are questioning his people, but they will all alibi each other."

Lumi snorted and picked up the bag containing his study kit. "Let's go and have a look then."

Out on the boardwalk he gazed up at the clear sky, then down at the pools in the street. What a night for dying, and to die in such a way ... Brown headed down the boardwalk to the street bridge, beyond which Lumi could see a crowd around a taped-off area. In the centre of this area lay a muddy shape. It had been done in the alley. Coti must have managed to crawl that far before the beetle reached a vital organ or he had collapsed from blood loss.

The crowd parted before Lumi then closed behind him as he ducked under the tape and squatted by the corpse. Coti was on his back, his face in death relaxed into a kind of idiocy that belied the agony he must have suffered. Lumi opened his kit, pulled on a pair of surgical gloves, then removed a long set of tongs and a reinforced plastic bag. He parted the wound with his fingers and pushed the tongs up the path of lacerated organs into the chest cavity. There was movement there and he closed the tongs on something hard and slick, and withdrew it from the body.

"Oh my god," said someone in the crowd, turning and rapidly staggering away.

The blade beetle was the length of a hand and shaped like an almond. Its legs were flat paddles and the edges of these and its wing cases, as Lumi well knew, were sharper than broken glass. It was an adult, he saw; there would be eggs in the body.

"We won't learn much from this," he said, inserting the feebly moving beetle into the bag and sealing it in.

"Check his clothing and so-forth then bring him over for autopsy. He'll have to be burnt right after." He glanced around at the Chief Constable, who was looking on white-faced, then he stood. "Let's see where he was killed."

Brown led Lumi down the alley, following the trail Coti had left, dragging himself through the mud. Grooves with red puddles in them.

"Stop."

Brown looked around at Lumi in surprise.

Lumi tilted his head. "Do you hear it?"

The Chief Constable listened as well. "Something humming?"

"There," said Lumi, pointing down into the mud. He stooped down and removed his tongs again, delved into the mud for a moment, then came up with a metal cylinder with flashing lights on it. He clicked a switch and the lights went out.

"That's a board cutter," the constable told him.

"I am aware of that. What it would be nice to know is if it has cut something."

Brown smiled.

"Evidence, hard physical evidence," he said, then, as he hurried back out of the alley, "I'll get my men." When he returned, Lumi was scraping mortar from between the bricks of one wall and placing it in a bag.

"They tried to wash it off, but it soaked into the mortar. One of them was badly injured. Probably had something cut right off — there's a fragment of bone here. Find someone badly injured and I'll do a genetic cross-match, then you'll likely have your killer, or be very close to him."

"Sir!"

The shout came from the constable probing the mud at the end of the alley. Lumi looked down there and saw the crowd hurriedly dispersing.

"What is it, Walker?" asked Brown.

Walker did not reply. He hurriedly stepped back to the wall of the alley and stared out into the street. Suddenly a huge figure loomed there; eight feet tall and leathery skinned, long robes, a staff, a face visored with leathery skin, no eyes apparent, a grim slit of a mouth. A Proctor.

"Oh shit," said Brown.

The Proctor strode down the alley, its staff punching holes in the mud. It halted when it was looming over them, regarding them with the featureless thrust of its head.

"Death," it said, its voice flat and barren of anything human.

Lumi stood up and sealed the plastic bag he had been filling.

"We are investigating it," he said.

"Lumi," said the Proctor, then abruptly turned away and strode out of the alley.

"What the hell?" said Brown.

"I don't know."

"But they never take an interest in local law."

"I said I don't know."

Lumi gazed after the retreating Proctor. They enforced the laws of the Owner: No one to enter the

restricted zones, no building in or corruption of the wilder zones, no more taken from them by a human than a human can carry without mechanical aid, and of course, the population stricture. It was this last that inspired terror of the Proctors. The population was set at two billion and must never go above that number. Whenever it did the Proctors turned killer. It did not matter who *died* just so long as the population number was brought down again. This was why it was law that every man and woman must be sterilized after engendering only two children. To flout this law was punishable by death. In Lumi's opinion this was the right way of going about things. On Earth no such laws had been in existence, and the horror of what had resulted was still remembered.

Cromwell tapped a cigarette against its box and inserted it in his mouth. A quick pull on it had it burning and he blew a stream of smoke from his nostrils. The guard watched him warily out of the corner of his eye, his rifle braced before him and his stance rigid. Cromwell stood looking thoughtfully at the door. He flicked ash on the ground and took another drag. This was difficult. People not co-operating with him was one matter, but this one ... she hardly seemed to be aware of his presence. It was as if she considered him of no importance whatsoever. She would have to be made aware. He nodded to the guard.

"Open the door," he said.

The guard removed a key from his pocket and did as instructed. Cromwell entered the cell and stood inspecting his prisoner as the guard closed the door behind him. She was an attractive blond-haired woman in a single skin-tight coverall. She sat in a lotus position in the centre of the cold concrete floor.

"You have had time to consider my proposal," said Cromwell.

The woman glanced up at him and nodded absently.

"Will you give me access to your ship?"

She shook her head.

