

Seeds of Destiny – Organic Future 05

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CHAPTER 1

“Sir?”

A hand reached toward Marcus Aurelius Hrecker from a shadowy alcove in the painted tunnel wall. Automatically, he raised a warding arm and shifted his step to stay out of reach. Olympia, burrowed into the bulk of the grandest mountain in the Solar System, was as safe as any place, safer than any city on Earth or the Moon. But you could never tell. Even in a crowded tunnel.

“Sir? Please!”

The hand belonged to a small woman, stooped and wrinkled and smelling of

years. Her hair was so gray it was practically white. Almost against his will, he stopped and faced her. Other pedestrians flowed past behind him.

“Did you know I’m being evicted? I had such a nice apartment. And they say they need it for someone else. They’re putting me in a home. Just one room and a cafeteria and a lounge full of old wrecks. Like me.”

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “But there’s really nothing I can do.” Why was she even telling him? He didn’t know her, and he could imagine no reason why she would think he might change the housing office’s mind. Certainly he couldn’t take her home with him. His own apartment was barely large enough for him.

“Of course you can’t!” She nodded rapidly, her eyes bright, her mouth set in a pursed line. “Not about that. But...” She reached into the shadows behind her. Light glinted on polished metal wheel-hubs and basket wire. He recognized a cart of the sort many people used when shopping. “I have to get rid of my flowers, you know. I can’t take them with me. They just won’t allow it. There’s no point in even asking. But you look like a nice fellow.”

She swung back toward him, something in her hands. He shied away from her, stepping backward, thumping into a passerby, lurching forward again, and she thrust that something against his chest. “Here.” Suddenly he was holding a smooth-sided cylinder and staring at a spray of fuzzy green and white-edged, yellow-centered violet.

Oh, no, he thought. Fear washed over him even as his fingertips stroked the side of the cylinder and told him it was made of some smooth ceramic. It was surely a local product, made of Martian soil. No one shipped raw clay or pottery between the worlds, not even in an era when Q drives tapped the raw energy of space itself to power rockets.

No one made flowerpots either, and here was the handle and now it made sense.

“Here,” she said again, and her nod was insistent, demanding, dogmatic. “You can have an African violet. All it needs is light and water, and maybe a little fertilizer.”

But he was not listening. “No!” he cried. “You keep it! I can’t!”

He pushed the mug full of greenery toward the old woman, but she seized his

wrists and with surprising strength turned him toward the center of the tunnel. “No,” she said. “I really can’t, you know. They’re evicting me. But I can’t keep my flowers. And they’re so pretty, aren’t they? You take good care of it now.”

“But-- !”

“Go on. I have lots more to give away.” There was a push at his back. He

staggered a step, and the flow of traffic swept him up and on.

Fortunately the shirt he wore did not have time-consuming buttons, snaps, zips, or strips. It wrapped diagonally across his chest, and he thought he got the flower out of sight before anyone could recognize it for what it was. An African violet, she had called it. A plant, of all things.

At least she had sense enough to stay away from the more brightly lit portions of the tunnel.

Plants were most definitely not approved personal possessions. They were acceptable only in agricultural domes and tunnels. House plants were prima facie evidence of Orbital/Gypsy sympathies at best, of disloyalty and treason at worst.

If Security spotted the African violet, it would not matter a bit that his father, his grandfather, and his great-grandfather had all been Security agents. An uncle had even been chief of Security on the Munin habitat until a blowout caught him without a suit.

He tried to look innocent.

He tried not to stare at his fellow pedestrians. That just wasn’t done. Only

the very young and the guilty failed to pretend they were alone in the tunnels, on the way to work or home or running errands.

He tried not to search the tunnel walls and ceiling for Security cameras. But if he couldn’t look at the African violet and he couldn’t look at people, there was nothing else at which to aim his eyes.

At least he could refrain from scanning, couldn’t he? Then he wouldn’t look like he was searching for cameras. He wouldn’t look guilty.

Unless they watched for people who were obviously trying not to be noticed.

In which case he had better not keep looking away from shopping carts. It

was quite natural to peek, to see what people had found in their shopping, to learn what foods had come from the farms. Like that purple globe of eggplant, red-skinned onions, blue-green potsters, green broccoli, pale white fish.

He forgot the fish as his eyes jerked back to the green and away.

He wished he had a reader with him.

There! Watch those! Illuminated signs that advertised beer and pizza and

minerals formed when Mars had water a billion years ago. Crystals, the shop bragged. Mudstone marked with ripples. Wormtracks. Shells.

There was a diskshop stocked with new disks, novels, textbooks, games, and more. Its entrance was never clear, for people moved steadily in and out.

A tour shop, its entrance flanked by glass-cased, bright-lit posters showing the vast rise of Olympus Mons, the gorge of Marineris just as vast, Io spuming yellow, red, and black, the desolation of the lunar highlands, coral reefs on Earth, fishless and stark, Earth itself viewed from orbit. Next door a clothing store, its display assuring everyone it sold everything from the flimsiest of nightwear to Martian hardsuits.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker let his attention settle on a tiny robot, legs flickering as it scurried along the floor, dodged feet, and raced up a ramp attached to the tunnel wall. There was another robot on the shelf that ran just above all the doorways and display cases and neon signs and usually kept the machines off the floor and out from underfoot. The first ignored the pull-outs, the ramps up and down, and the access holes that led inside the walls. It met a third, and there was room to pass. It stopped. Its head rose, antennae wiggled as it optimized the signal it was receiving, and it began to move again, faster, running now, practically flying, taking the ramp that led to the next cross-path, arched riblike beneath the tunnel's roof.

The little robots removed dust and litter and debris, searched for defects in tunnels and ducts, repaired what they could, and signalled for human assistance when a problem was beyond their abilities. Marcus Aurelius Hrecker shared his people's pride in the versatile machines even though he understood their major shortcoming. They were a triumph of mechanical and electronic technology, but they were no nearer the ultimate goal than they had been a century before. Only the sort of information storage one found in genes could permit a self-reproducing von Neumann machine to exist.

Artificial intelligence? They had that, though hardly at a human level, not even at the level rumor hinted had been achieved some time before the Engineers' final victory. He had heard the robots compared to cats and monkeys, and the reason for their limitation was once more that they were not organic. In some ways, living things had distinct design advantages.

But not this African violet. Not at this moment. Not now. Not ever.

It could kill him.

He wished he dared to set the plant in its mug on one of those shelves, or

on the floor. The machines would dispose of it. That was their job. They were everywhere. They cleaned clothes and floors, polished shoes, mended and repaired, stripped paint and replaced it, found and fetched lost items, and prepared food, tending Olympia and all its people just as they did in the cities of Mars and Earth, the Moon and the habitats, everywhere the Engineers chose to live.

But no one did such things. If he did, one of his fellow pedestrians would surely notice and report his

suspicious behavior. Or the cameras, wherever they were, would pick him up.

Better he should leave the plant under his shirt.

* * *

The short side-tunnel, filled with the pink-tinged light of Mars, opened into a concourse thirty meters high. Its far wall was a curve of steel-ribbed glass. Beyond that was the red-rock lip of the scarp that lifted Olympus Mons a kilometer above the lowlands beyond, and then those lowlands, softened and smoothed into plains by distance. The only signs of human presence were a distant dome and a cloud of yellow fumes beside the concentric rings of an open-pit mine.

No one paid the spectacular view any attention at all. No one seemed disturbed by the far-off industrial stain on the landscape. Both were routine, backdrop, as accepted as the posters in the tour shop's display cases.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker was no exception. When he left the tunnel, his mind was on the plant tucked within his shirt, on his destination, on the tasks that awaited him. He turned sharp left, stepped aboard the escalator in front of him, rode to the next level up, and entered another tunnel marked by a small brass plaque that said "Olympus University." When Hrecker passed it, it repeated its message aloud.

Just within this tunnel was a directory board that displayed a map of the university's tunnels and a list of departments, offices, and labs. Hrecker ignored this too. The Q-Drive Research Center where he was a junior researcher was straight ahead and right and right and left, past the administration's side-tunnel and the dining hall and the freshman dorms, just before the turn into the athletic complex, and late on any afternoon the lab rocked with noise every time someone opened the main door to enter or leave. Sometimes the din even penetrated the solid rock of Mars itself.

But the tunnels were quiet now. The day's first classes were in session. He glanced through the entry to the dining hall and found it empty except for a few stragglers. The creak of exercise machinery was the only sign that anyone was in the athletics area at all.

And here was the Research Center. He felt the flower mug with his wrist. Would he be able to reach his lab before someone spotted it? Would he be able to bury it in a wastebasket? Should he flush the plant and its soil down a toilet, wash its container, and pretend it had never held anything more incriminating than a wooden pencil?

Of course, as soon as the entrance door swung shut behind him, Eric Silber came out of the com room, his hands full of paper. "What's that? A tumor?"

Silber was a mathematician, but his sharply angled, acne-scarred face and cawing voice had prompted more than one to suspect out loud that he was really a Security plant. Thereafter, no one quite dared to trust him or to object to his bitter gibes. And of course he had seen the bulge in Hrecker's shirt.

"Just a..." He made a garbled noise, waved one hand, and turned quickly into the hall that led toward his lab. When Eric did not follow him or say, "What?" he breathed a sigh of relief.

But the relief did not last long.

When he reached his tiny office safely, he peered beneath the metal desk and

behind the books and knickknacks on the shelf. Once he was sure none of the tiny, insectoid robots were present, he set the plant in its mug beside the keyboard of his terminal. Then he wondered what the gyp he could do with it.

He scratched his belly where the mug had pressed. He was carefully tucking in his shirt once more when the doorlatch clicked behind him.

“Got a min-- ? What have you got there?”

He spun and flushed and said, “Sorry. But—“ “That’s dumb,” said Renard Saucier. “Suicidally dumb.”

Hrecker did not think to ask why Saucier was in his doorway, belly straining

against his traditional coverall, hairline arching toward the ceiling. As usual, the man’s upper eyelids folded down at their outer edges and he looked exhausted. He was in charge of this section of the lab, supervising several researchers and technicians, but he was rarely seen until after lunch. Mornings he spent on his own research.

“A plant, of all things,” said Saucier. “Today, of all times. I was just in a meeting...”

“An African violet.” Hrecker tried very hard to sound meek. “I was going to throw it away.”

“Then why did you bring it here? If Security spotted it...”

“I know.”

“You’d never run another probability shifter, would you?”

Hrecker shook his head. The lab had learned how to use the probability warp

that made the Q drive possible to achieve macroscopic tunneling a decade ago. The trick had proved to be the key to faster-than-light travel, the heart of the tunnel drive the Gypsies had mastered before they fled the system more than a century before. More recently, they had been trying to use a variation of the technique to control the placement of ions in semiconductors. They hoped to build electronic memories that would match the capacity of biological ones.

A shelf on the wall to the left of the doorway held a veedo set. Saucier turned toward it and touched its switch. Then he reached past Hrecker and picked up the plant. “I’ll dispose of it. You check the news.”

Was that why he had appeared so early in the day? Was there something important happening in the world outside the lab? Something that might affect their work? Or...?

Obediently, Marcus Aurelius Hrecker watched the screen as it came to life. And when the image proved to be that of a familiar piece of Olympian tunnel, he reached blindly for his chair, rolled it away from the desk, turned it, and sat.

A voice was saying: “Constant vigilance is the only way we can remain free of the green taint. Only half

an hour ago, Security noticed this woman..." A small woman, elderly, silver-haired, her bent back against a shadowed alcove. Hrecker recognized her, and a premonition of her fate shivered down his spine. "Obviously a Gypsy sympathizer," the voice went on conversationally. "Perhaps even an actual agent. She was distributing emblems of that subversive movement."

The camera swung toward one of the woman's hands, the image enlarged, and the screen filled with a plump cactus rooted in a small glass jar. "She is in Security's custody now, being interrogated. Once she has divulged the names of everyone who accepted one of her emblems, they too will be arrested and questioned. Then she will be—"

"Executed." Saucier was back. "So will they."

"She practically forced it on me!"

"You should have screamed for help."

"For what? Assault with a deadly flower?"

"It's deadly enough when Security is watching."

Hrecker nodded. "Yeah. Is that what you wanted me to see?"

The other shook his head as the weathergirl came on to speak of dust storms and unusual cold sweeping across the face of Mars. "I didn't even know about that one. Give it another minute."

"But why? The last time anybody saw a Gypsy was a century ago. That was when we conquered the Orbitals and took over the whole system, not just Earth and the Moon."

"There might be a few left."

"Enough of them?" Hrecker asked. His tone was insistent. "Every time something goes wrong, every blowout, every equipment failure, every... Enough to take all the blame?"

"They're useful that way, aren't they?"

"There can't possibly be a resistance movement!"

Saucier nodded. "Don't say that outside the lab."

"Do you think I'm suicidal?"

"You had that flower."

He fell silent. So he had. He supposed he wouldn't have if he hadn't felt

able to trust the lab. He would have found some way to refuse the cursed gift, or to get rid of it. He might even have cried out for Security to seize the treasonous old woman.

He had been quite astoundingly foolish to do what he had done. He loved the lab for its tolerance of difference, for its atmosphere of intellectual independence, for its old-fashioned free speech. But talk was one thing. Doing was quite another.

“What did you want me to see?”

The weathergirl was done. The soccer report from Earth was nearly over.

“There it is.” Saucier didn't really need to point as the screen filled with

a Q-ship, all swollen nose and slender shaft jutting from a bundle of cylindrical reaction-mass tanks.

“The Explorer.”

The newscaster, his voice urgent with professional emotion, was saying:

“...back from Tau Ceti, where they found a world with intelligent life. It may be the Gypsies' First-Stop, according to Commander Dengh.”

Pictures flashed across the screen. Humanoid aliens, large-skulled, round-bellied, and blunt-muzzled, standing erect but fur-covered, some with tails, some without. Cities and fields and roads, ships and trucks, a high, high tower centered in a nearly circular valley, a handful of artificial satellites. A world with two large continents separated by no more ocean than lay between Europe and Africa, each one wreathed in arcs of islands.

“How long have they been back?” asked Hrecker.

“A month. They've kept it quiet.”

“Why? What's the secret?”

“The Gypsies. The best our people could tell, the age of the buildings, the

size of the road network, the amount of environmental damage, all indicate a very young civilization. And that tower. The locals aren't quite advanced enough to build it. And they speak a kind of English. Our biologists think the Gypsies must have gengineered them from animals.”

“I hope they spent the month arguing over what to do,” said Hrecker.

Saucier nodded. “We're not our ancestors. But we do need to do something. If

we don't, the conservatives will gain power and we may turn as destructive as ever. Or the underground, if there really is one, will sense weakness.”

“Then—“

“That's what that meeting was about.” When Hrecker looked puzzled, he added, “Just before you got

here. That's why I came in here in the first place, things to tell you, and then the rest. They're moving us."

"Why?"

"The Explorer's our only starship, and it's small. We need more and bigger

if we're to send a force to Tau Ceti." He shook his head. "It will study the place in detail. It will see whether the Gypsies really did do anything. And then it will do whatever it thinks appropriate."

Hrecker closed his eyes and shuddered. "So they want more ships."

"The government is drafting every Q-drive designer and engineer there is."

"Whether they're in the spaceship business or not."

"We used to be. We gave them the tunnel drive."

"But we're not anymore. We're scientists, not engineers, and we've moved on."

Saucier shrugged. "They want us too. We're what they've got."

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker turned away from his supervisor. He looked at his

desk, the keyboard with the smudges where his hands touched most often, the corkboard with the photos of his father and sisters on Earth, the... "And I'll bet the university isn't secure enough for them."

"We have the rest of the week to pack."

"Where?"

"A construction base in the Belt."

Hrecker made a face. "Maybe Security should have spotted that plant."

"They'd have jailed you as a gypsymp, a Gypsy sympathizer."

"More work for the rest of you."

Saucier showed his teeth in a grim smile. "You wouldn't be any better off yourself."

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* * *

CHAPTER 2

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Once upon a time, the valley had been a bowl rimmed by steep bluffs, its floor purpled by a carpet of low, mosslike plants and watered by a small lake a little to the west of center. In the woods atop the bluffs had lived creatures about the size of German shepherds. They had eaten the plump white mossberries and drunk from the shore of the lake. They had caught small amphibians and fish and the larvae of the bird-like dumbos, dug for roots and grubs, raided the nests of egg-layers. Occasionally one group had met another, and then they had screeched and screamed and thrown things. Sometimes they had fought, all tooth and claw, blood on the ground, tufts of fur on the shrubbery, even a body or two to eat.

Strangers had fallen from the sky on tongues of flame, burning the moss away where the bluffs flattened to the east, blackening the yellow soil with char. They had named the creatures Racs, studied every detail of their structure, and in time decided to tweak the blueprints that made them what they were. The new Racs that resulted walked erect, had hands instead of paws, and had larger brains.

The lake was still there. The landing field was green again, covered with moss. The Racs picked berries there, played games, and on suitable occasions gathered by the thousands to stare into the heavens where their Remakers had gone.

There were legends of that day, when the night-sky spark that was their vehicle, the Gypsy, had spouted flame and vanished.

The center of the valley was still dominated by the Worldtree the strangers had grown before they left. Yet that Worldtree was no longer a simple spike that jutted from the ground, its tip swollen to hold the strangers' heritage. Its base was surrounded by a complex of stone buildings several stories high. Beyond the buildings the moss remained, broken now by gravel paths, stone benches, and thickets of alien vines. It stretched almost to the bluffs, where dormitories and homes and shops for those who served the Worldtree formed a wall of masonry and wood as imposing as the bluffs alone had ever been.

A Rac standing on one of the gravel paths that linked the valley's center to its rim could have glimpsed, through arched passageways and alleys, the stream of traffic on the ring road that encircled the valley just outside the wall of buildings. The road's tributaries led to the mouths of tunnels carved into the bluffs to reach a maze of natural caverns where masons had leveled floors, built walls and ramps, and installed reinforcing pillars. Roadways wound through the caverns, and the widest sloped ever upward, finally opening to other roads above the bluffs, outside the valley. Narrower ones led to warrens that had once sheltered Racs from war. Now they were storehouses and parking garages for the local citizenry's vehicles.

The forest atop the bluffs was gone. Once small villages had been scattered among the trees. Brush and thatch construction had given way to wood and stone. Farms and workshops had appeared. The population had grown, and the valley floor had remained empty, holy ground occupied only by the Worldtree and the ruins of the first Temple, used only for worship, for picking mossberries, and for battles between tribes and nations that craved possession of the Worldtree. Until...

Dotson Barbtail trembled in the honeysuckle thicket. His pelt kept him from noticing the chill of the mid-autumn night, but his ears alternately pricked alert and flattened against his head. His voice sang with tension in his throat. Quiet, he thought. Quiet. Don't move. Don't make the vines shake. Don't let anyone see you. And thank your Gypsy Remakers that it is not cold enough to turn your breath to clouds of steam.

The pedestrian whose presence on the gravel path had made him freeze passed by obliviously. No others were in sight, which was as it should be. It was late at night, halfway between dusk and dawn, and every good Rac in the valley should be in bed.

Except for late-working scholars.

He shifted just enough to watch the pedestrian grow distant on the path. Did

he have a tail? Was he a scholar? Or a tailless servant?

Those were the choices, weren't they? Everyone in bed but late workers, scholars and servants. And rogues like Dotson Barbtail.

Was he really a rogue?

One hand touched the traditional leather harness that crossed his shoulders

and chest and circled his waist. It supported several small pouches for trinkets, money, tools. One held a key.

Rogue. When he had been small, they had called him that. His mother had cuffed him twice for every one she gave his brothers and sisters. Teachers had scolded and punished. Neighbors had looked at him, and their voices had changed from the roughness of contentment to the smooth song of anger.

Perhaps he had just had too much initiative. Been too ready to act, too slow to anticipate costs and consequences.

But he had also been smart. He had known how to learn quickly and well, and he had qualified to be a student at Worldtree Center. Now he tried to be as much a scholar as anyone. It was a life he loved.

Why, he didn't really have to hide in the honeysuckle, did he? He was a student, a scholar with research assignments all his own. He might be working late himself. He could walk the paths as freely as any other.

But he didn't want to be seen by anyone who might later recall his presence here on this night of all nights, when...

He wished it were darker. The lights of the city that surrounded the valley made the sky glow. If someone saw him hiding there, they would have little trouble making out the distinctive color pattern of

his fur. That was what had given him his name.

The Worldtree stood high ahead of him, its silhouette piercing the skyglow. The buildings of Worldtree Center leaned against its shaft, holding up their peaked roofs, the crenellated walkways for the guards that had not been needed for a generation, the single high turret from which a stout rope ladder rose and rose and rose, vanishing from sight in its reach for the Worldtree's distant, precious tip.

He wished he wore an ordinary, undistinguished, anonymous coat. Then, if he were seen, he might have some hope of escaping unrecognized.

He would have another name too, wouldn't he? No barbtail markings. Just a reputation for getting into trouble.

He snorted gently, quietly, and eased forward among the honeysuckle vines. Several of the cup-sized blooms tipped and spilled their sticky nectar on his fur. Their cloying odor filled the air. He wrinkled his nose and struggled not to sneeze. He promised himself a bath and a brush. Perhaps, when he was done, he would go by the lake.

Trouble, he thought. He was who he was, and surely that could not be changed. Not entirely. He had behaved himself since coming to Worldtree Center. Most of the time.

But he was who he was. Just let him think of something that seemed a good idea to do. It did not matter whether his elders would approve or not. Better, perhaps, if they would sing with rage when they found out, and knowing that, or thinking it, he had never been able to leave that good idea alone.

Without his markings, he would surely be known as Dotson Eaten-by-Temptation. Or would he? Sly Evader might do as well, for the elders caught him far less often than he deserved.

Would they catch him tonight?

He really hoped they would not. He had never before plotted such an awful

crime that was theft and sacrilege and blasphemy and heresy all at once.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

It still did.

He squeezed his fingers more tightly about the lump of baked clay in his

hand. He had been roaming the streets of Worldtree City above the bluffs when he had found the potter's workshop. He had lingered in the door to watch one rotund worker kneading red-brown clay, another making bowls on a spinning wheel, a third painting glazes in patterns onto dry clay surfaces. He had returned again, and again, and one day he had found the shop empty. That was when he had stolen a handful of clay. He had shaped it later, making his lump, heating it in the oven of his apartment stove, hoping that was hot enough, then painting it with enamels. When he was finished, he was satisfied. It was not a perfect match for what he had wished to imitate, but it was close. Close enough.

The only question then remaining was whether he would ever have a chance to use it. Would there ever be a time? Would he ever dare?

Every year the honeysuckle spread, pushing its way into ground long held by the valley's native moss. Gardeners pushed it back, but still it grew. It even grew outside the valley, spreading across the face of First-Stop much as had the Racs themselves.

Some Racs thought the honeysuckle should be removed entirely, chopped and burned and dug up by the roots. The space, they said, could be given back to moss. Or it could be used for more dormitories or library space. Others said the vines were a relic of their Remakers, the alien strangers who had raised them from the beasts. They should remain, as much a remembrance and a promise as the Worldtree that dominated the valley and the Rac culture. So far, the traditionalists had always won.

Dotson was grateful. The honeysuckle hid him where he crouched. It let him move unseen close to the walls of Worldtree Center, that complex of buildings that surrounded and leaned against the Worldtree the Remakers had left behind.

He looked upward, toward those walls, those buildings. They were built of stone and mortar, designed to last forever. They were pierced by windows, many of them lit even so late at night. He saw shadows moving, heard voice and music, smelled food.

Now there was a walk ahead of him, an open zone that he would have to cross to reach the Great Hall. He let his face ease gently through the screen of vines and peered first left, then right. No one was in sight. He could hear no crunch of gravel beneath distant feet.

Still, someone might be watching from further off. From some high window, dark or lighted. He chose a darker portion of the path, slipped sideways from the honeysuckle, and stepped forward along the gravel as naturally and normally as he could manage. A few more steps, another shadow, and he slipped into the honeysuckle on the other side of the path. With luck, he thought, no watcher would have seen where he came from or where he went. There he was, following the path like any other stroller. They would assume they had not noticed him, that he had been there, on the path, all along and was still there somewhere, lost from sight once more in darkness.

He bared his teeth in a Rac grin. He certainly hoped he was lost from sight.

The honeysuckle on this side of the path was a thin screen, a ruff of vegetation at the base of the stone wall, a foundation for the vines that climbed the building's side and peeped in at the windows. He thought the vines were surely sturdy enough to bear his weight. He was also happy that he did not have to trust his estimate. His target was low, near the ground, and here it was, glinting in the skylight just enough to see. He reached out one hand to touch the glass. It moved.

He had been in the Center that afternoon, working in his lab, studying the copies of the Worldtree's ceramic plaques that spelled out the basics of his field. A smudge had impelled him to seek out the archive, to check the original, and it was passing through the Great Hall on that errand that he had found the key, set down and forgotten. Where he found it told him what it must fit.

His recognition of the moment he had long awaited had paralyzed him where he stood. But he had unfrozen before anyone could think his odd posture worth a question. He had palmed the key. Then...

It had taken only minutes more to find this window and set it ajar.

And no one had closed it.

Once that would have been unthinkable. Once there had been guards who

patrolled all of Worldtree Center, finding and closing off every route by which a stranger, an enemy, might invade.

He swung the window wide and clambered over the sill into a small room. The dim skylight revealed a toilet, a door, and a sink. Beside the sink was a roll of paper towels.

When his feet clung to the tile floor, he stopped. He wished he had had the foresight to know that honeysuckle nectar would spill, that he would walk in the sticky stuff, that it would cover his hands. He wished he had known he would leave such unmistakable signs of his presence.

But if he had no foresight, he had luck. The Remakers must have smiled upon his plan when they led him to use the window in this room.

He dampened a fistful of towels at the sink and scrubbed the worst of the stickiness from his fur and hands and feet. Only then did he slip through the door into the dim-lit corridors beyond.

A mounted suit of ancient warrior armor—helm and breastplate and skirt of metal strips—made him start, but only for a moment. No one, no one real and live and apt to question his presence there, seemed to be in the building. There were no lines of light beneath office doors. No distant voices, no click of claws on floor tiles, no echoes of closing doors.

There was no telling how long the silence would last. Surely there were still a few guards to patrol the building and protect its treasures. Surely they would come by soon, too soon.

He stopped. Was that... ? No. Some small animal, scurrying above the ceiling panels. A creak of the building's fabric.

He hurried, and when the corridor he followed debouched into the building's central chamber, he stopped again. Near one end of the vast room was the tenth-scale Worldtree, at its foot a small stepped pyramid on which the priests held forth each week, new students dedicated their lives to learning, and officials of Worldtree Center took their oaths of office.

There were more displays of armor and weapons and the inventions that marked the ascent of Rackind from their raw beginnings. There was the great mural that covered the long far wall with a depiction of all Rac history from the creation to the building of Worldtree Center. Though the light was dim, it glowed with a brilliance of its own, or perhaps of memory. Every Rac knew this painting's every detail as if it were the pattern of his fur.

There was the valley filled with opposing armies that trampled moss and honeysuckle alike. There were the great box kites, anchored by wheeled winches, that had lifted observers above the battle. There was that one observer who had called for more rope and let the wind lift and lift and lift, until he could drop from his kite to the flange that ringed the Worldtree's top. His deed had earned him a new name, Kitewing, and made him a hero for all of time.

When he looked at that portion of the mural, Dotson touched the side of his flattened, chinless muzzle in an abbreviated version of the Rac greeting gesture. Few ever denied Kitewing that token of respect, for legend had always said that the Remakers had left a trove of knowledge in the chamber atop the Worldtree and that those Racs who possessed the valley and the Worldtree would, as soon as they could reach its top, rule the world.

Not that war had stopped after Kitewing hoisted the first rope ladder up the Worldtree and brought the first few plaques down to be puzzled over and the kinship of their language to that spoken and written by the Racs slowly recognized. Since then the Rac tongue had shifted closer to that of the plaques. Now only the least educated and the primitives who did not live in the Land of the Worldtree could not understand the Remakers' gifts.

Nor had war ceased after the construction of Worldtree Center had begun. Nor after the dawn of industry, the making of vehicles and other machines. The mural recorded it all, the bright sunlit notes of triumph and progress, the somber, smoky, red-lit notes of further war, the tanks and fighters, guns and bombs, fleeing civilians, death, destruction.

And always the opponents seemed to differ only in whether they did or did not have tails.

Dotson Barbtail snorted gently, quietly, careful not to produce any sound that might draw attention to a room that should be empty at this hour. The historians said the battles for possession of the Worldtree and its secrets had been battles between tribes, later between nations and regions, later still between systems of belief, both political and religious, not between races of Racs. But the mural told its own story. He did not think it quite coincidence that tailed and tailless mostly lived in different nations, different regions, under different patterns of rule and religion. And the tensions remained. War could erupt anew at any moment, just as it had so many times in the century since the Remakers had left First-Stop and the Racs' story had begun.

Had it really been only a century, a little more, since Racs had lived in huts in the forest? Since they had been beasts without even the wit to build the crudest shelters? He turned to face the miniature of the Worldtree. The priests said their progress had been so fast, faster even than that of the Remakers before they had learned enough to become the gods of the Racs, because those gods had not only made them. They had also taught them... The lesson was inscribed on the shaft of the Worldtree icon at the head of the room, on the image of the Worldtree wherever it appeared in the mural, though he could not make it out in the dimness: "Knowledge is the road to heaven." Once the Racs learned enough, they could climb the Worldtree. Once they learned still more, said the priests, they could join the Remakers in the sky.

Perhaps that final goal was not far off. Rac engineers and physicists had learned how to fill metal towers like hollow Worldtrees with liquid hydrogen and oxygen and put devices into orbit around their world. The latest such thundertree was the largest; when it was finished, it would carry a pod containing three Racs into space. In a few years, First-Stop would have what the Remakers' records called a space station. There would be trips to other planets of the Tau Ceti system. Eventually...

Dotson Barbtail shook himself. This Great Hall was designed to awe, to fill Racs with a sense of history and destiny, to stop them in their headlong rush from task to task and awaken reflection. It rarely failed with him, not even when he knew he could not afford to give it the time it demanded.

That lump of clay he had prepared was hot and damp in his hand. He turned again, away from the miniature Worldtree, away from the mural. There was what he sought. There, at the opposite end of the chamber, a glass display case in which rested the seamless metal casket Kitewing himself had found atop the Worldtree.

Legend said that the two dozen seeds within the casket were the seeds of the Remakers themselves.

No one knew how a walking, thinking, talking creature could possibly sprout from a seed like a plant, but that was what the legend said.

Once the Racs mastered every lesson the Remakers had recorded on the plaques the Worldtree had also held, they should plant the seeds. The Remakers' children would then be with them to guide them to where their parents dwelt among the stars.

He unsnapped the flap of a pouch and removed the key he had found on top of the display case earlier that day.

Would it fit?

Would he trigger some silent alarm that would bring Worldtree Center's guards running to seize him?

He inserted it in the keyhole at the base of the case's wooden side panel.

It turned easily, and the panel swung down.

He chose a seed, just one, and replaced it with the lump of painted clay he had carried all this time in his hand.

He closed and locked the panel once more.

He set the key on top of the case, precisely where he had found it.

Then he fled.

The pot full of rich valley loam was already waiting in his quarters.

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CHAPTER 3

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The new lab did not look much like the old. For one thing, Belt Center 83 had not been embedded in a very large rock. Its gravitational field was just barely strong enough to define a vertical and so slight that it took many seconds for a dropped tool to reach a floor. This meant that a few square centimeters of velcro were all it took to anchor cupboards, storage bins, display screens, and other gear against the walls. A grid of narrow metal bars was slung a meter below the ceilings. People pulled themselves from bar to bar as they traveled about the lab. The ubiquitous little robots ran atop the bars, though they could and did go everywhere in search of dust and litter and pinhole leaks in the tunnel lining. Many were equipped with small propellers and stubby control surfaces that made them look like ancient biplanes so they could move quickly despite the lack of weight. The same modifications also equipped them for zero-gee.

For another, except in that portion of the Center occupied by Security and Administration, there were no individual offices or other rooms. There were only endless tunnels winding beneath the surface of the rock. Elastic cords and plastic sheets created walls and partial ceilings, but they only approximated privacy. The sheets, no thicker than a sheet of paper, were both flimsy and translucent, and Security forbade complete ceilings even over toilet facilities. Always, overhead, the way was clear for passersby to look in on whatever might be going on. An etiquette of averted eyes and hasty passage had quickly developed, but even when people did not look, they could only pretend to ignore smells and sounds. Everyone knew that there could be no real secrets of work or toilet, sleep or sex.

The new lab differed in one other crucial feature as well: Security was everywhere. Guards hovered at every tunnel intersection. They daily scanned the records in every computer and read mail before addressees ever saw it. They peeped over every flimsy partition, and no one knew when they were listening.

No plants were visible, but that was nothing new to those who had come to Belt Center 83 from Mars or the Moon where no scrap of green was permitted outside officially approved greenhouses and agricultural domes and tunnels. Yet in such places people at least had known the greenery was there. If one were careful, it could even be visited.

Here, though, there were no such places. Those who craved a glimpse of green could only visit the vatrooms near the lab's surface, where the light of a distant sun glowed through vast tanks of algae that absorbed carbon dioxide and wastes and supplied the lab with oxygen and a pasty goo to be processed into food.

There were more guards in the vatrooms than anywhere else, and it was no mystery why. Those who craved green, those who had some sympathy for living things, could not be decent Engineers. They might even be secret Orbitals or Gypsies, or their silent allies. Certainly they could not be trusted.

Few of Belt Center 83's workers, not even those few from Earth who missed green the most, not even those few who did indeed doubt the wisdom of their masters, thought it worth being seen staring into the algae tanks.

What passed for Marcus Aurelius Hrecker's private workspace looked much as it had at Olympus University. There was a desk, a screen, a keyboard. A veedo set and a shelf clung to the one wall that was solid. Self-stick memos stuck to the plastic sheeting of the others. There was, of course, no African violet. Nor was there a door, not when he and all his visitors dropped in from overhead.

One frequent visitor was Tamiko Inoue. Half Hrecker's mass, she seemed to smile whenever she looked at him with her deep black eyes. He knew he did the same.

“They can spare you for a while?”

She laughed and sat on the end of his desk nearest the veedo set. “I’m not

that important.” She was one of several aides to Sergei Lyapunov, the Estonian general in charge of the Navy’s expeditionary force. The Navy was the Navy because it traveled in the sea of space; its commanders were generals because its ships flew.

“Or do they send you out to spy on the peons?”

She laughed again and shook her head. Her hair, as black as her eyes, was

cut too short to swing and bounce, but he could imagine it longer, given life by motion and gravity. She wore a sleek coverall that brought every bulge and hollow to life. Hrecker did too, though his shape emphasized the outfit’s practicality. Clothing that flapped and billowed did not belong where gravity was not enough to keep it under control.

“Can’t think why else you’d leave the castle.” The scientists and technicians in the rest of Belt Center 83 envied their administrators, who shared one end of the asteroid with the Security forces. The tunnels there opened into actual rooms, with doors and solid walls.

“It gets lonely in there, even though there’s a lot of men would like to—

Uh!”

She jumped as the veedo set beside her turned itself on with a burst of sound.

“Security,” said Hrecker.

“Of course.”

“This morning,” said a voice. “In Vatroom 3.”

The screen displayed a single man, so skinny that his bones showed at every

joint, maneuvering a complex glass construction. With one hand he fended off walls and other obstacles. The other clutched a glass pipe from which rose half a dozen curving, curling, tapered shapes that subdivided in a nearly fractal way.

“That’s Ozzie Gilpin,” said Tamiko.

“He must have blown that himself.”

Gilpin was Belt Center 83’s chief mechanic. He repaired what broke. He built

shelving and cabinets and tools. He machined metal into shapes called for by physicists and engineers. He blew molten glass into flasks and coils and stills for the chemists.

The vatroom’s ceiling was a broad arch of metal interrupted by narrow viewports through which light could stream. Beneath each glass stripe stood a green wall a handsbreadth thick, a tank full of algae soup. Between the tanks were mounted fluorescent lights to supplement the distant sun. Buglike robots

clustered atop the tanks and ran up and down their sides.