"Perhaps I am not making myself clear. Perhaps you actually think you have choices in this matter. Well, in a way you do ... you see, there are drugs I can use, some nasty little insects that are local to this area, pain, endless amounts of pain."

The woman met his stare directly. Her expression showed an analytical curiosity now. "What do you want from my ship?"

Cromwell stared at her for a moment, took another drag on his cigarette.

"High tech weaponry," he said at last.

"There is none," she told him.

"Unfortunately I do not believe you. You can of course prove me wrong by allowing me access."

"I think not," said the woman.

Cromwell grinned nastily. She was not a very good liar. There were weapons aboard her ship, weapons probably powerful enough to deal with Proctors. Cromwell's grin turned to a sneer when he thought about that. Damned Proctors. The Owner was a myth kept alive by idiots like the Chief Scientist. Only the Proctors with their stupid arbitrary restrictions were real. He winced when he thought about the money he had outlaid on the sluice from his paper mill. The sluice had led into a river in the wilder and there had been no interference until the day of the first outflow. A Proctor had walked out of the wilder

and methodically smashed the sluice to pieces. Cromwell ordered his men to fire on it, but only two dared to do so. They had been brave men. He was generous in compensating their families. These thoughts in mind he stepped forward and grabbed hold of the woman's hair.

"You'll let me in your ship or I'll skin you from the feet up," he hissed. The next moment he found himself on his back on the floor, the woman standing over him.

"I do not understand you," she said, and it sounded as if she really did not. "If you had such weaponry the Owner would never allow you to use it."

"There is no Owner," Cromwell spat. "I would use the weapons on the Proctors to free us from them!"

The woman sat down on the floor again, staring at him all the while.

"I come from Earth," she said. "I am here to see the Owner to tell him we are ready for his guidance now. He exists."

Cromwell stood up, stared at her in disgust, then banged on the door of the cell. He stomped down the corridor pulling another cigarette from his packet and lighting it. At the end of the corridor he mounted a stairway that led up to his office. There he paced for a while before eventually throwing himself into his chair and flicking on the communicator.

"Owner my ass," he said as he punched up a coded number.

The screen flicked on and the face of a young woman gazed out at him.

"Is it done?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Any problems?"

"Yes."

Cromwell had not expected that.

"Go on," he said carefully.

"Your son was injured."

Cromwell sat back in his chair and stared at the woman coldly.

"How badly?"

"The board cutter had his cutting tool with him. He took a lump off your son's arm before we killed him. We took him to Doctor Grable. He's in a room in the nursing home."

"Evidence?"

"We cleared as much as we could find, but it was dark ... the residents were showing an interest, sir."

"Keep him concealed. No one is to know where he is. The board cutter ... he had no time to speak to anyone?"

"We got him before he reached Lumi's house."

"That, is not what I asked."

"He spoke to no one."

"Very well." Cromwell stubbed out his cigarette as he considered his options. "If they start genetic testing we'll have to move fast. Has there been any Proctor activity?"

"I'm told one was seen at the scene of the killing while Lumi was there."

Cromwell swallowed dryly. They should not be interested. It was not in their remit.

"Okay, keep your eyes and ears open. Anything unusual and I want to know. If they start testing I want Jamie moved to Cosburgh. Keep me informed." He cut her off then quickly punched in another number. After a pause a bald-headed man with a walrus mustache looked out of him.

"Doctor Grable," he said.

Lumi studied the two patterns on the screen then turned to Brown.

"It wasn't Cromwell, but there is a close match. I would say it was a relative, perhaps his son or his brother. I suggest you check them both out. No general testing, that will alert him."

"We'll check all the nursing homes. If he's badly injured Cromwell will have him in one of them," he said.

"How about Grable's place?"

"My men are moving in now."

Jamie Cromwell lay on the surgical table feeling slightly sick. There was no pain with the nerve-blocker in place, but he could feel the pullings and cuttings at his shoulder as Grable installed the plastic joint. This was not the kind of adventure he liked. It had always been fun going out to 'sort things out' with Keela. He loved the feeling of power, loved being able to say the words, 'Kill him'. There was nothing else that gave the same buzz.

"How long will I be laid-up?" he asked.

"Oh you'll be up and about after this. But you won't be able to use this arm for three weeks, and I would suggest plenty of rest," said Grable.

Jamie considered telling him that he should save his suggestions for his other patients. He was working on Jamie Cromwell, there was a difference, but when he looked at the doctor's bloodied surgical gloves and close work eye visor, he desisted. There was no telling what the doctor could do to harm him. Jamie did not like pain when it was his own.

"What's that?!"

"Be still!" Grable held him down on the table as he tried to rise. The sound of gunfire had come from outside, and there was shouting now. Grable stood up and walked to the window.

"Constables," he said, after a moment. "A large force of them."

"I must get out of here," said Jamie. He sat up, supporting his arm and trying not to look at the bloody mess of his shoulder. One glance had been enough: the plastic joint was in place in raw flesh and tied-off arteries, all sealed under a layer of translucent jelly. He carefully lowered his legs over the side of the

table. Grable was looking at him strangely.