Dark flecks, threads of ungreen fluid, and streams of bubbles swirled in the narrow tanks. The veedo carried the throbbing sound of the pumps that kept the algae well mixed with the Center's sewage and stale air.

Gilpin's eyes were intent on the nearest tank. He did not seem to notice as a trio of Security guards swam into view. They were armed with short metal clubs whose grips were wrapped with black plastic tape. Elsewhere in the lab, the guards also carried sidearms.

"What have you got there?" asked one of the guards.

"You'll see," said Gilpin. His free hand brought him to a gentle stop beside

the tank's topmost harvest tap, nearest the window and the light. He immediately connected the tap to the pipe at the base of his intricate glassware construction.

"It's a sculpture," said Hrecker.

The guards made no move to stop Gilpin.

When he opened the tap, rich green fluid flowed into the sculpture and

filled its every ramifying corner. "A fern," he said, and as it caught the light it was. A cluster of sparkling, glass-sheathed fronds that shone as brightly as any in an Earthly forest.

"Oh!" said Tamiko. "It's beautiful."

Hrecker nodded. His hand covered hers and squeezed.

The three guards reacted in no such appreciative way.

As one, they unfastened their clubs from their belts and began to swing.

The glass shattered.

Gilpin screamed and bled and died.

The algae soup continued to flow from the tap.

Hrecker thought it should cover the wreckage with green, but red blood made it muddy and low gravity let it drift and twist and bubble in the air.

"Oh, no," said Tamiko. Her voice was low, as if she could feel Gilpin's pain.

The screen went dark.

The voice that had introduced the veedo tape had said nothing more after "In Vatroom 3."

The point had needed no discussion, no lecture, no sermon. No one needed to be told that Engineer officialdom thought it heresy to value living things, or that Security was always watching for hints of treason.

“He’s not the first.” They both nodded. Ten days before, Hrecker had been on his way to work when Security agents had made him stop and cling to the travel grid overhead. In the distance, he had been able to see other agents pulling a struggling woman from a workspace.

Later, he had told Tamiko and said, “I wonder who she was. I wonder what she did.” He had not said how aware he was that the same thing might once have happened to him, might yet happen if Security ever learned about the African violet.

Tamiko hadn’t known the answers then, but by the next day she had been able to tell him: The woman had fastened a photo of her mother to the plastic wall of her workspace. Unfortunately, her mother worked in a lunar greenhouse tunnel, and she had been photographed against that background, all green leaves, red and purple fruit, even a few flowers.

The next time Hrecker traveled down that tunnel he looked for the woman, her workspace, the photo. But there was only an empty space, a desk, a computer screen and keyboard, a veedo set, flimsy walls with no sign that anyone had ever attached a thing to them. Two days later, a man was sitting at the desk and there was a photo of the Explorer on the wall.

The woman had vanished.

“I never did learn what happened to her,” said Tamiko now.

“They forget we’re animals,” said Hrecker. “We need food and oxygen, so we need the plants.”

“Need is one thing. They recognize that.” Her hand indicated the veedo set and the algae tanks they had just seen. “But we shouldn’t love them. We shouldn’t see beauty in them.”

Not even if that beauty was shaped from glass, from hardness born of furnace melt, not seed or spore. Not when it gained color and significance from lowly algae. Not when it glorified the living world.

He opened his mouth as if to say as much. But then he glanced at the ceiling and remained quiet except for, “Or we might be tempted.”

“Yes,” said Tamiko. Their hands were still entwined. When she squeezed, he thought the message clear. There was no telling who might pass or who might be hovering just out of sight, listening for any disloyal word. And whatever they might now say could be dangerous for them both.

The Engineers thought of themselves as allied to machinery, to mechanisms designed and built by human hands. Their traditional enemies, the Gypsies, had based their technology on living things, on genetic engineering. And the closer the Engineers came to confronting their foes once more, as they had not in a century, the more they purified their stance.

Nor would it be safe to suggest out loud that the Engineers’ ideology could be less absolute and rigid and unchanging, more flexible and lifelike, than one of their holy machines.

But of course it was. Ideology was a people thing, and people were not machines. Of course it stiffened when opposed and relaxed when it was not.

Hrecker took a deep breath. It would be much safer to question action instead of belief. “Why do we have to go back to Tau Ceti?”

Tamiko was shaking her head even before he finished. “We’ve exhausted Earth.”

“But we have everything we need out here. Don’t even mention the Moon or Mars. We have habitats and the Belt. Enough room and energy and minerals for centuries. And no gravity wells to fight. No interstellar distances to make shipping expensive. Why can’t we just let these creatures go on with their lives?”

“You’re right,” she said. “Of course you are. We don’t need mines or farms or colonies.”

“But we’re going anyway.”

“Idiot. You’ve forgotten the Gypsies.”

“The Gypsy stain.” He could not help the doubting tone of his voice.

She frowned at him. “First we have to be sure it’s there. But once we’re sure—“

“We’ll get out the scrub brushes.”

“We’ll clean the place up. Get it polished and purified and ready for colonists later on.”

He knew how much of what he said he believed. But she? Her tone was definite, decisive, confident, as if she could see beauty in green plants and glass ferns filled with algae but still believe the Gypsies evil.

How much of that, he wondered, was pretense for the sake of those who might be listening?

* * *

On Mars, a large part of the lab’s work had been directed toward focusing probability shifters on smaller and smaller volumes. Now that focus was turned outward as it had been when the shifter was first invented.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker had seen old records that claimed the Engineers had invented the shifter and the Orbitals and Gypsies had stolen it. He thought more recent historians made more sense when they said the Orbitals had been the first to learn how to warp probability and stimulate the vacuum to fountain forth the energy needed to power a spaceship. The resulting Q-drive had made it possible for the genetic

engineers to escape the cleansing of Earth. Later the refugees had learned how to use the shifter to boost the infinitesimal probability that large objects such as spaceships would tunnel across gaps in space. The distances the ships could leap in this way had been microscopic at first, but when the leaps were repeated millions of times per second, the ship's effective velocity rapidly grew impressive.

In time, the Engineers had duplicated the discovery. They had even increased the size of the tunneling leaps to meters and achieved faster-than-light travel. But the Explorer's voyages each took many months. Longer leaps and shorter travel times were essential for a military expeditionary force.

"We got it!" said Renard Saucier. His ebullient tone and the wine bottle held aloft in his hand suggested a crucial announcement.

"Not us," said Hrecker. "We weren't even working on that." His tone was flatter. The news had been on the veedo the evening before. Each leap was now ten meters, and it took three nanoseconds. That was about twenty times light-speed, already a good deal better than the best the Explorer had ever been able to do.

"Hah!" Saucier laughed and squeezed wine into translucent drinking bulbs.

The wine was not champagne. "So it was the Farside team."

"Gypping thieves," said Eric Silber in his abrasive voice. "I had to help them on the math, and do you think they mentioned that?"

"The point is, we got it," said Miriam Panek quietly. Smooth, yellow-brown skin and an almost hairless scalp made her age impossible to estimate. Her specialty was the macroscopic quantum. "The trip will only take five weeks, maybe six."

"Once we have the ships," said Silber.

"They're almost ready," said Saucier. "But they're bigger than the probability fields we can generate. That's our job."

"I've been working on that math too," said Silber. Silence answered him, but it was not an attentive silence and no one looked his way. "I..." He shrugged and stopped.

"We're getting there," said Hrecker. "It won't be long."

Saucier lifted his drinking bulb in a toast. When the others had matched the gesture, he said, "It had better not be."

* * *

Except for Security and Administration, Belt Center 83's personnel lived in much the same sort of quarters as they worked: open-topped, flimsy-sided, doorless cubicles. Sleeping sacs were velcroed to

solid floors and walls to keep the sleepers' movements from propelling them into traffic or neighboring cubicles.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker unfastened the elastic cord that held his makeshift ceiling of wall material in place. It did not cover the entire cubicle, but it did serve to block vision and provide an illusion of privacy. Tamiko let go of the travel grid and slipped through the opening. A moment later, he had joined her.

She touched the plastic overhead. "You're supposed to leave more space around the edges. You shouldn't have to unfasten it to get in."

"You've said that before." He kicked a robot aside as he drew her toward the sleepsac on the floor. "The last time you were here."

Their words were not loud, not much above a whisper. People in nearby cubicles were just as careful not to stand out above the background murmur of soft talk, shifting bodies, and quiet music, though a laugh echoed from further down the tunnel. Some evenings there were fights. Sometimes there were parties, though with those the neighbors joined in rather than protest. Sometimes they even took down their walls to make a larger space.

For a moment they said nothing more at all. But then he drew back from her just enough to see her face in the light that filtered through the plastic. "Lots of people do it," he said.

"Security doesn't like it. They think people don't want them watching."

"They don't. We don't. You don't. Do you?"

She giggled. He murmured. She giggled again.

Later, he said, "You're going, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. I work for the General, after all." There was a pause. "And

I want to go. Here, the only place you can live outdoors is Earth. Everywhere else..." She pointed at the poster he had taped to one flimsy wall. It seemed an abstract landscape until one recognized the many-sulfured hues of Io. "The Moon, Mars, the habitats. Here. You have to stay in a box. I want to see another living world. And the aliens sound fascinating."

"Even if you have to destroy them?"

"If we have to." He hoped the reluctance in her voice was genuine. "If they aren't natural. If the Gypsies made them. If they're monsters. Your work will help."

Hrecker grunted. The Engineers had defeated the Orbitals a century before largely because they alone had seen that the torrent of energy the probability shifters coaxed from the vacuum could become a particle beam weapon. And among his other tasks at Belt Center 83, he had worked on improving particle flux, beam collimation, and range.

"You're going back to Mars." It was not a question.

“Back to the university. Back to the routine. It’s probably just as well.”

“What about us?”

Her mass was not enough to keep him from shrugging. “I’m not a gypsymp.

But...” He pointed at the flimsy ceiling, and she nodded. He could not, should not, say any more. There was no telling who was listening.

But they both knew what he wished he could say aloud: He was no Gypsy sympathizer, but he was not nearly as convinced as she that it was right to purge every trace of engineering from the universe.

“We won the war a long time ago,” he said instead. He meant that the old conflict between mechanical and biological technology was over. “In fact, they couldn’t have fled without adopting our kind of technology. Spaceships and Q-drives.”

“Potsters,” she whispered in his ear. And yes, he thought, the Engineers had had to accept some biological technology in turn. Here they ate processed algae, but on Mars and elsewhere, much of the food came from engineered plants.

“They’re good,” she added. “But I wouldn’t eat them if I had any choice.

Lobsters and potatoes are just as good and more moral. Purer, you know?”

“Natural.” That was the party line. Did she really believe it?

She nodded against his shoulder. “That’s it. We should get rid of them.

Udder trees, too. And oil trees, hanky bushes, snackbushes...” She continued the list.

“People like them too much. They’re too tasty, or too useful.”

“Tough.”

“Why can’t we combine the two?” he asked quietly. “The way we’re already doing, really. The best of both?”

She shook her head. “We’re too different.”

The lights above the travel grid never dimmed, and the thin plastic of the cubicle’s walls and partial ceiling did nothing to exclude the brightness. But people had long since learned to sleep without dark. Tamiko was snoring gently, prettily, seconds after closing her eyes.

He remained awake, thinking: He had never accepted the ideology of his world as unquestioningly as she. As unquestioningly as almost everyone, when no one alive today had ever seen a Gypsy.

When he had first heard of the Explorer’s discovery, he had said he hoped the government had argued over what to do. That was not a thought suitable for someone who thought the Gypsies and all their works were automatically, innately evil.

Somewhere along the line, sometime in his life, even before he met Tamiko, he had become a moderate.

Yet he kept silent about it. Or nearly so, though he thought Tamiko might think he was only playing devil's advocate when he opposed her.

He sighed. If he opposed her less gently, if he said what he really thought, he would surely lose her. He might also lose his job, his liberty, even his life.

Meanwhile, he continued to work on the probability shifters that would permit the ships of the Engineers' expeditionary force to stutter their ways through space. The problem remained that the fields generated by the probability shifter, the regions of warped probability that alone made macroscopic quantum tunneling possible, were still too small. They were more than large enough for the Explorer, but the new ships were larger still.

He did not doubt that they would lick the problem, just as other teams would eventually reduce the time needed for a single leap to a single nanosecond.

It was only a matter of time.

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CHAPTER 4

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Dotson Barbtail let the crowd sweep him through the high doors into the Great Hall of Worldtree Center. The female beside him was nearly as tall as he, and everything around them glowed with all the warmth a springtime sun could carry. Even the armor and weaponry and ancient gadgetry displayed along the walls gleamed as if freshly polished, despite the film of dust and the occasional cobweb the light revealed.

"There's a new shop out by the Field," she was saying in his ear. "Basket lunches. Beer. The berries are ripe. And it's a beautiful day."

“Ah, Sunglow.” He struggled to keep his voice a relaxed snarl, not the high melody of tension and anger he suddenly felt. He patted the soft, golden fur of her hip. “You know I have work to do at home.”

Her grip on his elbow tightened, and her voice smoothed with irritation.

“You always do.”

The female to their left was staring at them, nudging her mate with an elbow, saying, “Look at them! What’s he thinking of? She’s one of them!”

Others heard and joined her glare. The tip of a lashing tail brushed Dotson’s ankles. He knew it could not be Sunglow’s, for “one of them” meant one of the tailless Racs.

“She shouldn’t even be here!”

As Sunglow seemed to shrink beside him, he pressed against the flow,

steering her with his hand on her hip, his wrist against her lower back, just above the swell of her buttocks. He could feel the bony nub beneath her skin, all she had to mark her biological origins and her kinship to him and all the rest, twitching against his wrist. From the corner of his eye, he noted the rotundity of her belly and its statement of maturity and health. He wished his own swelled out as much, but he did not eat the way he should.

The crowd was so far thickest toward the front of the Hall. To the right, toward the rear, there was still room, and that was where he directed their steps. He felt relief when the righteous comments faded behind and the looks they drew began to seem more sympathetic. Here were a very few other tailless Racs, a mixed couple or two, a child whose short tail proclaimed its hybrid status.

“Remember,” he said. “You’re an exchange student from Farshore. Not a beast from the forest, not a degenerate from the slums. Not whatever they say. Don’t let them get to you.”

“It’s hard,” she said, and her voice was still high, higher, pained and suffering and more than a little mad.

“I know.” As they passed the glass display case, his mind froze for a moment. How long had it been since he raided it for that seed? Months, though “month” was a meaningless term on a world without a moon. The word had come from the Remakers and meant a span of thirty days. He raised himself on his toes. The key was just where he had left it. No one had yet discovered the theft.

He remembered how empty the vast room had been that night, how quiet, how clean. Now it roared with Racs talking, talking, talking. It smelled too, of fur both washed and unwashed, of soaps and perfumes, of morning meals. Even in the rear of the Hall, it was now impossible to move.

“There aren’t many tailless Racs here,” she said.

“They’re almost all servants and laborers. Poor. Low-class. Unambitious.”

“We’re poor at home too. But not unambitious.”

“You made it here.”

“Sometimes I wish I hadn’t. You’re just about my only friend.”

He winced and looked away from her. He liked her, he did. He wished he dared

to like her better. But... He changed the subject. "The place is packed." He could feel warm flesh and fur against his back, his sides, his front. A cry of outrage elsewhere in the Hall prompted him to clutch at that harness pouch that held his money. Someone had joined those Racs who had lost everything they carried while they—but somehow not their thieves—were immobilized in the weekly crowd.

"It always is," she said. "Every time. And most of them don't see me when they look at me."

The room was filled with those who worked at Worldtree Center, students, teachers, scholars, librarians, administrators, and filled again with those who worked elsewhere in the valley or in the city atop the surrounding bluffs. There were also those who came great distances to worship at the center of the Rac civilization, in the valley where once the Remakers had created their kind. There were also pouchpickers and strapnips. And almost every one had a tail.

"I'm surprised you come."

"Just with you," she said. She patted his arm. "I could help, you know. Then you'd be done sooner. We could..."

"Uh-uh." He shook his head abruptly, and as abruptly wished he hadn't.

"You always say that."

Few were paying much attention to the mural that recounted the history of

the Racs, or to exhibits such as the glass case and its casket of seeds. All eyes were focused on the front of the Hall, the miniature Worldtree that reached almost all the way to the Hall's high roof, the pyramid of steps at its base, the High Priest emerging from a small doorway on the right.

The roar of the crowd died to the merest murmur as the High Priest mounted the steps and revealed the purpose of the pyramid, to lift him high enough to be visible throughout the Hall. He wore a light yellow cap and cape marked to recall the black ears and back-stripe of the Founder.

The High Priest faced the Worldtree's icon, head up, arms held high. He held the pose as he turned toward his audience, scratched the side of his muzzle with sweeping gestures that could be seen throughout the Hall, and bowed. "Welcome," he rumbled.

As one, the crowd scratched the flanks of its myriad snouts and rumbled back, a sound of immense satisfaction at being where they were.

It was this way at the end of every week. The people of First-Stop filed into the Hall and stood shoulder to shoulder, packed tighter than ever they were outside this shrine to the high Worldtree at the center of their world, to the aliens who had Remade them from the beasts. Yet they did not feel awe. Their religion was one of pride and determination and striving.

The High Priest's voice snarled and rumbled forth. "Our gods are gone," he

cried. "But they have not abandoned us. Before they left, they said, 'Come to us

when you are ready.’”

The murmur of the crowd that filled the Great Hall swelled in response. Scent glands released involuntary bursts of odor, nostrils widened, bodies shifted.

“Are we ready?” His pause was hardly long enough for any answer. “No.”

The crowd’s murmur shifted higher in pitch, expressing an anxiety as ritual as the disappointed High Priest’s sway of body and shake of head.

“We have not learned enough. Yes!” he cried. “We have learned an enormous amount. We climbed the Worldtree.” He gestured toward Kitewing’s portion of the Hall’s mural. No one looked.

“We learned how much, much longer our Remakers took to learn as much. Then we learned to build thundertrees and grasp the edge of space with our own claws.”

The murmur grew deeper, the crowd of Racs more pleased with itself. Dotson twisted to see where the thundertrees were being added to the mural. The painters had begun their work only a month before.

“That too is not enough. Our Remakers are gone far beyond the edge of space. We have much to learn, even with the aid they left us. But we will never give up. To do so would be to deny our destiny.

“We will continue. And someday we will deserve to call our Remakers what they called themselves: Gypsies.”

The rhetoric continued until it was time to celebrate the progress that had been made in recent days. A large door to the left of the High Priest’s pyramid swung open, and three young Racs wheeled in a mass of complicated looking machinery. It proved to be the latest version of the mechanical arm that would aid the building of the space station Rac engineers planned to place in orbit above their world. The High Priest’s pride was clear when he gestured, the Hall darkened, and one wall was illuminated with a scene from space: Three construction capsules equipped with smaller arms were beginning to assemble a framework of aluminum girders. Behind them First-Stop floated, aloof and beautiful. Near the bottom of the image swam several broad sheets of solar cells. In the distance were the flecks of light that were fuel tanks and spent thundertrees. In time, they would be fastened to the framework, linked by tunnels, powered by the solar cells, and staffed with Racs eager to take the next step outward, away from First-Stop and toward reunion with the gods.

Next a scientist was saluted for discovering a drug that would increase Rac fertility and hence the size of the population that struggled to pursue the destiny the Remakers had assigned the Racs. The next generation would learn more and faster, and there would be more farmers, miners, and factory workers to support the drive beyond the edge of space.

Another was honored for learning that the larger dumbos, big-eared flying creatures with feathered wings and furry bodies, could tell each other where to find nectar and water bodies suitable for egg-laying. They uttered sounds pitched above the range Rac ears could hear and used the echoes to navigate. To communicate, they played back the echoes they had encountered on their way to their find.

Finally it was time to leave. The High Priest scratched his face and bowed one last time, turned, descended the steps of his pyramid, and vanished. The crowd began to seep from the Hall to the

pathways outside.

“Well?” said Sunglow.

“Well, what?”

“A basket lunch? A beer or two? An afternoon picking berries on the Field?”

She sounded less dejected than she had before the service had begun.

“I have to...”

“Work. I know. You work too much.”

“I’m sorry. But...” He made the gesture that, for a Rac, was a shrug.

“It’s not good for you.”

As the Great Hall continued to empty, the crowd shifted. Space appeared

between its members. Dotson Barbtail could no longer feel the pressure of others against his pelt. He let go of his money pouch and smiled as he noted Sunglow doing just the same. Together they turned toward the Hall’s high doors and moved with the gaps among their neighbors.

“Dotson!”

Moss and honeysuckle filled the eye with purple and green, the nose with

scent. Beyond the grounds and the valley’s encircling buildings, the bluffs lifted high to scattered trees and the walls of offices and hotels and private homes. But they were not given the chance to admire the view.

“Dotson!”

They turned as one to find an older Rac approaching from one side. The hairs

of his pelt were tipped with silver-gray, giving him a frosted, grizzled appearance, and his whiskers were white. His claws rasped against his muzzle. “Senior Hightail,” said Dotson as both he and Sunglow returned the greeting gesture. “The head of my department,” he added for Sunglow’s benefit.

“I haven’t seen many interim reports from you lately,” said the Senior. His tone was smooth and high enough to indicate a degree of anger. Behind him, another scholar from the Center pretended not to hear what he was saying. Dotson thought he recognized one of the astronomy section. Starsight? Was that his name?

“Has there been any progress?” asked Senior Hightail when Dotson did not reply immediately.

“Not as much as I would like,” admitted the younger Rac.

“I know why.”

Dotson hoped he did not look as surprised as he felt.

“You haven’t been spending enough time in the lab. Not for months.”

“I’ve been waiting for samples,” said Dotson. “But they’ve been having trouble with the submersibles, and...”

The Senior snorted so hard that droplets sprayed from his nostrils. “More likely it’s this pretty thing.” He pointed at Sunglow. “Shouldn’t let yourself be distracted. Not if you wish to accomplish anything.”

“Yessir.” What else could he say? That even though the submersibles were not visiting the deep-sea vents, he had all the samples he needed in the lab’s freezers? That he didn’t spend nearly as much time with Sunglow as she wished he would?

“It’s important, you know. All Rackind is counting on you.”

“Yessir.”

“I want a report,” said Senior Hightail. “You’ve got a week.” With that he turned and left.

When he was a safe distance off, Dotson told Sunglow, “Don’t mind the old fart.” A moment later, he squeezed her arm and added, “I like being distracted. At least by you.”

She squeezed back. “But you won’t go to the Field with me.”

“You heard him. Now I’ve got to write a report for him.”

“You didn’t have that excuse an hour ago.”

He said nothing as he led the way off the steps and onto a gravel path that pointed toward his apartment.

“You’ve never had me in your place, you know. So I’ll go home with you now.

You dictate. I’ll type. We’ll be done in no time. And then...”

“Uh-uh,” he said, and despite his best effort, his voice squeaked. “I work better alone.”

She stopped on the path and swung to face him. “You’re lying. You’re afraid of me. Or you have something else going on. Do you have a mate there?”

“No!” But his voice squeaked even worse.

“I don’t believe you!” she cried quite shrilly.

He could not possibly tell her the truth. But what else could he say? In

silence, he tried to smile. He let the effort go when Sunglow's only response was wide open eyes, flaring nostrils, one hand raised in fury, its claws extended.

He backed a step. She froze and stared at her own hand, realizing what she was doing. She let it fall. And then she walked away from him.

* * *

Dotson Barbtail's apartment consisted of two alcoves and two rooms. One alcove, its opening shielded by a curtain, held a shower, a sink, and a toilet. The other was a tiny kitchen with a hotplate, a coldbox, and three cupboards for food, dishes, and utensils. One of the rooms held a table, a desk, two chairs, a rack of shelves filled with books and stacks of paper. The other was equipped with a sleeping pad and another rack of shelves that held harnesses, extra pouches, two cloaks, three caps, and copies of all those Remaker plaques that pertained to his research.

The sleeping room also had a broad, multipaned window that faced the morning sun. Before that window was an oversized earthenware pot full of dirt. In that dirt stood what looked like a large plant. A broad rosette of green leaves lay flat on the soil. From its center rose a waist-high stalk as fat as Dotson's thigh. Its lower half was creased as if it would someday divide in two. Its upper half was swollen and misshapen. The top of the stalk bore a fat terminal bud.

Dotson tried to work when he got home. Just as he had told Sunglow, he had the work to do, and it had gained urgency from Senior Hightail's words. But...

He sat at his desk, staring at his typer and the piece of paper it had held for three days. It was in fact the first page of a progress report. Unfortunately, he did not have much progress to report.

As they had with so much, the Remakers had left full accounts of their own biology and of the techniques by which they had manipulated the material of heredity to create such things as Racs. Dotson Barbtail's predecessors had established that Rac and Remaker biology were in all but details the same. The cells of both stored information in genes built of DNA. The Remakers had used protein enzymes found in bacteria to snip and splice the genes, and their plaques noted that the most useful such enzymes came from bacteria that lived in hot springs and volcanic cracks in the deep sea bed. Unfortunately, they had not been able to leave samples with their records. It was up to the Racs to find or make their own tools for genetic engineering.

That is, it was up to Dotson Barbtail. He had been assigned to screen First-Stop's bacteria for the necessary enzymes. He had even found some, transferred their genes to bacteria he could grow in vats in the lab, and hoped soon to have restriction endonucleases and heat-stable polymerases in quantity. Unfortunately, the bacteria refused to grow as they should. It almost seemed that the enzymes poisoned the cells that made them.

He had said all that before. He had told his superiors. He had requested more samples from hot springs and the sea bed. He had put himself at the mercy of other workers, and when the submersibles had run into problems of their own, he had actually been pleased.

Could he have solved his problems by himself? Perhaps, he thought.

If he had never raided the Great Hall for that Remaker seed.

If he had never planted it in his sleeping room, there by the window.

If it had never sprouted.

If he had never spoken to it and watched in open-mouthed delight as its stalk bent away from the light toward him, toward his voice.

If he had been able to leave it long enough to try growing the enzymes he already had in other sorts of bacteria. Surely there were some the enzymes would not poison. Surely there was a way.

But.

He slammed one hand on the desktop and sang, high-pitched and angry, at the

awkward, clumsy, time-consuming typer. Would it help if he had a computer, a word processor? No one had such things yet, but the Remakers' plaques described them in detail. Five years ago, the High Priest had celebrated the first single-crystal silicon ingot. Now there were solar cells for space stations. A year ago, he had celebrated the first simple integrated circuit. Soon, soon.

No. The problem was not his tools. It was him.

He abandoned his desk for the sleeping room. He stood over the plant and

sang at it angrily. Once more, as it always did, it leaned toward him. It did not care about his mood. "Speak to me," its posture said. He could almost see the stalk as a body, a Rac wrapped in a green robe to blur its outlines, the terminal bud a head tipped attentively in his direction. "Speak to me. Talk and tell and teach."

Soon he was telling it about the service that morning, about prejudice against tailless Racs, about Sunglow's courting of him and his reluctance to let her into the apartment, about his fear of what she would say or do when she saw the plant for the first time. Would she guess what it was? What he had done? Would she denounce him? Would the High Priest himself then come here to remove the pot and plant? What would happen to him?

Would he be banished? That would mean the continent of Farshore, a backward place peopled almost entirely by tailless Racs. There were mines there, essential for industry and progress, and there was a need for managers. Maybe he would be volunteered for that duty, far from the Worldtree at the center of his life, at the navel of the world.

Or... The Farshorns provided most of the miners, when they were not warring with each other or the Land of the Worldtree. Tailed criminals provided the rest.

Sunglow was a tailless Farshorn herself, as lovely and enticing as only the alien could be. She was not backward, not primitive, not fit only to be a miner or a servant. Her mother was a teacher, her father a bureaucrat. But no matter how much he craved her, no matter how much other males envied him when she was with him, tail or no tail, he could not let her get too close.

Did it make a sound when he got up to find a sausage for his lunch? How could it? That slightest of squeaks must have come from outdoors, or the apartment next door, or the hallway. Yet now the plant was leaning toward the visioncaster on the table beside the window.

He turned it on, and then he stood to watch the report of a newly discovered troop of Racs. They lived in the forests of an island far at sea, eating roots and fruits and shellfish. Living in huts. They had tails, but they were more primitive even than the Farshorns outside their towns and cities.

The announcer's voice was saying how far these islanders showed the rest of Rackind had come since the Remakers left.

Dotson got his sausage from the coldbox. When he looked again, the VC showed an outdoor scene, a milling crowd, a miniature Worldtree with a basket of woven steel upon its tip, and a tailless priest atop a pyramid of wooden steps. He wore a yellow cloak and cap, marked with black, just as had the High Priest of Worldtree Center's Great Hall.

This priest, however, never faced his congregation. Arms upthrust, head back, eyes closed, belly protruding more than that of any priest Dotson had ever seen before, he appealed to his Worldtree icon and through it to the Remakers themselves. "We have learned," he cried. "We have learned so much! Give us a sign! Tell us we have done well! Tell us that you approve our struggle! Tell us that our progress pleases you!"

A line of young Racs formed to one side of the step-pyramid. Each one held a replica of one of those plaques the Remakers had left atop the Worldtree. When the priest gestured, they approached the icon one by one, found the inconspicuous clawholds in its surface, climbed, and carefully set their burdens in the basket high above the congregation.

"Our offering! The lessons we have mastered! Tell us they are enough!

"Or must we still struggle to unravel all the rest? You are the gods,
perfect and unsurpassable! How can we equal you?

"The heretics of Worldtree Center claim we must even go beyond. How can that be possible?

"Give us a sign! Return to us!

"Or must we first destroy all Evil? All those who would destroy your works?"

The sausage was flavored with roasted mossberry seeds, pungent and sharp beneath the meat and grease. It was also far too quickly gone.

Dotson thought of his typer and the work that waited for him. That was not too quickly gone. On the contrary, it loomed over him forever.

He looked back at the VC, the visioncaster. Who was the heretic? It had been one of the tailless who had first proclaimed the holiness of the quest for knowledge, the drive to match, exceed, rejoin the Remakers. But it had been the tailed who listened and accepted and made that faith their own. The tailless had chosen to pray to the Remakers for approval, intervention, return, and the restoration of their own one-time dominance. They were the last of the Racs to be Remade, they claimed. They were the Final Model, the best, the closest to godhood. And someday the Remakers would return to redress all

their favorites' grievances.

Not that the tailed—including Dotson Barbtail himself—never prayed to the Remakers or wished for their return. Not that the tailed did not also believe in the existence of evil forces that opposed the Remakers or the quest for knowledge.

It did not surprise him that the beliefs of the two groups had influenced each other. Indeed, those who studied the plaques that recorded the Remakers' history said that such influences were common.

But the tailed remained closer to the Founder's vision. He had always been sure of that.

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CHAPTER 5

* * *

Most of Belt Center 83 had no way to see out except through veedo screens. That had its advantages, for it meant each residential cubicle, separated from its neighbors only by thinnest plastic, could nevertheless look out on Mars's Valles Marineris, share the view from Olympia's glass-walled concourse, overlook an Earthly cityscape or mountain range, furrowed glacier or moving sea. Forests, jungles, coral reefs, farms, and other living views were forbidden. A few seemed to overlook vast factories full of gleaming metal and busy machines.

Most people rarely used their veedo windows, seeming to prefer the quite traditional prints, photographs, and holograms. They were no less artificial and much less prone to interruptions by veedo calls and official announcements, but the real reason may have been something more akin to agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces.

The Center had an entrance, a dome through which people could come and go and supplies could be delivered. The dome's surface was transparent, and standing beneath its frameless curve, the floor pushing almost weightlessly against one's feet, was like floating in space, unsupported, insecure, surrounded not by human structure but by vast emptiness and thronging stars and distant worlds.

Yet that dome was almost always empty. Few people visited to savor the view it offered. Few whose

business took them through it lingered there or lifted their eyes from the floor as they hastened on their way. The human species was well established in the space environment, but those were rare who could stand to stare into the infinite depths of space without the frame of a helmet's visor or a port's rim to reassure them of their safety.

Those robots that scurried through clung to the angle between the floor and wall.

"I don't like this place," said Eric Silber.

"It's cold," said Miriam Panek, and it was. The material of the dome

resisted heat flow far less well than the walls of the tunnels, and the chill of space penetrated to the staring humans.

"It's the gravity," said Renard Saucier. "Not just the view. They've got even bigger domes on the Moon. But your feet can hug the ground. You don't feel like you're about to spin off to nowhere."

"Greenshit," said Silber. "How long are you going to keep us here? We're done, aren't we?"

"You want to go home, don't you, Eric?" Miriam's voice was wistful. "Back to Mars and its tunnels." She was staring through the dome, into space, and Hrecker thought her face seemed softer, younger, than usual. "I don't see much difference."

"There's weight. There's a view. You can go outside for a walk. Or you can be alone in a room with solid walls."

"Ah, well," said Miriam. "Then you'll be happy soon. We're almost done."

That's why Renard brought us here, to this dome."

"Just to stare at the gyppin' ships?"

Saucier said nothing, letting Miriam nod and smile sweetly and say, "I

wish..." The probability shifters had successfully been given larger fields. The drives had been designed and built and installed. The ships had been finished, and there they were.

"What do you wish?" Silber's tone was now a sneer. "You want to go with them?"

"Look at them," said Hrecker. He pointed through the wall of the dome, halfway between floor and zenith, and spoke their names with relish: "Ajax, Bolivar, Bonami, Cascade, Drake, Gorbachev, Pizarro, Saladin, Toledo, Villa."

All except the largest, the flagship Ajax, even though they were built in space, were quite capable of landing on a planet. If all went well, they would, and soon. They were almost ready for their cleansing mission.

For now, they orbited the asteroid that was Belt Center 83 like remoras around a shark or aides around a general. In form, they were huge mushrooms, their ten broad heads crowded with narrow corridors, missile bays, beam generators, storerooms, and sleeping quarters, cubicles equipped with shelflike bunks. The stubby stems that contained the drives were sheathed in clustered pods for the dust the Q-drives

used as reaction mass. The ships wore no armor, although the mushroom heads were broad enough to shield the dust pods from whatever debris combat or space itself might throw in their way. No one wished a ship to lose its power to move.

Among the ships were several of the huge fabric spheres the dust-mills had filled with pulverized asteroids. More were on their way.

“I suppose you want to go too.” Silber was glaring at Hrecker, refusing to look at the products of all their efforts.

Hrecker shook his head. “No, not really. But aren’t they marvelous? Haven’t we done a grand job?”

Silber snorted derisively. “It was a job, and yes, we’re done.”

“Almost,” said Saucier. “Soon enough, and you can go home.”

“They’re already being loaded,” said Miriam.

Food, spare parts, equipment, and weaponry were arriving daily from Earth,

the Moon, and Mars. With them came men and women from the Navy’s bases on the Moon and Mars, Ganymede and Titan, selected for competence, loyalty, and experience with the old slower-than-light, insystem Q-ships. General Lyapunov had announced that their experience should help them adjust to the new ships.

Most were also volunteers. The worlds of the Solar System had been pacified for many decades, the Engineers’ rule unquestioned except by isolated malcontents. It had been even longer since anyone had seen a Gypsy; it seemed unlikely that they would return just now. And no one took the possibility of an alien invasion seriously. All the action would be at Tau Ceti.

As soon as Hrecker and his colleagues completed the final adjustments to the Q-drives and the crews had shaken down both themselves and their ships, the expeditionary force would be able to leave. The date of departure had already been set for three months hence.

* * *

“I’m going to miss you,” Hrecker said for the hundredth time. He spoke in the murmur that had become second nature for all those who lived in the tunnels. He was barely aware of the sounds his neighbors made: soft music, the click of game tiles and the whisk of playing cards, occasional raised voices or laughter. The louder noises of the starship crews, billeted by twos and threes wherever space could be found or made, were more obtrusive.

“You could come too,” Tamiko Inoue answered as she always had. “You don’t have to go back to Mars. We could stay together.”

“You could stay here. Come with me.” He had made it plain again and again how eager he was to get back to the university and his lab, to the work he had been doing before this project had drafted him. He

had come willingly enough. What choice had he had, after all? He had worked hard, and unlike Eric Silber he had taken satisfaction in the success he and his colleagues had achieved. Yet he was content to let his involvement with the mission end.

But she had been the one factor that most truly made life at Belt Center 83 bearable.

She shook her head furiously. “No. I want to see Tau Ceti and First-Stop and the aliens.”