"I have to go," he repeated.

"No," said Grable. "You must not. They will catch you and question you."

"What else is there to do then?" asked Jamie.

Grable turned from the window and went to his medical cabinet. He opened a drawer and removed an old-fashioned syringe. While Jamie watched he squeezed out the air. How would this help him to escape? Grable approached.

"Here, sit down again," he said.

Jamie had a sudden horrible suspicion. "What is that for?"

"It will calm you, relax you."

Jamie did not want to be calm and he did not believe Grable. He lashed out and kicked the doctor between the legs. The doctor swore and bowed over. Jamie swore at the pain of a broken toe and a sudden foretaste of pain from his shoulder. In the surgical gown he staggered for the door. There he turned back in time to see the doctor reaching for the syringe where it had stuck point-down in the wooden floor. Jamie opened to the door and fled.

"Come back!" the doctor bellowed, and Jamie heard him coming after as he stumbled towards the stairs. He reached the landing just as the doctor caught up with him. He tried to yell at the constables he could see coming into the reception area. The doctor's hard hand slammed over his mouth, and he was shoved back against the wall. The doctor lifted the syringe to plunge it in Jamie's neck. Jamie kneed him in an already tender spot. He had learnt a lot from Keela. As the doctor gasped again Jamie grabbed the syringe hand with his free hand, and pulled it down in an arc to stab it into the doctor's thigh.

"Oh! Oh, you bastard!"

Grable staggered back and gaped down in horror at the syringe. He pulled it out of his leg and saw it was empty.

"I must — " he managed, turning back towards his surgery, then he fell on the floor. By the time his screams and convulsions had finished the constables had reached that floor. As they led Jamie away he looked back and noted how the doctor had ripped off his fingernails while clawing at the floor, and how the convulsions had displaced one eye from its socket and broken his teeth.

"Why was he killed?" asked Lumi, his eyes not straying from the nautiloids in their tank.

"He saw something he was not supposed to see," said Brown as he looked around the laboratory.

"And what was that?"

The Chief Constable returned his attention to Lumi to see what reaction his words might elicit. "He saw a spacecraft that had landed in the wilder."

Lumi turned from his nautiloids. "Spacecraft?"

"Yes."

"The Owner?"

"No."

"Please explain."

"A spacecraft of unknown origin landed in a wilder zone ten days ago. Apparently Cromwell's people found out about it first and sealed off the area. Coti saw the ship before they did that. He avoided Cromwell's people there, but they caught up with him in Blue Street. He was killed to silence him."

"Cromwell must see great advantage in this craft. If it is not something to do with the Owner then it's likely from Earth or the colonies. Perhaps he thinks the war is reaching out to us again, the fool. Has Jamie given any indication that his father thinks this?"

"He says that this is his father's belief."

"What of the crew?"

"One pilot, a woman, whom Cromwell has captured."

"This is fascinating," said Lumi. "Have you closed in on Cromwell yet?"

"All his residences have been raided. He left this morning with a large group of his people and headed into the wilder."

"Then he's gone to this ship and taken the pilot with him. He must not get his hands on any high tech weapons. He will bring disaster on us. We must go after him immediately."

"I agree," said Brown. He was staring at the tank again.

"We need a tracker," said Lumi.

Brown turned to look at him. "In this we are lucky. Bradebus is in town. My people have gone to hire him."

Lumi looked at him. "You've been ahead of me all the way," he said. "Why do you come here?"

Brown smiled bleakly. He pointed at the tank. "Are they the ones? These creatures?"

"Yes, they are the nautiloids the Owner allowed me into the restricted zone to study," said Lumi.

"What was he like ... if you don't mind me asking?"

Lumi thought back to that time when he was twenty-five years old and hiking along the Choom beaches of the wilder, on the edge of the restricted zone, in search of fossil nautiloids to back up his theory that they were not Earth-import life forms. He remembered his frustration when he stood at the marker line: silver posts spaced fifty metres apart. To step through that line was instant death for a human. Human bones in fact lay on the beach there. So wrapped up in his frustration had he been that he thought this the reason he had not heard the man approach. This was not the reason. He turned to see a big man in a black suit of strange design: a suit piped and padded and linked to half-seen machines floating in the air about him. His hair had been white, cropped, his eyes as red as a devil's. Lumi had known in an instant he faced the Owner. The half-seen mechanisms were the subspace machinery of the Great Ship Vardelex, and part of the Owner himself — extensions of his mind and senses, grown and added to over ten thousand years.

"You are Lumi," he had said, and in that moment the machines had faded away around him and his eyes had turned from red to a quite normal hazel.

"I am," Lumi managed.

The Owner pointed to mountains in the restricted zone. "Up there are the fossils you seek. You will not find them anywhere else on this planet."

Was he being taunted, Lumi wondered.

"You may study them at your leisure." The Owner stared at him very directly. "I place no restrictions on you in this matter because I know you to be responsible."

Lumi felt sick with excitement and fear. He gestured at the fence. "I cannot ... "

"It will not harm you. I have instructed the fence here not to harm you. You may pass through."