“I’d like to see them too.”

“Then come.”

“And I don’t want to give you up.”

“Then come with me.” A moment later, she added, “The General says we don’t

have enough techs. He’s worried about maintaining the new drives and particle beams and repairing them if they break down.”

“They won’t.”

“He’s still worried. There hasn’t been time to train any Navy technicians.”

“So that’s why you want me to sign up.”

“No!” The thought that he suspected her of being so manipulative seemed to

shock her. “But... We could use you, and all the rest of your group. All you have to do is fill out the application. You’d be a lieutenant right away. Your boss would be a major.”

Now it was his turn to shake his head. “You could just wait a while before leaving. The Navy’s techs have been working with us all along. It wouldn’t take many more weeks to finish training them.”

“We can’t do that.”

“Why not?” said Hrecker. “The aliens aren’t going anywhere.”

“They have satellites. They might, if we take too long. They could escape, just like the Gypsies.”

“And you can’t have that, can you?” His expression turned sad. “You want to be a Crusader and destroy the infidels.”

“The Crusaders were the infidels. They were after the heathen Moors.”

“You know what I mean.”

She didn’t answer. She sat up in the sleepsac, her arms crossed beneath her

breasts, and stared through the gap between his ceiling and the wall. A shadow swept across the plastic,

a head flashed into view and vanished. There was no telling whether the passerby had glanced in her direction.

When Hrecker tried to lift an edge of the sleepsac to cover her, she brushed his hand aside. “Are you advertising?”

“I might as well. I’ll need to find someone else if you’re staying.”

“That won’t be hard. Pretty thing like you.”

She pushed his hand away again. “Hard enough. We’ll be busy. Not much time for socializing.”

“Not that busy. We’ve improved the drives a lot, but you’ll still be on the way for weeks.”

“We’ll use it all for weapons drills, defense, evasion. It’s a military expedition, after all.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“We don’t know what to expect.”

They were silent, listening to the sounds of other people: a rhythmic

slapping, thudding, grunting that said a pretense of privacy could be enough; an ancient song about a truck that had lost its brakes on the way down a mountain road; a tensely whispered argument; a veedo report claiming, “...ses of samples and tapes brought back by the Explorer. There is no sign of human or Earthly DNA, but the natives there bear a marked resemblance to raccoons. We are now more confident that the Gypsy gengineers were there. The coons are therefore lab-made monsters, abominations, corruptions we must wipe from the face of the planet.”

“Coons,” someone in the distance laughed. “That’s what they called my great-great-great grandfather.”

At last Hrecker said, “I want to be with you. I want to see Tau Ceti too. But I’d miss Earth. Not that I’ve ever spent much time there, but at least on Mars and the Moon there are farms and greenhouses. A link. I miss that here. I’d miss it worse there.”

“There’s life there,” said Tamiko. “You’ve seen the tapes. Green leaves and trees. Animals. And for all our worries about the Gypsies, it looks a lot more natural than Earth has been for centuries.”

“Except for the coons.”

She nodded. “We’ll have work to do when we get there.”

Neither of them said out loud what that work seemed likely to entail.

* * *

The Navy's uniform was a light blue coverall with darker blue shoulder panels. The left breast was embroidered with a golden cogwheel of a size that could be covered with a palm. Insignia of rank were pinned to the right breast.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker looked at his reflection in the surface of the small screen that showed Belt Center 83 shrinking to a distant speck behind the ship. His cogwheel was surrounded by a second, larger one to mark his position in the technician corps. A silver bar said that he was, just as Tamiko had foretold, a lieutenant. Below it, a pair of dice said that his specialty was the probability shifters that made Q-drives and macroscopic tunneling and faster-than-light travel all possible.

The shifters themselves were silent. The energy that flowed from the quantum vacuum under their influence was too. But as dust from the storage pods was fed into the reaction chamber to be vaporized and thrust from the rear of the ship, a whisper grew to a roar and acceleration pressed his feet to the deck.

The controls he had been set to watch showed no irregularities. The shifters worked flawlessly, and satisfaction in the development work he and his colleagues had done showed in the set of his lips.

"On our way," said Meyer Smith, the chief technician.

"No problems," said Hrecker.

Smith flipped a switch that would confirm what the crew on the bridge already knew. "Happy?"

Hrecker nodded. Yes, he was happy. He had wanted to go back to the university and his lab, but he had also not wanted to part from Tamiko. She had refused to give up her place on the expedition. Eventually, he had given in. And here he was.

On the other hand, here he was. On the Saladin. And she was on the flagship, the Ajax. After all, that was where General Lyapunov was, and she was one of the man's aides.

But he could talk to her occasionally. He would see her when they arrived. And he would see a new world, a new people, alien and strange, frightening and tempting.

The drive room was a smaller version of the bridge. It didn't have a big viewscreen, and it didn't have in the center of the chamber a padded couch for the captain, but it did have all the controls needed to fly the ship. It also held enough room for the second and third shifts to gather near the entrance, there to watch as the expedition took its first steps into the interstellar dark. He glanced in their direction. Saucier was on the Gorbachev, Major Saucier indeed. Miriam Panek was on the Cascade. But Eric Silber was here, on the same ship as he, looking sour.

He could not help but wonder if he was here because rumor was right and he did indeed work for Security. If they had assigned him here despite his wishes...

"What are you staring at me for?" he snarled.

Hrecker shrugged. "Just glad you decided to come."

“I had to when the rest of you signed up. Twiddling my gyppin’ thumbs till you got back would have driven me nuts.”

“Vacuum flux on the curve,” said Bela B’Genda on the other side of the room. She was a short, stocky, dark woman who had left a husband on Ganymede. Her voice was warm and resonant.

“Dust flow’s fine. The mills didn’t leave any lumps.” That was the German, a brush-cut blonde everyone called the Baron because he once had mentioned aristocratic ancestors. He sounded like he was giving orders, and in the center of his ornamental cogwheel he had pinned a robot the length of his thumb. From time to time it twitched and wiggled legs and antennae.

Smith flipped two more switches. “Six weeks,” he said. “And then—“ “We need a planet-buster,” said the Baron.

“What the gyp’s that?” asked Silber.

“Old stories,” said the Baron. “They used to write about blowing up whole worlds, even stars.”

“Hah.” That was Bela.

“Truth. I had a great-great-something uncle, they say. Made donuts for a living, but he dreamed up some of the damndest gadgets.”

“So what would we want a planet-buster for?” asked Hrecker.

“We wouldn’t need a whole gyppin’ fleet. One ship, one big warhead, and the job’s done. No more First-Stop. No more coons.”

“Pretty drastic,” said Smith. “Overkill.”

“Nah,” said the Baron. “Who cares about a bunch of alien trees and bugs, as long as we get the monsters? It ain’t Earth, after all.”

“And that’s the only place that counts, eh?” asked Bela.

“Right.” The Baron jerked his head in an affirmative that brooked no argument.

Hrecker glanced at Eric Silber. He was grinning. Bela and Smith were not. Their faces looked as stiff as his own felt. They too were struggling to contain their reactions to the Baron’s bloodthirsty chauvinism. They too, perhaps, feared that the Baron might really be an agent of Security, there as much to provoke disloyal attitudes as to watch drive-room displays.

It was hard to imagine that anyone could seriously wish to destroy an entire world.

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CHAPTER 6

* * *

“Tell me, Dotson. You look sad.”

He ignored her, staring past her out his bedroom window across the

evening-shadowed valley, the high Worldtree, the complex of buildings that huddled around its base. A flock of dumbos, leathery wings flapping, flexible proboscises trailing from their round heads, swooped above nearby roofs. They were already gathering for their fall migrations. Behind him the VC muttered through its repertoire of dramas, sermons, exhortations, and lessons in history, calculation, and the study of the plaques for all those children and adults who did not choose to sit in classrooms. He had not turned it off when he came in.

“Tell me, please.” The voice was reedy, thin, yet sweet and clear, young, still new to speech though its owner was the size of a half-grown Rac. She had not been talking for very many weeks. “Tell me, do. What happened to you?”

He sighed. He said nothing. Then he sighed again. “Senior Hightail. As usual. He says I’m not in the lab enough. I’m ignoring my work. Not making progress.”

“I keep you busy.”

“I suppose you do. He thinks it’s Sunglow. So do the other students. ‘Too many late nights,’ they say. ‘Go to bed alone for a change.’”

“You always go to bed alone.”

“Huh. I can’t say that. They’d wonder what I was doing.”

“Talking to me.”

“Lord Highass even said maybe I should see the career counselor. Maybe I don’t belong at Worldtree Center.”

“Stay here!” The voice sounded suddenly worried. “Talk to me!”

“I wouldn’t be able to take you with me if I left, would I?” He chuckled,

his voice rougher now, more relaxed, more affectionate. He reached out one hand to stroke the side of the head and ruffle the pale blue petals on its scalp. He looked at the figure, still rooted in the large pot in which he had first planted the seed. Leaves still fanned across the soil. But its stem was now a body no higher than his chest. Its lower portion was divided into legs, its center swelled into hips, and a little higher its chest wore two—just two, and already larger than a Rac female’s six—mammary bumps. There were shoulders, arms, hands. The skin was pale and covered with small, triangular, bright green leaves.

There was a face quite unlike any Rac’s. Quite flat by comparison, with no projecting muzzle. More triangular than round, broad-browed, narrow-chinned. Small teeth, gray eyes instead of brown, a thin, furless skin—leafless too—that let the cheekbones show. A chin, so squarely shelflike that it might have been designed to compensate for the missing shelves of bone above the eyes. Eyebrows thin and pale, not bristling like some prickly hedge.

If a Rac child had ever looked like that, its parents would have called a physician, who surely would have called it underdeveloped, weak, anemic, sickly, doomed to die an early death.

Yet the plant beside him did not seem strange to him at all. It was a Remaker in all but one little thing: Its—her—feet were still rooted; she could not walk. “You’re a big girl now.”

“Too big to move?”

He nodded. “Too big to hide.” He could just imagine what the neighbors would

say if he lugged her out the door in her pot. They would see right away that he had something unusual and illicit. They would call the Center. She would be confiscated and examined, and as soon as someone realized what she truly was, she would be ensconced in the Great Hall and worshipped endlessly.

While he... He didn’t think they would have much patience with him. Certainly they would not worship him. Or honor him in any way. Most likely, they would take him to some small room deep beneath the Great Hall, or even deeper within the caverns in the bluff, and he would never see the sun again. Or Sunglow.

Nor would it help if she could walk. He thought she would. Any day now she would pull her feet from the dirt and step out of the pot. Why else would her stalk have become legs? But even then... Well, she was not the same shape as a Rac. She couldn’t possibly walk with the same gait. She didn’t have the pelt. Or the rotund belly.

If she walked out beside him, he would still lose her. He would still be in trouble.

One hand rose to bring his mind back from wherever it had wandered. Two fingers rubbed the side of her nose. She had learned to do that so well, almost well enough to pass, if only she looked more like a

Rac and less like a god. “Read me a story?”

He sighed once more. He scratched the side of his muzzle. “Okay.”

Almost as soon as she had opened her eyes and shown her ability to speak, he

had realized that she had to be much like a child. She would need toys and stories and playmates.

He hadn’t been able to do a thing about the playmates. He had to keep her secret, and besides, what school would have her? She was far too strange, too alien, even without her obvious connection to religion.

He had wandered Worldtree City for days before he had dared to go into a toy store. “Gifts for my sister’s children,” he had said, and the bored clerk had not seemed to doubt him. He had chosen a pair of dolls, one Rac, one Remaker, and a wooden Worldtree with a set of brightly painted graduated rings. Unfortunately, his talking plant had ignored them. The toys now rested on the windowsill.

A bookstore had been both easier and more successful. He had brought home brightly illustrated fantasies and nonsense, legends and histories, and those she had loved. Her current favorite was the tale of Kitewing, who had ridden a soaring box kite to observe the movements of a tailless army in one of the many battles for possession of the valley and the Worldtree. He had seen how high he was and how much higher the dumbos flew, and he had cried out for his ground crew to let out more line from the winch. He had soared higher, and yet higher, and when the opposing army had sent its own kites aloft to forestall him, he had cut their cables with his sword. Only one enemy had avoided his attack, remaining below him to saw at his own cable. Kitewing had managed to leap from his kite at the last possible moment and land upon the flange that encircled the top of the Worldtree. His enemy had followed him. They had fought, and when Kitewing had thrust the other off the Worldtree, he had discovered the chamber full of Remaker records.

“And the box full of seeds.”

“And the box full of seeds,” he agreed. “They kept it in the Great Hall,

over there.” He pointed through the window. “Until I took one of them and planted it.”

“That’s me.”

“That’s you.”

Her indeed. She had grown rapidly, from seed to sprout to sapling, a swollen

stalk, a fat terminal bud. The stalk had swelled still more and subdivided and taken the Remaker shape. The bud had enlarged, leaflike scales had fallen away, and a face had appeared, eyes as closed as any newborn animal’s. He had touched her skin, felt animal warmth beneath the tiny leaves that covered it, been surprised at the way she bent toward his hand and an arm reached for him, gently clutching.

He had marveled. He still did. The Remakers had remade the plant species that had been her ancestor far more extensively than they had remade his own precursor species. They had added, he guessed, their own genes. Perhaps they had added genes from other plants and animals as well. He could not tell, but he recognized in her the flowering of the genetic engineer’s art.

That was why...

“Why did you name me Gypsy Blossom?”

“That’s what the Remakers called themselves. Gypsies. And they made you.

Remade you. Just as they did us. But you’re a plant. You have leaves, and your head’s a flower, a blossom.” He had explained it all to her before, but she liked to hear the words again and again, just like any child of Racs.

He had marveled anew three days later when she had opened her eyes and blinked and softly said, “That’s the Worldtree.” She had been facing the window. When she turned, pivoting on her stalk, she added, “You’re Dotson.”

She had learned as he had talked to her, thinking her little more than a plant. And at that moment that could only be considered her birth, she had already known enough to identify the first things her eyes saw.

A newborn, she had already been able to speak simple sentences, express simple thoughts. How far would she develop with time? he wondered. Had all Remakers been so precocious? Or had they differed in this as the plaques said they did in other ways. Some, he knew, had been pink, brown, and green. Some had had hair, not petals. Some had been borne in wombs, and some had grown from seed.

That was when he had begun to leave the VC on all day.

* * *

“Are you going to see the career counselor?”

“No!”

“Maybe there is something that would suit you better.”

“No!”

“But...” Sunglow sat beside him in the shade of a bank of honeysuckle. In

front of them two gravel paths met at an angle, and a small patch of moss was studded with white berries. Sunglow leaned forward to accept the bounty their world offered, even here in the shadow of Worldtree Center’s buildings. She picked a few berries, touched two to either side of her muzzle, and set them between his lips. He chewed, blinked at sudden tart sweetness, and swallowed.

He did not respond as he should, even though, somewhere in his mind, he dimly recognized the significance of her gesture: courting and invitation and welcome. Even the ancestral Racs of the forests, unintelligent and wild, living in hollow trees and burrows, courted their mates with food. The Remakers had not chosen—or perhaps they had just not thought—to remove the instinct from those genes that dictated the automatic functions of the brain.

“I can’t leave,” Dotson Barbtail said. “There’s too much to do. I’m not done. I—“

“You’re not doing it. That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

He nodded jerkily.

“And it’s not what people say.” Her tone was mournful now. “Not me. I wish

it was. But even moments like this... We go to Great Hall worship every week. We’re together often enough to keep people thinking of us as a pair. But we don’t have any of those late nights. You’ve never even let me past your door. Or come past mine.”

He only looked at her and twitched the skin of his shoulder and whined nervously deep in his throat. He knew she wished. He understood. He even shared the same desire. But he dared not let her find what he grew in the privacy of his apartment. If he had ever given in, if he had ever gone to her place, he would have felt obliged to let her into his. And then...

“You spend an awful lot of time in there.”

He whined again.

“You’ve got something, haven’t you? Something you don’t want anyone to know about. Something that takes up all your time.”

He wished he dared to get up and run, but all he could manage was to turn his stare aside.

“Another female?”

“No!”

“What is it then?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t I have a right to know? After all—“

“It’s damaging your reputation? Then stay away from me.”

“It’s damaging yours too. Whatever you’re doing, it’s destroying your career. You’re not doing the work you should be doing.”

He shrugged.

“It won’t be long before they throw you out.”

There was a long silence. Dotson picked a few mossberries himself. He stared

at them as they rolled back and forth in the hollow of his hand. He licked his lips, and when that reminded him of other berries, just a little while ago, he recalled the answer he should have given Sunglow then.

Automatically he chose two plump berries, touched them to his own face, and held them up. When she leaned forward, he set them against her lips. Her tongue licked out to touch his fingers, and they were gone.

“I suppose I ought to go to the lab. Put in some time. Read reports. Run some tests. Though I wasn’t making that much progress before I got distracted.”

“By what?”

He didn’t answer.

* * *

He stayed away from his apartment as long as he could. He worked. He found signs that a polymerase he had sought for months might lie in cells that had come from a hot spring just a little to the west of Worldtree City. He ate a meal he barely tasted in one of the Center’s cafeterias. He wrote a brief report to Senior Hightail about the new enzyme. And not long after dark he could stay away no longer.

Blue-gray light flickered in the crack that rimmed his door, and the mutter of VC talk and music was just loud enough to mask the steps behind him. He noticed nothing until his door was open and he was in and the door’s swing back into its jamb was blocked.

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

“Sunglow!” She filled the doorway when he spun, silhouetted against the dim

hall light behind her, her teeth gleaming in the VC flicker, her foot against the door.

“Someone’s in here.”

“No!” he said. “I just left the VC on.”

“Uh-uh. I’ve been listening. The channel changed.” She set one hand against

his chest and pushed. He resisted. “Don’t you think I have a right to know?”

The anxious whine was back in his chest, struggling to become audible once more. But he gave way before her hand.

“Where’s the light switch?”

He pointed helplessly.

She flipped it on. “There’s nothing here.”

He was defeated: “In the sleeping room.”

Sunglow stepped past him. He followed her, watching past her shoulder when

she stopped in the doorway. The VC was near the foot of his sleeping pad, but it faced the window and a large plant pot occupied by a shapeless pillar.

“There’s no one here. And I was sure I’d find her on your pad.” She pointed toward her left, where the room’s broad window made a corner with the wall and the shelves on which he kept his harnesses and pouches, cloaks and caps, were mostly bare. “Tsk,” she said, “but you’re a slob.” She bent to pick up a harness. “There should be someone here.”

He flipped the sleeping room’s light switch and sighed. The pillar by the window was wrapped in his second-best cloak, a brown cloth with pale green stripes.

“What is that?”

“You can take it off now,” said Dotson.

“Is that Sunglow?” The muffled voice grew clearer as the cloak unpeeled.

Sunglow gasped and touched her own face as if she faced a mirror that told

her she had changed in some dreadful way. When she realized what she was doing, that this was no mirror, that it was real and strange, she jerked her hands down and away from her cheeks.

“I heard her at the door. And I knew you wanted me to be a secret. So I grabbed the cloak.” Gypsy Blossom held it out. “I’m sorry I knocked everything off the shelves.”

Sunglow took the cloak in her hands and automatically began to fold it.

“Yes,” said Dotson Barbtail. He wanted to smooth the leaves the cloak had

disarranged. “This is Sunglow.”

“You’re pretty,” said the plant. Slowly and deliberately, she raised a hand to scratch at her cheek beside her nose.

“What... ?” Sunglow’s voice squeaked. “They called them bots, didn’t they?”

“Botanicals.” Dotson nodded.

“And you swiped a seed.”

He nodded again.

“I don’t blame you for keeping me out.”

He bent to start picking up the things the bot had knocked from the shelves when she tried to hide within his cloak. “I suppose I should be packing now.”

“No,” said Sunglow. She set his cloak upon a shelf. “I won’t say anything.

This is too marvelous.”

He grunted in surprise and relief.

“But there is a price.” Before he could react, she added, “I want to come back here. I want to talk to her.”

He stood up, his arms full. “Not me?”

“Oh! Of course! But...”

He understood. She still wanted him, as he wanted her. But the bot was foremost in her mind for now.

“What’s her name?”

“Gypsy Blossom.”

Sunglow faced the bot and belatedly returned the muzzle-scratching greeting.

“Where did the Remakers go, Gypsy Blossom? When will they return? Can you tell us anything at all?”

The bot raised her furless arms in a helpless gesture.

“She was only a seed when they left,” said Dotson.

“They never talked to me,” said the bot. “They did not leave me any plaques.

All their messages were for you, and I think you have them all.”

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 7

* * *

“I thought things were cramped at 83, but...”

The laughter that issued from the grille in the panel before him was soft

and warm, already missed. Tamiko’s face occupied the small screen, and he almost felt that he could smell her hair. “Not here, Mark. The Ajax is larger, and the General rates. I have a room all my own.”

“I’ve got walls anyway. But I have to share.”

There was the briefest of hesitations—was she wondering whether she should

be jealous?—before Tamiko said, “I hope she’s nice.”

“He. The Baron. Not my type at all, though he took the upper bunk.” The cubicle they occupied had only the single pair of sleeping shelves. Those for the lower ranks held six, three to a wall, with much less headroom.

“Not your what? Type? That g... broken up. We must have... st our synch for a second there.” Her own words were suddenly choppy, as if they had been recorded by a voice-activated tape. Some were almost entirely lost.

“It’ll get worse.”

“I know.”

“We should be able to talk for a few days first.”

“Gotta g... being pa-ached.”

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker touched the key that broke the connection and leaned

back in his seat. He sighed.

“Your girlfriend?” Eric Silber’s bitter voice made him close his eyes. Why did they have to share the same shift?

“Think you’ll get any favors, sucking up that way? How’s she taste, anyway?”

He refused to look at the other man. “Better than you would.”

“Shaddap,” said Meyer Smith. “You’re just working up to a fight. Save it for

First-Stop.”

Silber settled back and stared once more at the controls and indicators he was supposed to mind. Hrecker did the same and wished that there was more to do than simply wait and watch for some malfunction or anomaly. But he and the others, including Eric, had done their work well. The ship, the whole fleet, was working flawlessly.

If only communication between the ships were not a problem. In two days, maybe three, he and Tamiko would no longer be able to speak to each other. Then the boredom would set in.

The problem had its roots in the laws of physics, not some failure of design. The ships’ Q-drives provided thrust and vector and a sense of weight. They would be essential for maneuvering once the fleet reached Tau Ceti. But they were useless for bridging the light-years between Tau Ceti and Sol. That needed the tunnel drives, which skipped through space, leaping a few more meters every 1.4 nanoseconds. The intervals between leaps were so short that the net effect was faster-than-light travel, even though between leaps, when the ship existed in real space-time, speed was distinctly slower than light.

It was those intervals between leaps that made communication possible.

Unfortunately, they grew shorter and more frequent as “net” speed increased. Slight differences in drive frequency and in timing spread the fleet out and dictated that not all the ships occupied the same space-time simultaneously. Ship could talk to ship only as long as they were close enough together, as long as the intervals were long enough, as long as the ships’ computers could keep their quantum leaps synchronized. The trick was getting a signal’s wave-front to coincide in space and time with the ship for which it was meant.

The first signals to become useless would be real-time conversations such as he and Tamiko had just concluded. Highly redundant, repetitive coding would remain able to get messages through for a few days more. After that, total silence would fall. Each ship would be a single tiny, enclosed, self-sufficient world until it slowed on the approach to Tau Ceti. Then the signals would return.

“I’m catching a little drift in the shifter, Hrecker.”

“Yessir.” His fingers danced across the board before him, diagnosing,

adjusting, trimming.

* * *

Ten days later, Hrecker was in the Saladin’s mess after his drive-room shift. Across the narrow corridor that arched rimward of the storerooms, Bela B’Genda and the Baron shared one of the small tables that folded with its pair of seats from the wall. Hrecker shared another with Meyer Smith. Eric Silber had just arrived with the tray of food he had picked up at the end of the corridor. He took the next table past B’Genda and the Baron and sat so he could face Hrecker.

The Baron could not see the glare that passed his back. “I’ve been poking around,” he said.

“And you’ve found a planet-buster after all,” said Bela.

“You know there’s no such thing.” But he was grinning. The robot on his shirtfront twitched.

“No, I don’t. Besides, why not? It’s just a big warhead.”

“Real big,” said Silber. He was still glaring at Hrecker.

“What else?” asked their chief.

“Plenty of other stuff. Particle beams, of course.”

“I worked on those,” said Hrecker. They were an adaptation of the Q drive.

“We’ve got nukes,” added the Baron. “For the missiles. One size fits all.

And big enough. If we can’t blow First-Stop up, we can sterilize it.”

“Freeze it,” said Bela. “We can’t possibly be carrying enough of those warheads to sterilize a planet. But it takes a lot less for a nuclear winter.”

“Whatever,” said the Baron. “We’ve got what it takes.”

“Do you?” asked Silber. “No more com, Marky,” he added. “No more chitchat with the girlfriend.”

“Another month,” said Hrecker. “That’s all.”

“No more sucking up.” Silber’s voice was taunting. “Can’t keep her busy.

She’ll find someone else.”

“Cut it out,” said Smith.

“He’s always been that way,” said Hrecker. “But now...”

“I’m worse?”

“Too far from home,” said Bela. “Your own girl back in port.”

“Huh!” the Baron snorted. “If he has one. If one would have him.”

Silber’s face reddened. He set both hands on the edge of his table and began to push himself to his feet.

“No com,” said Bela. “No more sight of shore. As crazy as a sailor lost at sea.”

“Crazy, is it?” The man’s glare was rapidly turning dangerous. He was on his feet, crouched as if he were about to spring, shoulders raised, knuckles white. For a moment, the smells of sweat and something more, an animal pungency, rose above the scents of food.

Then silence struck the mess and she added, “As crazy as them.” She straightened in her seat, half turned, and hooked a thumb toward a sudden clash of plastic china and metal cutlery.

Hrecker kept one eye on the other man, but he too looked where she was pointing, past Silber, further down the corridor.

Several men and women were hurriedly abandoning their tables as two figures struggled to their feet amid a litter of trays and dishes. They roared. One swung a fist. The other slammed a knee into a crotch. One roar turned into a screech, but neither man went down. They grappled and lurched against the table they had been using. It sagged on its hinges.

“It won’t last,” said Meyer Smith, and he had hardly finished speaking when two burly Security guards rushed past. Two more appeared in the distance, beyond the combatants.

Silber sat down once more.

The fight stopped. The combatants stared at the approaching guards as if at inevitable doom, and they did not resist when they were led away.

A swarm of tiny robots appeared as if from nowhere to clean up spilled food and repair the table.

The bystanders resumed their seats but kept their heads down. The mess was silent.

“We won’t see them again,” murmured Bela B’Genda.

Hrecker thought Silber looked as puzzled as he felt himself, and when Meyer

Smith looked from one of them to the other and said, “You haven’t heard,” he shook his head.

“Signed on too late,” said Bela.

“Policy,” said Smith. “For mutineers, rebels, deserters, dissidents. There’s no room for a brig on this ship, and there’s no way to ship troublemakers home.

So... Out the airlock. Or use them for reaction mass.”

“I don’t think there’ll be much more trouble,” said the Baron.

“It didn’t look like they were asking who started it,” said Hrecker.

Bela looked at Silber. He was still bristling with anger and defiance. “Then

we should get out of here.” When Hrecker ignored her raised eyebrow and inviting glance, she grabbed the Baron by the hand. “Let’s go.”

“They’ll be busy for a while,” said Smith to Hrecker. “You come with me.”

“Not for...”

“I’d rather play chess.”

Behind them, Silber was left alone, clenching his fists. He did not look like he would surrender meekly if Security came for him.

* * *

When Hrecker reported for work the next morning, Silber was not in the drive room. “I moved him,” said Meyer Smith. “C shift, 11 to 7.”

“Just as well,” said Bela B’Genda from her station.

“He’s got a bright green hard-on for you,” said the Baron. “Any idea... ?”

Hrecker shook his head and took his seat. He powered up his console, checked the probability shifters, and made two fine adjustments.

“Security didn’t object when I changed his shift,” said Smith.

“So maybe he’s not a plant,” said Bela.

“That’s only a rumor,” said Hrecker. A rumor with the strength to follow a man from Mars to Belt Center 83 to the Saladin. To First-Stop.

“It wouldn’t surprise me to learn it was truth,” said the Baron.

“More like,” said Bela. “He’s just too standoffish. He can’t let anybody get close, so nobody trusts him. Hence the rumor.”

“How’s the vacuum flux, Doctor Freud?”

“Jes’ fine, boss. You think maybe he volunteered? Went for the game as long as he had the name?”

“Who knows?” Smith touched keys and the screen above his console lit up with a flowchart. “The captain says we should try to synchronize with the other ships.”

“I know one way to do it,” said Bela. “Though it wouldn’t be real bright.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“And every ship would have to be precisely the same in timing.”

“Stay tightly packed?” asked the Baron.

“In line. Spaced just so to tunnel into the next ship’s wavefront.”

“And if the timing’s off?”

“Bugger all.”

The Baron laughed.

Two hours later, after all their efforts to adjust the timing of the tunnel

drive had failed to raise a single response from any other member of the fleet, Meyer Smith said, “There’s another way. Stop tunneling once a day.”

“And if the ships are light hours apart?” asked Bela.

“They’d resynchronize every day, right?” asked Hrecker.

“That would still slow us down a bit, eh?” said the Baron.

“You might as well tell the captain he’ll have to wait till we reach Tau Ceti.”

“Another month.”

* * *

... “Three weeks.”

* * *

... “Eighteen days.”

* * *

... “Two weeks.”

* * *

“What I wouldn’t give for a game of poker!”

“Bridge for me.”

“Billiards.”

“Scrabble.”

But the only games were chess and checkers and go, games with no element of chance the probability shifters could influence however slightly. There was a library of old veddos, video games, and books stored in electronic form. There was sex and bickering and speculation on what they would find when they finally reached their destination.

Some wondered what they would do to what they found. The expedition’s commander—General Lyapunov—would decide that, as was only right, but...

“What do you think, Mark?” asked Bela B’Genda. “You’re in bed with his aide.

What does she tell you?”

“One of his aides. And I haven’t seen her for weeks.”

“Still...”

“She didn’t talk about him much.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said the Baron. “We know what he’ll do.”

“Let us in on it, O Wise One,” said Meyer Smith.

“He’s an Engineer, isn’t he? And if he was a liberal, he wouldn’t be a

general. We’re carrying guns and troops. If the place is crawling with gengineered monsters, we’ll wipe them out.” He held his arms as if sighting down the barrel of a rifle. “Boom! If there are any Gypsies there, we’ll wipe them out too.”

“You’re looking forward to it,” said Hrecker.

“Sure. It’s gonna be fun. Aren’t you?”

Hrecker nodded. He did not dare do anything else.

* * *

Some studied the Explorer's records and discovered anew that First-Stop's population was remarkably small, its cities and roads and mines and fields notably few, its industry and technology astonishingly advanced. "It's not much of a space program," they said. "But it is one. Look at those satellites. Camera platforms for watching the weather. Communications relays. No space stations, but still... How can they support the effort? They can't possibly have the economic surplus Earth needed to do as much. There isn't the population, the industrial base, the..."

And if the Gypsies had made them hardly more than a century before? Then they hadn't had the time. There must still be Gypsies there, helping, building, waiting for the cleansing hands of the Engineers.

Were there no signs of Gypsies except that enigmatic tower? Then the locals had to have been there much, much longer than a century. But if that was so, why hadn't they left more scars upon the planet? Ancient ruined cities. Chinese walls. Denuded and eroded landscapes. Played-out mines.

There were no such things? Then the alien civilization had to be young, too young to have accomplished as much as it clearly had. Perhaps the Gypsies had made the coons. Yet how could even the infamous Gypsies have stimulated so much progress in so little time?

Just a century? That was how long it had been since the last Gypsy had returned to Earth's vicinity, found the Engineers ascendant over all the system, and fled. More like a century and a half since the Gypsies had fled Earth itself.

But even if they had created the coons the very moment they had arrived at First-Stop, there had not been time enough for all the progress the Explorer's records showed.

Were there more aliens than they could see? Did they live underground? Were there vast unseen warrens, buried slums and ruins and mushroom farms? As many billions as Earth had had to have to mount its first abortive space programs? Then, if that was so, there was the possibility of defeat.

"No," said the Baron loudly when the possibility was raised at a table three down the mess from his own. "They thought of everything before they shipped us off. Don't you believe that? We're armed to the teeth, and I think we must have a planet-buster warhead with us. It's probably on the Ajax."

There was a moment of silence. The others had dismissed the idea of a bomb that could destroy a world when he raised it before. Now they felt obliged to entertain the possibility more seriously. Eventually someone at that other table softly cheered. "Then we'll get the gyppers sure."

* * *

Tau Ceti swelled from star to sun in the viewports, its light unshifted because the fleet's instantaneous velocity was always much less than that of light, even if the "net" was something else again. Weapons systems were checked and readied, and people grew wire-tense as the time for action neared.

Hrecker was busy at his station, balancing the demands on the probability shifters as the Saladin's tunnel drive turned off. The Q-drive would continue to provide thrust and a sense of weight until orbit was achieved half a million kilometers from the planet, well beyond the limits of the coons' ability to detect them. At home, they would be heading for a translunar orbit, but First-Stop had no moon.

Radio traffic was forbidden for fear the coons would not only detect their presence but also overhear their plans. Yet there were also narrow, line-of-sight laser beams, and it was no surprise when a diode said his com was live with an intership call. A speaker crackled, and... "Mark?"

"Tamiko!" He could not resist glancing toward where Eric Silber had sat the last time he had talked to her.

"I've only got a moment," she said. "But I couldn't wait."

"I'd have called soon enough," he said. His eyes and hands were still

darting over his board. "Right now—"

"You're busy. I know. And we'll see each other soon. But I wanted to hear your voice, see your face. And did you...?"

An officious voice interrupted her: "Security override. You have ten seconds to clear this channel."

"Acknowledged," said Hrecker.

"Command conference," said Tamiko with the confidence of one who knew

General Lyapunov's schedule. "Did you see? They're already building a space sta..."

The word quickly spread.

General Lyapunov and his staff monopolized the laser com for days with their

planning, but there were moments when general and captains were eating or sleeping. Then others seized the chance to chat with friends and share their responses to the latest discoveries about the world that waited below for their subjugation.

The coons were indeed building a space station. It wasn't large, and it wasn't sophisticated. It was just an unspinning framework of girders to which were attached solar panels and gleaming cylinders in which a few of the coons would be able to live and work for a few weeks or months until the lack of gravity or centrifugal force weakened their bones too much to continue.

There were no signs of Q drives or orbiting weaponry.

The small launch center from which the coons operated their infant space age

occupied flat land near the equator, beside an ocean.

There were signs that the coons knew what war was. Even from their great height above the planet, the Engineers could see what could only be military bases, shipyards, and airfields. There were even two depots for armored vehicles, tanks.

The humans laughed. They were centuries ahead. They had the high ground. And all the weight of righteousness was on their side.

The coons would be easy meat.

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CHAPTER 8

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“Have you read this?” Gypsy Blossom hefted the massive book she was reading. It had taken her only a few weeks of children’s tales and VC programs to pick up the skill. “Do you know what it says?”

“No,” said Dotson Barbtail, his voice a relaxed and peaceful snarl. He sat cross-legged on his sleeping pad. Beside him was a block of paper on which he was drafting another report for Senior Hightail. “The priests tell me all I need to hear about theology.”

The report would say that at last the samples had begun to come in, the cells had grown, the enzymes were being found, all was going well. It would not say that the true reason why he was making progress was...

“Uh!” He jerked when the fine-toothed comb found a snag. Sunglow knelt behind him, working on his fur.

“History.” Sunglow picked at the tangled fur. “You should take it more seriously.”

“I do take it seriously.” He twisted to look over his shoulder, but neither his tone nor his expression suggested that he wanted to argue. Life had become so much simpler and less stressful since she had

pushed her way into his apartment. He no longer had to struggle to keep her at arm's length, and that meant he had time and energy enough for work once more.

"But The Book of the Founder isn't history," he added. "It's gossip and foggy memories, rumors and dreams. Tales told by ancients to children. Not history."