Lumi could not do it. All his upbringing, all the social conditioning, the hundreds of years of tradition ... He was terrified. The Owner saw this in an instant, took hold of his arm with a hand as cold as ice, and marched him between the silver posts. On the other side of the fence Lumi had fallen to his knees and been sick on the sand.

"You may pass through this section of fence for the rest of your natural life. You may study the fossils and nautiloids and whatever else you may find here of interest to you."

Lumi had gazed up into eyes returned to red, the weird machinery back.

"Why ... have you allowed me this?" he managed.

"Because I can," the Owner had said, a strange smile on his face.

"What was he like?" Lumi said in reply to Brown's question. "My meeting with him has been detailed time and time again, much has been spouted about how human the Owner is when he disconnects himself from his machines. I think that is exactly the case. He isn't human. He probably ceased to be human thousands of years ago. You know what I felt most strongly about that meeting? It was that only a fragment of him communicated with me, the largest fragment permissible."

"What do you mean?"

Lumi shook his head. "A man does not discuss philosophy with a microbe."

"You think the gap that wide."

Lumi pointed at the nautiloids. "He let me study those. Only in the last few years have I come to a conclusion about them, that conclusion recently backed up by evidence from the fossil beds. They are native to this planet, as are creatures like the blade beetles, but they were extinct before the Owner got here. This was a dead world. He populated it with life forms from Earth and then resurrected some of the old life forms. He must have got the information from their fossils somehow. I also think he created the Proctors, and that they are not machines as is often thought, but highly sophisticated living creatures. I think that in these things we see only a hint of his power."

"Do you think he is a god?"

"As near as makes no difference to us. Think of the war. Our ancestors came here in an escape craft from a ship capable of destroying planets and which itself had been destroyed. The Owner allowed them to settle ... it's an old story ... but think about some other facts: This world was in the war zone yet nothing touched it, nothing came into the system unless the Owner allowed it. The two warring factions of

the human race had no power here whatsoever."

"Then, what power does Cromwell have?"

"He could get us all killed. With high tech weapons he is sure to try to destroy Proctors. It might be that he could become just enough of an irritant to get himself flattened."

"A good thing, surely?"

"One microbe or the whole Petri dish. The laws are for a reason. We are here on sufferance. The population stricture should have told you enough. The people killed when the population tops two billion are not the idiots who can't control their gonads and there is no enforced birth-control or sterilisation unless we do it. The Owner's message in this should be evident: We keep our own house in order. I have a horrible feeling, no, I am certain, that if Cromwell starts killing Proctors then the Proctors will start killing back, and they won't stop."

Bradebus the tracker was the most irascible old man Lumi had ever known. He was also reputedly the best tracker known and had often helped the Constabulary find criminals who had fled into the wilder.

"Who you after then?" the old man asked, scratching at a ragged mess of a beard.

Brown looked to Lumi then said, "Cromwell."

"Ah! Got something on the bastard then?"

"You could say that. He's gone into the wilder with many of his people. We want to catch up with them as soon as possible."

"Who's going?"

"Myself, Chief Scientist Lumi here, and fifteen constables."

"When did he go?"

"This morning."

Bradebus stared at Lumi calculatingly then gulped down the rest of his glass of whisky. The barman waddled forward and immediately refilled the glass.

"We want to leave as soon as possible," said Lumi.

Bradebus took a gulp from his glass and grinned. "Oh, we'll catch up all right. Can't say we'll take him by surprise though, not with fifteen clod-hoppers along."

"The men are ready now," said Brown to Lumi.

Bradebus said, "You know more or less what direction he took?"

"Yes," said Brown.

"You go along then. I'll catch you directly."

"This is important, Bradebus," said Brown.

"It always is," said the tracker, turning his back on them.

The edge of the wilder was marked by a line of black metal posts. On one side of this line were arable fields and lands for livestock, on the other side the deep woodland that was the wilder itself. The bus drew to a halt in a circular parking area, in which the road terminated, and Lumi and the constables disembarked. The men and women were all in field kit and carried an assortment of weapons. Lumi was in his hiking gear and carried no weapons. Brown was quick to remark on this.

"Sir, I would feel better if you carried this," he said, and handed over a pistol belt. Lumi drew the weapon and inspected it. It was a ten-bore revolver with eight chambers. A weapon you only needed to hit a man with once. Lumi considered rejecting it then changed his mind. Such an act might have been admirable in some circles, but here and now it would have been foolish. He strapped the weapon on and observed the constables unloading more powerful armament.

"What's that?"

"Missile launcher," said Brown. "If he gets to the ship and takes it up ... " Brown did not need to elaborate. "Okay, let's go," he said to his men. And they walked between the black posts into the wood.

This close to the perimeter there were many well-trodden paths. They moved at a slow pace following the main track Cromwell's group had reportedly followed. By evening they had not left that track, and stopped at a well-used camp site.

"We'll wait here for him," said Lumi, and went to set up his tent. Before retiring he ate a meal with the ten men and five women under Brown's command, drank tea, and listened to Brown briefing them. They had known nothing of their mission prior to entering the wilder.