"It says..." The VC across the room was dark and silent, the window curtained against the night outside. A gap between the drapery panels let a single doll look out upon the room. A light angled a beam across the bot's shoulder. Other tomes were piled on the floor beside her.

"It says, "'You are gods," said the Founder. "Or makers. And all gods have enemies who seek to undo their works. The battle is ancient and eternal, and it has come to us.'"

"He was supposed to be talking to the Remakers before they left," said Dotson. "That much I know."

"To distant workers preparing the Worldtree," said Sunglow. "We know these tales at home. The Founder was watching from across the valley when an enemy hidden among the Remakers tried to kill a Remaker hero."

"What did the Founder mean?" asked Gypsy Blossom. "Can gods have enemies?"

"Your ancient enemies remain." Sunglow paused in her combing while she

quoted. "And they are ours as well. We will hold this in our minds and in our histories. You will leave, and in your absence they may try to destroy your works. We will not permit them to succeed."

"He meant there is a war between good and evil, light and dark, knowledge and ignorance, making and unmaking."

Someone shouted in the street outside the building. Sunglow stopped talking and cocked her head toward the curtained window. Dotson and Gypsy Blossom did the same.

More voices rang out in cries and shrieks and shouts. The din swelled as if the number of voices were doubling with every breath.

"What's going on?"

Dotson shook his head. "I can't tell what they're saying."

Gypsy Blossom sighed and squatted on bending knees and hips to set her book

on the pile beside her. She was now as tall as any Rac, and her legs were sleek with muscle. But her feet remained buried in the soil from which she had grown, while a forest of slender roots sprang from her calves and shins.

"War?" asked Sunglow. "I didn't think we were close to that."

Gypsy Blossom was reaching for the curtain as Dotson said, "It can't be. I

hear no guns or bombs.”

“That’s what chased the Remakers from their own home,” said the female Rac. “It forced them to come to our world and to raise us from the beasts. And when they left, it rose between the tailed and tailless as if the Remakers’ enemies were indeed among us.”

“A generation of war,” said Dotson. “But...” He had to raise his voice against the growing din outside. What was going on out there? The night should be quiet and peaceful, not...

“Two generations. And two more of oppression. My people are still crushed, confined to Farshore, still kept from the Worldtree.” Her voice edged higher in pitch as if she could not suppress a deeply embedded anger. She did not seem to be responding to the noise outside.

“Not if they accept the faith.” His own tone smoothed and tightened—she was contrary and argumentative and wrong, and... Was it that? Both knew that they could fight, but his muscles were tensing, his fur rising, his pulse pounding in the great arteries behind the joints of his jaws, far more than he had ever felt in a simple argument. The din outside must, he thought, be lowering his threshold for anger, for rage, or his body was responding to the elemental hysteria of the mob beyond the window. Was this what it was like to be a soldier among other soldiers, facing an enemy army, ready to kill or die?

Sunglow’s body matched his swollen tension as she sang, “We have our own faith.”

“Which is not that of the Founder. His own people turned away from him. Ours did not, and we can already see a day when we will go in search of the Remakers.”

“We hardly need to! They will return when we deserve to see them once more.”

“You help me more than you know,” said Gypsy Blossom gently. She looked at the pair of dolls on the windowsill and the miniature ringed tower beside them. She twitched the curtain until it slid aside on its rail, let it fall back against the window’s edge, and turned toward them once more. “You tell me and you show me. If one says ‘Go,’ the other says ‘Stay.’ It almost seems that intelligence means opposition.”

“Even with your kind?” asked Dotson. He sighed relief, and some of the tension went out of his back and shoulders. They had needed the interruption.

“I do not know. I am intelligent, but there is only one of me. But there’s many more than one in the streets out there.” She gestured, and the two Racs finally joined her at the window to watch the growing crowd as it spilled from doorways and flowed around corners. Every face was tipped upward, every arm was pointing, every voice was screeching in excitement.

“What are they staring at?”

The street lights went out.

Sunglow turned out the apartment’s lights. Dotson leaned close against the

glass and craned his neck to see upward. But the building’s overhang blocked whatever was there to see.

Someone slammed a fist against the apartment door. “They’re here! They’re here! They’ve come back

at last!”

“Who?”

But the question hardly needed an answer. There was only one “They” who had gone, one “They” who could possibly return.

“Let’s go.”

In the dark and haste, neither noticed the agony on Gypsy Blossom’s face.

She too wished to see whatever was in the sky, but she could not leave her pot.

* * *

The night outside the building was no darker than it ever was or could be on a moonless world. Yet it felt darker, for the lights that usually glowed on streetcorners and in windows were off, the skyglow from Worldtree City atop the bluffs was gone, and the Racs who milled and cried and emitted acrid scents of excitement in the street created a sense of blindness and confinement. The din rose and fell, and when it was at its lowest, one could hear more cries belling from the more crowded streets above the valley’s rim. Whatever it was that had brought every Rac out of doors had spread its influence much wider than the valley alone.

“Look!” cried a voice as shrill as flight or murder.

Arms stretched high.

“There!”

Fingers pointed.

“There!”

Eyes gaped.

“There!”

“What is it?” whined Sunglow’s voice in Dotson’s ear. Like all the other

Racs in the street, she was staring upward, pointing as she spoke.

High, high above the valley, off center to the south, the spark of the space station the Racs were building floated in space.

A finger’s width to one side glowed a ragged double quincunx of brighter sparks.

Now it was his turn: “What are they?”

“They’re moving.”

And as the moments passed, she proved to be quite right. Dotson smelled the

hint of coming warmth in the air, of declining rain and damp, of life only lately roused for another season of growth. Spring was only a few weeks old, another summer was just ahead, and yes, strange things were in the sky. The ten spots of incandescent light were moving indeed, drawing nearer to the space station.

“Like moths to a candle,” someone said.

Dotson’s heart was in his throat. He knew what he hoped the strange lights

were. He knew what they had to be. But where did they come from? Who did they bring?

He shook his head and looked at the female beside him. “They might not be that close to the station. They could be farther out. Or closer.” But he did not believe his own words. The coincidence was too great.

“Are they attacking? Or... ?”

A red-orange glow illuminated the windows of one of the hotels that overlooked

the valley and made it visible in the dark. Murky shadows obscured the glass as the building began to shine from within. Tongues of flame appeared.

Sirens screamed above the noises of Worldtree City’s streets, but their sound did not seem to move. Dotson thought they must be mired in the crowds, and he wondered how many more buildings would burn.

As if controlled by a single switch, the strange lights in the sky went out.

The crowd noise stopped. A heartbeat later, so did the roar from atop the bluffs.

“Thundertrees,” said Dotson. “That’s what they have to be. They’re in orbit now.”

“Near the station,” said Sunglow. “They’re not moving now.”

“It’s hard to tell.”

“They’re not ours,” someone said.

“They must be huge,” said someone else, “for their flames to be so visible.”

The crowd was silent for a moment more, watching and waiting. When the lights did not reignite or move, a murmur rose, a susurrant like wind in the leaves of a forest.

In the distance, someone screeched, and then another, and another. Soon the din was as great as it had ever been, and the streets reeked of panic and hysteria. More buildings were aflame on the valley’s rim,

bonfires to greet the gods. More sirens wailed, moving now.

Finally someone turned the street lights on again.

* * *

No one slept that night.

People lingered in the streets, staring upward into the haze of urban

skyglow, sniffing at the smoke of the fires and the fading mob-reek, wondering together, saying, “Spaceships, yes. Starships. But could they really be our Remakers, come to inspect our space station and judge us for our suitability to join them in the stars? Or are they aliens, utter aliens, unlike both us and our Remakers? And if so, then what? Are they benign? Or not? Should we celebrate? Or mourn? Should we welcome them? Or flee?”

People went indoors to turn on their VC sets, though they found no answers there. The wonder in the sky was on every channel, but none of the experts dragged before the cameras could at first do more than ask the same questions people were already asking each other.

Yet it was not long before the experts had a little more to offer. VC cameras were patched into the astronomers’ telescopes. Space-station workers were taken off their jobs to send more images homeward. Soon every one of First-Stop’s VC screens bore the resulting images of mushroom prows and bundled pods, reminiscent of designs recorded on Remaker plaques though not quite the same.

“Not quite the same,” said Sunglow. “But does it look like—“

“No!” cried Gypsy Blossom in clear frustration. “I told you before, I have

no memories of the Gypsies. I was only a seed. I know no more than you.”

“All our attempts at communication are futile,” said the face on the VC screen. “We have tried every radio and VC frequency. We have used lasers. We have even aimed floodlights at the ships’ viewports. And they do not respond.”

An off-camera voice asked, “Are you sure there’s anyone aboard? They’re not just automatons?”

“We have detected ship-to-ship messages, so...”

* * *

All that day the mystery possessed the world.

The strange ships remained in orbit hard by the embryonic space station.

They remained deaf to all attempts to contact them, silent except among themselves, aloof. The aliens' identities and their intentions remained unknown.

Many of First-Stop's people remained in the streets, staring into a sky where they knew the ships hovered high above them, made invisible by day. Others stayed close to their radios and VCs, anxious for any and every scrap of information that might ease the mystery. Others hosed down the coals that lingered in the ruins of the buildings that had burned in the night and began the task of clearing away the rubble.

Dotson Barbtail spent part of the day in his Worldtree Center office, trying to finish his report. When the words kept blurring before his eyes and his thoughts could not stop chasing questions about the aliens through his brain, he wandered the hallways and found no one else, not even Senior Hightail, in the building. He wound up in his lab, next door to his office. But his ability to concentrate was no better there. When he dropped the second flask of cultured bacteria—neither broke, thank the Founder!-- he set himself to other tasks. He washed dirty glassware and other tools. He dusted his bookshelves. He organized his desk. He washed his windows. And when he ran out of chores to keep him busy, he went home, where Gypsy Blossom and Sunglow had remained near the VC.

Not, he thought, that the bot had much choice.

* * *

Once more it was dark outside the apartment window. Once more the streets were full of people and the street lights were off. This time, however, the crowd was almost silent as it stared into a sky where wisps of cloud threatened to blot out the view of the alien starships. Most of the noise came from the windows beside the street, where residents had set their VCs with their sound turned up as far as it would go.

There was view after view of great ships rotating in space, spinning, twirling. "Centrifugal force," said a Rac voice. "It gives them a sense of weight inside those ships. We'll need to do that ourselves when we build bigger stations. And starships of our own, of course."

Here was the rim of a mushroom prow and a row of round hatches, and an expert saying, "...much smaller. Too small for personnel scaled to fit the viewports and handholds we can see." The view shifted to show viewers what the speaker meant. "Are they for weapons? Missiles? Are they covered to protect them from dust and debris while the ship is moving? Or to keep us from seeing these alien creatures' true intentions?"

Here were rows of symbols painted upon the alien ships' metal skins. "The characters look like distorted or decorative versions of those the Remakers wrote on their plaques. That tells us these aliens are kin to our Remakers. They must come from the same world, speak the same language, share the same history." No one dared to speak out loud the obvious truth: If the aliens were kin to the Remakers, that did not mean they were necessarily friends to the Remakers and their makings.

"What do the characters say? They come in combinations we can pronounce, which says they spell out

words. Most of these ‘words’ are meaningless, but perhaps they are names such as we paint on watercraft. If so, the largest of these ships is the Ajax. The rest are the Bolivar, Bonami, Cascade, Drake, Gorbachev, Pizarro, Saladin, Toledo, and Villa.”

Here was an interview via VC with the spaceworkers who were building the space station. The spaceworkers were burly, their faces rounded by retained fluid, their fur spiky with low humidity and static. Their interviewer was a carefully, sleekly groomed female whose face told anyone who didn’t know that kidneys worked much better with the aid of gravity. “How do you feel with these mysterious beings so close?” she asked. “Are you nervous?”

“More like mad,” was the high-pitched reply. “They’re too short-tailed close.” Sunglow snorted at the adjective.

“Are you worried?”

“Who wouldn’t be? Aren’t you? Aren’t the folks down home?”

“What will you do if—“

“Die. What else?”

And finally, at long, long last, the suspense ended. The images on all the screens shattered into jagged lines and colorful fuzz. The sound spat and hissed and sparked. And as soon as Dotson and Sunglow and Gypsy Blossom, as well as all the Racs in every street in every city on all the world of First-Stop, were staring at the nearest VC screen, the picture and the sound returned.

The picture was first, and it was such that if there had been words, no Rac could possibly have heard past their compulsively fixated focus on that image—naked skin, fur only on top of the skull, ears on the sides of the head, flat face.

“Remakers!” rose the scream in the streets. “The gods are back! They are!”

Dotson Barbtail stared at the bot by the window. The face on the screen was

much like hers, though it had hair where she had petals. He had also seen faces of the same type, the same species, on the Remakers’ plaques.

But were these truly Remakers?

The gods had enemies, didn’t they?

And when the gods had left the Racs to develop on their own, once they were

gone, absent, those enemies would try to destroy their works. The Founder had said so.

Sunglow was looking at him as if she were sharing his thoughts despite his silence. He guessed they showed on his face.

The din outdoors said that hardly anyone else had similar reservations. The face on the VC screen was a Remaker face, a Gypsy face, a human face, and all Rackind was about to be rewarded for its obedience to its creators.

The face spoke, and silence fell.

“Greetings,” it said, and though its accent was strange, the word was

comprehensible. The language the stranger spoke was the same as the language the Remakers had left their makings.

“We come from Earth,” said the face on the screen. “We bring gifts of peace and prosperity and purity as we have to all the worlds of our sun. But before we may present those gifts, we must land on your world. Confer among yourselves. When you have decided where you would like us to come down, call us. We will be listening.”

The VC screens were once more filled with random electronic noise, instantly replaced by the Racs’ own stations and talking heads.

* * *

The Worldtree towered high above the buildings of Worldtree Center. Its top was higher even than the crests of the bluffs that were the valley’s rim, and from it one could look down upon the environs all around. There was Worldtree City and its streets, there the valley’s lake, there the ends of the bluffs, tapering abruptly toward the valley’s entrance and the ancient landing field just beyond.

Dotson Barbtail and Sunglow had found a place to stand on one of the many low hummocks that were scattered in the gap between the arms of bluff. Not far to one side was the small stream that drained the lake and spoke of that long, long gone time when a meteorite had excavated the valley as a crater, the crater had filled with water, and the water had found a weak point in the crater wall. Their hummock had once been a mass of rock the torrent had not swept away.

The only torrent there that day was one of bodies. The ground was damp. Gray clouds rolled toward the horizon, on their way to elsewhere. And every resident of Worldtree City, the valley, and all the towns within two hours’ travel seemed to be there. Racs covered the steeply sloping tails of the bluffs. They spilled into the moss fields on either side of the road that linked field and valley. They sat on rooftops. All faced the landing field.

The road was blocked by a flatbed truck on which stood a miniature Worldtree. By its side stood a priest, arms raised, ritual cloak fluttering in a light breeze, voice already hoarse with exhortation. Worshippers surrounded the truck, their own arms raised in reply. Acolytes shook baskets in front of every face and begged donations.

“They are so sure,” said Dotson. “They have convinced themselves that these ships carry the Gypsies, our Remakers. They forget that our gods had enemies. They forget that the enemies of our gods must be our enemies as well.”

“No!” cried Sunglow. “You’re too cautious. They have to be the Remakers. And their arrival is a sign.”

Dotson tried not to snort. He did not believe in signs.

But others did. Beside them a young male, as tailless as Sunglow, raised a

fist. “Yes! Our time is coming! We were the last of the Racs to be Remade. We are the most perfect of the Remakers’ makings. Now they will throw down the tailed usurpers. We will have our due.”

A tailed male shook his head. “It makes no difference. If they mean us ill, there is nothing we can do. We have not had time enough.”

“They cannot mean us ill,” said Sunglow. “They are good. They have to be.

They are the gods.”

“Or devils,” Dotson thought, but he kept the words to himself. There was no need to argue or fight when the answers even now were riding down from orbit and would soon stand before them all. He thought most Racs must agree with Sunglow, for the faces all around him were glowing with expectancy and joy and worship. He wondered how many knew how uncertain the future truly was, how all Rackind now walked in utter darkness on a path that at any moment might disappear in a yawning pit.

When the alien ship thundered out of the sky, Dotson and Sunglow and every other Rac covered their ears with their hands and squinted and screamed great screams of neither joy nor dread. None gave a thought to the moss that was being incinerated, the soft picnic ground being baked as hard as pavement, the decades recovery would demand.

Their gods, thought most, were returning.

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CHAPTER 9

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The spacesuit gave Marcus Aurelius Hrecker hardly more room than did his own skin. Worse, it was stiff and unyielding, resisting every motion, and he had to play Tarzan in it.

At least, the orange cable that linked the airlocks in the unturning noses of the Saladin and the Bonami looked like a vine, twisting this way, that way, never hanging in a gravitationally defined catenary. Fortunately, he wouldn't have to swing on it from ship to ship, or brachiate, or fight a lion. He would only have to grip the trolley that clung to the cable right in front of his face. His thumbs would turn its electric motor on, and it would tow him away from his ship into the gulf of space between...

"Ready?" The voice rattled in his helmet. The crewman was beside him, holding with one hand to the edge of the lock. "Then go." The gauntleted fist rapped his helmet. He pushed against the ship's metal with his boots. And...

No. Not between the stars, for wasn't there a star, a sun, just behind the Saladin? The ship had been positioned to keep him in shadow even though the visor of his helmet would darken instantly if sunlight hit it. But that meant space seemed empty and he was all alone on the edge of an impossible precipice about to fall forever and forever and...

He stared at the world beneath his feet, and that brought him back to himself. No. He could not possibly fall forever. The worst he could do was fall out of orbit, spiral down, burn to a fiery streak of ash, and sift to earth.

Not Earth. Nor Mars. This was not his world, and even this space was alien, its shape defined by a star that was not Sol. Light years from home. If the Bonami vanished, if the cable broke, if he let go, he would die a long, long way from the ground that held the bones of his ancestors. He would be more lost than a human being, a human soul, had ever been before.

He clung tight as the Saladin fell behind him and the cable writhed ahead. He could feel the humming of the trolley's motor through the fabric of his gloves. Remembering his instructions—"Don't go too fast!"—he flicked the motor off and coasted and wished he could feel a wind of passage against his skin. But there was only the pressure on his hands, the initial inertial swing of his body, the elastic rebound of his joints, the tug of the line that tethered his canister of personal belongings to his waist. There was also the stale odor of whoever had used the suit before him.