The night sounds kept Lumi awake for some time and in the full dark he heard the arrival of Bradebus announced by the guards. He slid out of his sleeping bag and after pulling on some clothing went out to see the man. The night was lit by the second and third moons; one a pitted and dented thing that was called the Old Man, the other a mirror-bright sphere that had acquired no name. It was simply called the Third Moon.

The tracker was dressed in clothing made from animal skins and wore a long coat of bear fur. He carried a short hunting carbine, a knife nearer the size of a machete, and two pistols holstered at his belt. He was squatted by the remains of the fire when Lumi saw him.

"We didn't expect you until the morning," commented Lumi by way of something to say.

Bradebus nodded. "Morning we go off the track to the north. Should catch up with them a bit. Loop in the track." He poked at the fire with a stick.

"Is that a good idea? They might turn off."

Bradebus studied him estimatingly. "They're out here after something. If it was close I'd have known about it by now. Must be in the deep wilder. They'll stay on the main track." He continued staring at Lumi, waiting.

Lumi nodded and returned to his tent. He was not yet ready to tell the tracker what this was all about.

Morning was yet to make its presence felt when Brown called outside Lumi's tent then went on to rouse his constables. Lumi swore, stuck his head out into the darkness, then checked the luminous dial of his watch. An hour until sunrise. When they set out the foliage above had become distinguishable from the sky, and it was just possible not to walk into the trees when Bradebus led them off the track. They had travelled for an hour more before the birds started singing, and travelled for three more hours before

stopping to remove rations from their packs to eat while they walked. Lumi noticed that Bradebus watched this with amusement, then wandered on chewing at a piece of jerky that smelt suspect, and washing this down with gulps from his hip flask. At midday Lumi went up to walk beside him.

"Ready to tell me what it's all about?" asked the tracker, his words only slightly slurred.

"A spaceship has landed in the wilder. Cromwell has the pilot. We think he is after weapons."

Bradebus nodded. "Lot of Proctor activity around here lately."

Lumi did not know what to make of that.

Shortly after this they rejoined the the main track and the tracker pointed at the signs of a large groups passing that way. "Gained about two hours on them," he said.

Lumi wondered if it would be enough. Another day's march and they would be getting into the deep wilder. They camped part way into the night, when they were all too tired to make good time, and when blade beetles started to be attracted to the lamps they carried. One man required stitches in his upper arm before he could go to his tent.

Lumi woke and did not know why. Had there been a sound? With utmost caution he pulled the revolver from its holster and slid out of his tent into the night.

"Everything all right?" he asked the guard.

The woman glanced at him then looked back out into the darkness. "The tracker went out there a moment ago. Don't know what he's up to," she said.

"Which direction?"

The woman pointed.

"I'll just go and take a look."

Lumi walked out into the wood as the woman muttered something about 'shitting in the trees'. Yes, that could be the reason the old man had gone out, but Lumi found he entertained suspicions about the old man. Might he be in the employ of Cromwell? Might he be leading them astray? Ahead of him he heard the rustle of leaves. He moved towards it, saw a flicker of blue light, moved towards that. As he drew closer the light grew brighter. There was an area of blue light, a huge shape moving about in it. A hand caught him by the shoulder and a hand closed over his mouth.

"Shush now," said Bradebus, and took his hand away.

"Proctor," said Lumi as the huge shape became recognisable.

"Oh yes, lots of them here. Lots of them."

There was something strange in his voice. Lumi watched Bradebus in confusion as the old man turned away and headed back towards the camp. Then the scientist glanced back at the light as it faded, before following the old man in. Had Bradebus come out here because he had heard a Proctor? Or had there been a more sinister reason? Lumi shivered in the night.

The next day of travel was marked only by the advent of their seeing a Proctor striding through the woodland far to one side. Otherwise it was exhausting and uneventful. Lumi quickly ate the food

prepared for him and drank his tea before crawling into his tent and the comfort of his sleeping bag. In the dark before dawn they set out into more rugged country where deciduous trees gave way to conifers and patches of stone revealed sky above and a glimpse of distant mountains. There was a track of sorts that Bradebus led them from without a word of explanation. Lumi felt too tired to question, or to reassure Brown, but did have the energy to follow when Brown hurried to catch up with the tracker and demand an explanation.

"You'll see," said Bradebus, and hurried them on. Soon he brought them to the edge of the pines and a flat area of stone. Beyond the stone was nothing but purpled by distance mountains and sky. He waved them forward and walked to the edge. Lumi stood at his shoulder and looked down into the forest a thousand metres below. It was an awesome sight. Bradebus pointed.

"There," he said.

There it was, lying on the shores of a lake, a silver cylinder amongst trees that only reached up to half its diameter.

"One would think a vantage point like this would be watched," said Brown, glancing around.

"It is," said Bradebus. "Cromwell's people have been watching us for some time now." He turned to Brown. "I said we would come as no surprise to him."

Brown snorted in annoyance and walked away.

"How many people does Cromwell have with him would you say?" asked Lumi.

"Ten came with him, including the one from the ship — she has strange shoes — and about here I would reckon another ten."

"We will have to be very careful then."

"They won't be as well armed, nor very well trained."

They came across the first of them an hour later.

Keela squatted down in front of the woman and handed her a bowl of soup. It was accepted graciously and the woman sipped at it while Keela tested the chain attaching her to the tree.

"He'll torture you," said Keela.

"Yes, I imagine he will."

"Why don't you just let him in? If there are no weapons as you say ... "

"I am not amenable to coercion."

"I don't understand," said Keela, settling down on the pine needles. "Why are you here?"

The woman looked up from her soup and observed Keela with disconcerting eyes. "It is strange, is it not, that you ask me this now?"

"Well?"

"I am an ambassador from the human federation. I have come here to seek the wisdom if not the assistance of the Owner."

"Why?"

"He is ten thousand years old. From who else would I seek wisdom?"

"He doesn't exist," said Keela.

The woman smiled and continued to sip her soup. Chagrined, Keela rose to her feet and stomped away.

"Anything?" Cromwell asked her.

"She just doesn't make sense."

"Then we'll have to force her to make sense."

Cromwell gazed speculatively at the glowing point of his cigarette.

They heard the crack of the shot simultaneous with the smack of the bullet against flesh. A constable staggered to one side, fell from the narrow path, and tumbled down the heather-tufted slope. Lumi had a glimpse of jetting blood, a raw exposure of flesh the size of a cooking apple.

"Down!" came the belated cry. Constables ran for cover behind the boulders at the base of the cliff as another shot rang out and smashed splinters from rock. Lumi found himself behind a boulder with Bradebus and watched him take aim with his hunting carbine. He looked into the woodland below and could see nothing. The carbine went off with a satisfying explosion.

"Got the bugger."

Immediately Bradebus was up and running down the slope. It all happened too quickly for Lumi. He followed after with the dazed constables and swearing Brown.

The man lay dead behind a splintered pine tree. Bradebus had shot him through the tree. The mangled bullet and wood splinters had made quite a mess. Lumi looked at the tracker questioningly. The man held out a handful of bullets. Lumi picked one up and inspected it: pointed steel tip, large caseless charge, enough to shoot a man through a tree, but of no use otherwise. There were no animals large enough to justify such bullets. How was it that they had come into this lowly tracker's possession?

"Spread out now, and move with caution. Lambert, you stay back," said Brown. Lambert was the one who carried the missile launcher. Before they moved off Brown went to confirm the fallen man was dead. Lumi went with him. Half his head was gone, somewhere on the slope above.

They moved cautiously. Shots soon rang out again. The sound of bullets cracking through tree branches.

A curtailed scream. Lumi saw the tracker running, his knife drawn and bloody. He was grinning. He looked like he was having fun. Two constables stayed back after that exchange, one to tend to the leg wound of the other. Nearby lay the corpses of two anonymous men and a woman, their blood draining into the pine needles. The second exchange was more intense, then abruptly ceased when Cromwell's people withdrew.

"What the fuck!" said Brown.

Lumi saw he was looking to one side. Two Proctors were striding through the trees towards the ship. There was another out to the other side of them.

"How many, I wonder?" said Bradebus in a whimsical voice.

This is very important, thought Lumi. As far as he knew the Proctors only enforced those few of the Owner's laws. There were two thousand of them, one for every million human beings on this, the Owner's world. Seeing them together was an event rare enough to be recorded. The last time Proctors had been seen together had been forty-three years before, just two of them, and the observer of this rare occurrence had said they seemed almost embarrassed about the matter and had quickly parted. Three Proctors here, in this small area of trees, how many more were there in the vicinity?

The ship and the lake became visible through the trees. Brown scanned the area through compact binoculars.

"They're dug in around the ship behind log barricades. The camp is clear. Can't tell how many of them there are. There's a woman chained to a tree between us and them." He scanned to one side, then with his expression dumb-founded he handed the binoculars to Lumi and pointed. Lumi brought the lenses to his eyes.

Proctors.

They were on the lake shore, moving through the trees. As he watched, one walked up out of the water of the lake as if it had just walked across the bottom, which might well have been the case. What were they here for? They seemed to be doing little more than waiting and watching; leaning on their staffs and gazing into the distance like old-Earth Masai. The parallel was perhaps not the best. Are we their cattle? Lumi wondered. Just then Cromwell's people opened fire and Brown slammed him down to eat pine needles. The constables fired back with their automatic weapons until Brown yelled at them to stop.

"The woman! You'll hit the woman!"

Lumi looked out to her. She was sat in a position of meditation, not trying to bury herself as would be expected. All the firing ceased.

"Surrender and we won't kill her!" came Cromwell's shout.

"He doesn't want to kill her anyway, she hasn't let him in her ship," said Bradebus.

How do you know that? Lumi had no time to ask the question. The tracker fired twice. There was a yell of surprise. He turned to Brown.

"You don't have to shoot low to get them. That Cromwell isn't the best tactician. Just shoot at the hull of the ship above them and the ricochets will do the rest."

Brown looked where indicated and grinned, then his grin faded.

"The woman," he said.

"I would say that problem is about to be solved," said the tracker.

The Proctor came striding in from the side and positioned itself between the woman and Cromwell's people. It drove its staff into the ground then reached down to take hold of the chain. It was a thick chain. The Proctor snapped it like a cord of plasticene. Cromwell stood up then. He was yelling something as he depressed the trigger of his weapon and emptied its clip. The Proctor's field flared blue about it and no shots reached the woman as it led her away with a huge leathery hand on her shoulder. It kept itself between her and Cromwell all the time. Cromwell should have remembered the outfall from his factory. It seemed he was not thinking straight, because after he had emptied one clip he remained standing while he fumbled for another. The woman was out of the way. The constables remembered many crimes, many slights, dead friends. How many bullets hit him at once is moot. It would have been

difficult to count the holes in what remained.

"Cease firing!" Brown shouted, once Cromwell had disappeared out of sight. From Cromwell's people entrenched below the ship there was no more firing once the constables lowered their weapons. The sounds of argument could be heard, then a weapon was tossed out in front of the stacked logs and a man rose slowly to his feet with his hands in the air. Someone was yelling at him and he was ignoring that yelling. He stepped out from cover with his hands up.

"Brave fellow," said Bradebus as he watched the man walk across the no-man's land between. Twenty feet from the constables the man halted.

"I surrender myself," said the man. He looked scared but determined.

"Come behind here and lay face down on the ground," said Brown. When the man had done this Brown searched him and cuffed him. "How many of the others will give themselves up?" he asked.

"Most of them," the man replied. "Cromwell was all that kept us."

"Loyalty?" asked Brown.

"Fear, for ourselves and our families."

Brown raised a sardonic eyebrow at that but did not refute it. "What about the rest?"

"A few who have reason to hate Proctors, only them."

Shortly after this more weapons were tossed out and another five men and two women approached to give themselves up.

"How many more?" asked Brown.

"Keela is there, her and two of Cromwell's closest."

Brown flicked on the com unit on his belt and turned it to public address.

"Will you die?" he asked the hold-outs. He signalled to his constables to be ready. "Where you are we can bounce bullets off that ship until you are all dead. Is this the end you want?"

A silence drew as taut as a garrotte. Eventually three weapons were tossed out and three people stood: Keela and the two men. They walked over to be cuffed with the rest.

The night sky was black and moonless, unusually, in that three moons orbited the Owner's planet. The forest was lit by camp-fires and weird blue glows like the flash of glow worms from where the Proctors waited. Brown, Bradebus, and Lumi shared the glow of a fire, steaming mugs of tea, and bread rolls filled with steaks from a deer Bradebus had shot and wild onions he had collected.

"We must find out why she came here, and what interest the Proctors have in her," said Lumi.

"And how do you suggest we go about that?" asked Brown, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"Why not go and ask?" said Bradebus, and the other two looked at him as if he had suggested eating blade beetles. "Well, why not?"

Lumi and Brown looked at each other. It was Lumi who replied. "For one, they would not answer, for two, we might end up dead."

"She would answer, and what rules have you broken that might bring their anger down on you?"
Bradebus stood up. "Come on, let's go see them."

Lumi and Brown stood up staring in amazement at each other as Bradebus strode off towards the Proctors. Lumi hesitated for a moment, then quickly followed.

"I have the prisoners, my men ..." said Brown, not inclined to follow.

Lumi waved him back and continued on. Brown sat back down and poured himself more tea. He did not want to say anything about all the leaders being killed.

The Proctors were seated around under the trees all facing in one direction. Lumi and Bradebus walked between them and soon came in sight of a campfire, and Proctors beyond that facing inward. The woman was by the fire eating something that had been cooking over it. The rise and fall of speech could be heard. Three Proctors sat around the fire with her, their staffs driven into the ground behind them.

"... fourteen star systems and the new gates are opening more all the time," they heard, followed by the grating voice of one of the Proctors.

"So much to learn, to see. This must be the time."

By then Lumi and Bradebus had reached the fire. The woman looked up at them cautiously. The Proctor that had been speaking turned its head in their direction and watched them approach. Lumi was the first to speak.

"Are you uninjured?" he asked the woman.

She nodded. He continued. "I am Chief Scientist Lumi and my companion is the tracker Bradebus ... by what name should we address you?"

The woman smiled. "At last someone with a civilised attitude. No one has yet asked me my name. The man Cromwell considered me a means to an end, though it turned out it was his own. These Proctors speak beyond names." She stood up. "I am Manx Evitel, ambassador from Earth." She held out a greasy hand, which Lumi took.

"Names have importance to us," said the Proctor, and Lumi looked at it in startlement. "All of us have names. We are one but we name ourselves singly, but what purpose identification to us?"

"What is your name, then?" asked Lumi, as he moved in and squatted by the fire. Bradebus came with him, his mouth closed and his expression alert.

"I am called David," said the Proctor.

"Why ... why are you here, David?" asked Lumi.

"Here is opportunity," said the Proctor.

Lumi left it, it sounded cryptic enough to be an avoidance, and he had no wish to push Proctors. He turned back to the woman, who had seated herself again.

"Why are you here then?"

She smiled again. "I am here as an ambassador. The wars have been over for many centuries now and the human federation grows faster than some of us can cope with. I have come here to seek the Owner, we need his wisdom, his great knowledge. He travelled the galaxy millennia ago in his great ship. There

are things he will know."

"It's more than that," said Bradebus.

She looked at him. "Yes, it is more. Our expansion has brought us to the edge of an alien civilisation. It is vast and they are ... difficult to understand, yet, from what we have learnt in our few encounters, they know about the Owner. He has been there. There will be things he knows ... There is so much he knows."

"Some believe the Owner is dead," said Lumi.

"This ... is possible," said the Proctor, David.

"How?"

"We have been one with the mind of the Owner for millennia. In the last fifty years the contact has been broken and we have gained independent existence. This is why we are here. We want to see and know more than this world. We want to do more than enforce the Owner's law."

"You have what you seek," said Bradebus to Manx Evitel. She looked abruptly surprised at this, then regarded the Proctor calculatingly.

"You have not been in contact with the Owner for some time then?"

The Proctor shook its head.

"Has anyone seen the Owner since?" She glanced at Lumi and Bradebus. Lumi realised he must be the last to have seen him.

"Twenty years ago I saw him," he said.

Evitel nodded and turned back to the Proctor. "What use might you be to us should we transport you from this place?"

The Proctor said, "The Owner called them the Snark-kind in reference to a poem by one Lewis Carrol. He traded with them and observed their civilisation for two hundred years. Every one of us knows what he learnt about them. We were one with the Owner's mind."

Evitel abruptly got up and faced her ship. "Ship, open," she said.

In the side of the great cylinder a slot of light appeared, and with eerie silence a segment of metal folded down, straightened out, became a ramp. Lumi stood and glanced back towards the camp where he could hear shouting. Suddenly there was gunfire. Lumi and Bradebus began running in that direction. More gunfire. A figure ahead, crouching, something across its shoulder. A spear of light.

"Shit!" said Bradebus, both he and Lumi hitting the ground. There was an explosion behind them. In the light of the flame Lumi saw the girl Keela with the missile launcher across her shoulder. He drew his pistol, fired twice. She staggered and fell.

The Proctor David lay on the ground, flickers of blue light on his skin. His side was open to expose something like organs and something like electronics. Evitel stood to one side. A shimmer winked out around her. All along, a personal force shield, Cromwell could not have harmed her. The Proctors began standing, something like a growl of anger coming from them.

"How the hell did she get hold of that?!" Lumi shouted at Brown as he reached Keela and turned her over onto her back, his pistol in her face.

"She knocked out Lambert. We didn't think she ... she is a third child ... "

Enough, thought Lumi, there was never any getting away from the stigma.

Brown stared in terror at the Proctors, they were moving now, all their fields flicking on. Lumi watched them too, not knowing how to stop what he felt sure was to come. A Proctor had been killed, the first ever.

"Tell them to stop," he said to Evitel.

"Wait!" she shouted. The Proctors ignored her.

"Hold," said Bradebus. He was crouched down by the corpse of David. All the Proctors froze then turned in his direction. Lumi saw the man's rough clothing fade, become a black body suit, piped and padded and linked to half-seen machines, saw his appearance change. The Owner. He touched David.

He and the Proctor flickered out of existence. There was a crack as air rushed to fill the space. The remaining Proctors turned towards the ship and slowly began to mount the ramp. More of them came out of the woods.

Twilight, birds beginning to sing, immediate warmth in the forest. The Proctors were all aboard, but for one called Mark. He and Evitel sat by a fire with Lumi and Brown. The other constables were taking the prisoners, the wounded, and the dead, back to the town.

"We are one with his mind again," said Mark.

"What is he doing?" asked Lumi.

"He has repaired David."

"What are his intentions?" asked Evitel.

"You may ask him."

The Owner came out of the forest with David walking behind him. He said, "It was my intention that the Proctors go with you. They have my knowledge and they have wisdom." He squatted by the fire, the machines gone, his eyes normal. He grinned at Lumi. "I had intended not to show myself, but, six thousand years of wisdom and knowledge is too much to lose." He looked towards David and nodded.

Mark rose, the two Proctors walked towards Evitel's ship.

"Why the subterfuge?" asked Lumi.

"Because I wanted it," was the reply.

"I would have preferred you to come," said Evitel.

"For that there will be no need. My Proctors will be sufficient to the Snark-kind." He looked at Lumi and Brown, then pointed out beyond the lake. In the sky they saw falling lights like a meteor shower. "This place has remained closed for too long. Here my constructors will build a spaceport and this world will join with the human Polity. All my laws will no longer apply. There is much room in space. I leave this place in trust." He stood.

"Where will you be?" asked Evitel.

"Around," said the Owner.

The ash of the fire gusted as air replaced him. The third moon, like a polished metal ball, rose in the twilight sky, made a right angled turn far above them, receded into dark. Lumi felt the tug of the huge mass moving away, heard waves breaking on the lake shore, squinted at the sudden flare of a star drive igniting.