When the cable's solid orange showed stripes of black thirty meters from the Bonami, Hrecker turned on the trolley once more, reversed its traction, and slowed. The nose of the ship loomed before him. The trolley bumped the eyebolt at its end, set just outside the airlock, and he swung. His knees slammed into the wall, the canister bumped his tail, and he was there.

While he reached for the edge of the lock and pulled himself to what felt like better safety, the Bonami's crewman unfastened the trolley, unlatched the eyebolt, and began to coil the cable, looping it from his elbow to the fork of his hand, over and over. Hrecker supposed that meant no more Engineers were transferring from ship to ship.

The lock's inner hatch had a small window through which he could see Tamiko Inoue waiting for him in the suiting chamber. He waved one hand, and the outer hatch closed, air hissed from storage tanks, and as his suit lost its stiffness, infrared lamps glowed just long enough to warm its surface.

As soon as he had the helmet off his head, he said, "Renard didn't want the job?"

"General Lyapunov thought one of his aides should go. Me." She was undoing the suit's fastenings. "And I wanted you."

He grinned. "Missed me, did you?"

“Fathead. Didn’t you?” She sidestepped as his arms came free of the suit.

“Not here.” One hand indicated the security camera positioned to cover the entire room. Beside it perched a mouse-sized robot biplane, its propeller still. “You know where the suit goes.”

But he only dropped the suit to the deck. “They know how long we’ve been apart.” One hand caught hers, and she did not resist his tug.

A few minutes later, he found an empty locker, hung the suit on the rack inside, and plugged the umbilical into its life support unit. The small amount of oxygen he had used on the trip between ships would soon be replaced. The ubiquitous robots would scour the interior clean of nearly all his body odor and dander. “You’re in charge?”

“Uh-uh.” She shook her head. “The captain will handle the high-level stuff.

We’re just supposed to get them to show us around.”

“Spies,” he said.

“Something like that. The General wants to know if there are any signs of Q tech or engineering.”

“We already know the Gypsies were here. The language...”

“But that doesn’t say the coons are just as bad.” She was opening the canister that had protected his possessions from vacuum. Inside was a small duffel bag. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“My place.”

“No cameras.”

“And we won’t be interrupted.”

He grinned. “Shouldn’t I report in?”

“They know how long we’ve been apart,” she quoted at him.

“You’re laughing at me.”

“Would I do that?”

He was not surprised to find her room much like the one he had occupied on the Saladin. It had two narrow, fold-down bunks. But only one showed any sign of use.

“No roommate?”

“I told you I had some perks.”

* * *

They needed both bunks when the Bonami lit its Q-drive to thrust itself out of orbit and down, into atmosphere, through high, thin clouds, roaring, thundering, slowing toward the moment when the Engineers would first touch alien soil. Flat upon the mattresses, they groaned and sagged and waited for the pain to end. Between burns, they talked and watched the veedo screen that displayed the expanding view of their landing site.

It was plain to see that the circular valley was a crater, either volcanic or meteoritic. Near its center was a spearlike tower surrounded by stone buildings surrounded in turn by a parklike zone of paths and vegetation, some purple-tinged, some as green as Earth's. The border of the valley was marked by a road and more buildings and a ringwall atop which spread more roads, more buildings, a city of aliens.

The valley's ringwall was broken on one side, opening on a purple plain on which no one had built roads or buildings. Low, dark clouds not far away suggested recent rain.

“That's where we'll land,” said Tamiko. “Where the Gypsies did when they were building the tower and...”

“You sure?”

“They call the planet First-Stop themselves. No doubt about it.”

“No. The field.”

“Where else? It's perfect. And besides, that's what the locals called it.

The ‘landing field.’”

“There's room for all our ships.”

“Just us, for now.”

As they dropped further toward the ground, the screen began to show the

waiting crowds, covering the slopes where the crater's ringwall had long ago been breached, surrounding the landing field, staying clear of the wide zone that would soon be sterilized by flame.

* * *

The landing field was still smoldering and steaming when the delegation of coons approached the ship. They wore yellow capes or cloaks marked with black center stripes, yellow caps with black centers, arrangements of belts and pouches, thick-soled boots. Their pelts were grey and brown and yellow and olive, marked with stripes and patches and swirls. They stood erect, and if their faces had been flatter and balder, they might have looked quite human.

“They don’t look much like us,” said Tamiko.

“They wouldn’t have to,” said Hrecker. “Even if the Gypsies made them from

Earthly material.” They were squeezed together in her bunk, propped on pillows to see the veedo screen across the narrow room. It would be another day before they could leave the ship.

“They don’t look made at all. Not mixed, not hybridized, no seams and patches.”

“We think the gengineers were evil, but that doesn’t mean they didn’t know what they were doing.”

“I don’t see boots on the ones out there.” She indicated the spectators at the edge of the field.

“The ground’s still hot.”

The ship’s officers waited for the coons, standing stiff, unmoving, on the

charred soil outside the ship. The stiffest of them all was Captain Quigg, whose face and body might have been assembled by a child. His mouth turned down, his cheeks puffed round, his nose was an angled blade, and his head was twice the size to fit his bony frame. The computer operator and navigator, Elspeth Keck, was younger and too plump. The ship’s security chief, Johnny Gatling, was thin and tense and his eyes peered at the world over dark, half-moon shadows. A machine pistol with an oversized magazine was slung from his belt. The chief technician, Meyer Smith’s stocky Bonami counterpart, was the fourth; her name was Ali Catrone, and her hair was gray, her lips tight. All wore their dress uniforms, complete with glittering cogwheels.

“They all look the same,” said Gatling. “Fuzzy wuzzies in drag.”

He was wrong, Hrecker thought. The creatures’ fur coats were not all marked

the same. Their faces differed too—here a thicker brow ridge, there longer whiskers, here a shorter or more steeply sloping snout, there a canine that refused to tuck behind a lip.

The coons approached slowly, their steps as measured and deliberate as those of humans in procession. Their cloaks swelled in the breeze but did not billow; the hems were weighted. As they neared the ship, they stroked the sides of their abbreviated snouts and lifted their arms high.

“That one,” said Hrecker, pointing at the one in the lead. “He’s the High Priest. We’re about to get worshipped.”

The Bonami’s captain seemed to have the same impression, for he extended one arm and hand as if he were a pope giving a blessing.

“Oh, no,” said Tamiko.

Two smaller coons emerged from the pack behind the High Priest. They carried

between them a pear-shaped wicker basket with openings on two sides. It was stuffed with what looked like books.

“Acolytes?” she asked. “And an offering?”

It seemed that way, for the two coons set their burden down in front of the

humans and retreated hastily. The High Priest stopped when he reached the basket. He lowered his arms to chest height, spread his hands, and said in a gravelly voice, “We pray you will approve what we have done with what you gave us.”

“He thinks we’re Gypsies,” said Hrecker.

“The General thought they might. Captain Quigg has orders not to set them straight.”

“We are pleased,” said the captain on the screen. He did not look pleased.

“That you still speak our tongue.”

The High Priest showed his teeth in what might have been a smile. “What else should we speak? We never had another until you brought it.” He bent to take a book from the basket and hold it toward the captain. “We write it too, as you taught us.”

Captain Quigg leafed through the book. Elspeth Keck looked over his shoulder. “A mathematics text,” she said. “Not terribly advanced. Just calculus, though the notation is a little strange.”

“For our young,” said the High Priest. “We have a great deal more to show you.”

“There is a great deal more we wish to see,” said Captain Quigg.

* * *

“Where’s your gun, Johnny?” Ali Catrone’s expression—nearly as dour as the captain’s—did not match her cheerful voice. “Quigg take it away after yesterday?”

“Just the big one. But they won’t pull any tricks on us.” Gatling touched a pocket to say he was not helpless. The bags beneath his eyes were worse than ever.

Catrone shrugged. “There’s not much to worry about. They think we’re gods.”

“Or maybe sacrifices.”

The local spectators were gone. A multipassenger helicopter waited on the

road, swinging lazy rotors above a fat body and a strangely tapered tail. In the distance, the tower in the center of the valley was visible. A breeze from that direction carried the odor of honeysuckle blooms.

“They were here,” said Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. There was no other explanation for the smell. “What else did they plant?”

“Hush,” said Tamiko Inoue. She gestured toward the four approaching coons, and Gatling and Catrone fell quiet too. No one wanted the natives to overhear any hint of what might be in store.

This time, only one coon wore the yellow cloak of a priest. The rest were civilians, clad only in straps and pouches. One had a tail whose markings suggested chevrons or barbs. Another was the color of sunlight on ripe grain; she had no tail. They were accompanied by the scents of spice and musk, exotic and animal.

The priest scratched vigorously at the side of his nose. “You are ready,” he said. “Come.”

“Not quite,” said Ali Catrone. She stepped forward and named herself. Then she introduced the other three humans.

The priest sighed, and his tail twitched. “I am Dreaming Tree.” He pointed at his companions each in turn. “Dotson Barbtail.”

That was the one with the chevroned tail, his posture what a human would call stiff, suspicious, wary. He does not trust us, thought Hrecker. And that name. Had his father been polka-dotted?

“His mate Sunglow. And Scholar Starsight.” The last was a drab grayish brown except for a streak of white that slashed across the muscle of his right arm and part of his chest. Perhaps it marked the scar of some youthful misadventure.

All three Racs scratched their muzzles just as had the priest. When Hrecker imitated the gesture, they showed their teeth in what could only be the local equivalent of a human grin. A moment later, the other humans followed his lead.

When they were airborne, the priest directed the pilot to swing over the city atop the bluffs. Gatling patted the wall and said, “Nice soundproofing. I didn’t have a bit of trouble understanding you. Why do you call it Worldtree City?”

The priest seemed slightly puzzled as he pointed toward the center of the valley. “That is the Worldtree, which you grew before you left. Our ancestors thought it held up the sky. And Worldtree Center, where we study the lessons you left.”

“Wh... ?” But the priest let Gatling ask no more questions. Instead he directed their attention through the copter’s windows to the city below, its streets and hotels and factories and warehouses. The pilot swung wider of the valley, and there were fields and orchards and herds.

They think, Hrecker reminded himself, that we are the Gypsies. We made them from nothing, and not that long ago. Guilt washed through him at the thought of the lie they were telling by not admitting that they were not Gypsies but rather the Gypsies’ deadly enemies, but he knew better than to say aloud any more than, “You’ve come a long way.”

The priest seemed quite righteously satisfied at that praise from one of his gods.

“How did you do it?” asked Ali Catrone.

“We will show you when we get to Worldtree Center.”

The copter swung back toward the valley, rose high, higher than any human

starship could stand, and hovered beside the bulbous tip of the tower. Hrecker noted the arched openings and the chamber within, and he caught a glimpse of walls covered with shelves. The shelves were packed with oblong bundles.

“What... ?”

“This is where we put our most honored dead.”

They sank through the valley’s air and settled beside a high-roofed hall.

The copter’s door slid open, and they faced more of the purple-leafed vegetation they had scorched from the landing field. To the left, a bank of green and viny growth presented huge blossoms shaped like erect wine-glasses.

“The honeysuckle,” said Gatling. He sounded suspicious, but Hrecker was not surprised. Obsessive paranoia was the man’s job.

“Do you drink the nectar?” asked Tamiko.

Dotson Barbtail made a face and shuddered. The blonde coon beside him,

Sunglow, said, “We don’t care for it.”

“Then why grow it?”

“You planted it before you left.” The priest seemed to think that was all

the answer needed, and perhaps it was.

* * *

Inside the Great Hall, they were met by the same High Priest who had led the welcoming party the day before. He gestured, spotlights bloomed, and he said, “Here we have recorded all our history.”

Hrecker was staring at the small version of the tower, the Worldtree, that dominated one end of the Hall. With difficulty, he jerked his eyes to the walls. Then, like all the other humans there, he could not keep his jaw from dropping. None of them had ever seen a mural so vast and sweeping, though perhaps they knew such things did exist on Earth.

There was the valley, carpeted only by the purple-leafed plant they had seen already. Scattered quadrupeds stuffed themselves round on white berries. “Our ancestors,” said the High Priest.

There was no trace of honeysuckle, no sign of Gypsies, but there was a single tree growing tall and taller, spreading vast branches. It became a limbless, barkless spear, polished smooth, hollow-tipped, rising above seas of opposing armies. There was the great box kite that had lifted Kitewing to the Worldtree’s tip, the hanging of the first ladder, the building of Worldtree Center. There were the first ships, trains, and cars, powerplants and rockets and communication satellites.

It was a tale of progress, of discovery and invention, of the rapid spread of science and technology. Its spirit was as proud as that of any arch of triumph.

“Romans of the Round Table,” said Ali Catrone. Hrecker followed her gaze to the the armor mounted below the mural, and he saw her point. The helms were medieval. The breastplates and metal-strip skirts might have come from an earlier millennium.

“You coons’ve had wars.” Johnny Gatling was leaning forward on his toes as if he wished to dive into the mural, into the midst of a swirl of flesh and blood so vivid Hrecker wondered for a moment why he could not hear the dying scream.

“Of course,” said Starsight, the scholar who had so far said nothing at all. He pointed here and here and here on the muraled wall. From the very beginning, the Worldtree had been a prize, and the battles had repeated every time the technology of war advanced. The first had relied on swords and spears and bows. Kitewing had flown above cannon. Then there had been tanks and rifles and bombs. In addition to the armor on display, here were hand weapons, miniature catapults and tanks, the first small rocket, battered from a landing ungentled by a parachute.

“We call ourselves Racs,” he added, almost as an afterthought. “That’s what you named us before.”

“The tails always won,” said Tamiko.

“Same difference,” said Gatling dismissively. He had settled back on his heels. “Racs or coons.”

The High Priest said nothing, though his eyes were sharply watchful. Hrecker looked again, and yes, Tamiko was right. Every battle pitted coons with tails against coons without, and the former always won. Yet surely there had been setbacks. Surely the tailed coons had sometimes lost a battle, even if they had won the wars and gained the right to record their version of local history. Suddenly he felt these alien beings might prove quite human if only there were time to get to know them.

“How can you be sure?” asked Ali Catrone. “Especially the early days. That would just be myths.”

“It wasn’t that long ago,” said Sunglow. Hrecker noticed at last that she was the only one without a tail.

“We could write from the start,” said the High Priest. “And some of those who painted what you see worked from memory.”

Hrecker scanned the mural once more. So much history, so much progress, so few years. “Wildfire,” he murmured to Tamiko. “A wildfire civilization.”

“It didn’t take us long,” said Dotson Barbtail. “You insisted that the holiest of activities was the pursuit of knowledge. Many of us took that seriously.”

Hrecker grinned. He agreed, and he could see how such an attitude would lead to rapid progress even for a small population.

But... Catrone looked uncomfortable. Gatling had a hand on his pocket.

Hrecker tried to change the subject: “Why did you give us that basket full of books?”

“To show you that we still remember our destiny. To give you a token in return for what you gave us.” The High Priest faced the miniature Worldtree, and Hrecker suddenly realized that the basket containing the books had repeated the shape of the pillar’s tip. The folks on the Bonami were still examining the books; not all were basic school texts.

“The plaques,” said the tailless blonde.

“In the next room,” said the High Priest. When they reached it, they found

two rows of glass display cases full of ceramic plates, each one engraved with text and pictures.

Catrone leaned over one case and positioned a hand to block the light that reflected from the glass. A moment later, she said, “Epitaxial beam deposition. Integrated circuits. Doping.” She moved to a second display case. “Quantum physics.”

“Not my field,” said Dotson Barbtail.

“Your lessons,” said the High Priest. “You told us they were waiting for us,

as soon as we learned enough by ourselves to reach the Worldtree’s top. Kitewing

found the way, and ever since—“

“My God,” said Catrone.

Johnny Gatling’s hand was already in his pocket.

Hrecker sucked in his breath. If Gatling... They could not possibly kill

every coon that stood between them and the landing field.

“Then that’s what Worldtree Center is for,” he said. At the same time, he let his elbow prod the security chief in the back. “Hundreds of you. Thousands of you. All working to make sense of your heritage.”

“And add to it,” said Dotson Barbtail.

“It’s no wonder that you’ve come so far so fast.” Hrecker’s voice bore more

than a hint of awe. His own species, he knew, had never done so well, never done so much so fast.

Perhaps it never could.

“Is this all of them?” asked Gatling. His hand was still in his pocket.

“Oh, no,” said the High Priest. Was his tone the least bit smoother, higher

pitched? “We have many more in storage, or in our scholars’ workrooms, or on loan to other universities and libraries. There are copies, too.”

Gatling’s shoulders slumped. His hand withdrew slowly, empty, from his pocket.

* * *

“Treason!” said Johnny Gatling later, after they had returned to the Bonami.

“Not really,” said Hrecker. “Or only if the Gypsies were Engineers like us.”

“They were human!”

Hrecker shook his head again. “Even so.”

“Then heresy!”

“How so?” Captain Quigg had just entered the conference room. Tamiko described the plaques the Gypsies had left for the natives. When she was done, he grunted. “That’s not the way we would do it, is it?”

“We wouldn’t make the buggers in the first place!” said Ali Catrone.

“Was there any sign... ?”

“Not really,” said Hrecker.

“But they did,” said Gatling, while Tamiko nodded in agreement. “We know they did. They liked to play god.”

“We have to be sure,” said the Captain. “Any sign of... ?”

“We didn’t see a thing to do with biology,” Tamiko admitted in a voice that said she thought that was hardly necessary. They knew enough. Now they should get on with their mission.

“Q tech?”

“I saw the basics on a plaque,” said Catrone. “Quantum theory, at least.”

“Destroy them all,” said Gatling.

“No,” said Hrecker. “Even if the Gypsies made them, their tech is clean.

They’re just victims.”

“But if they ever get loose!”

“At least,” said Captain Quigg. His downturned mouth became a straight line, and his cheeks bulged even more than usual. “We’ll have to destroy the plaques.

And that tower. Whatever else we find the Gypsies left behind.”

“It’s up to the General,” said Tamiko. “But I think you’re right.”

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 10

* * *

“It’s an honor,” insisted Sunglow.

“It’s a nuisance,” said Dotson Barbtail just as insistently. The pitch of

his voice was well above the rumble of contentment. All his world was staring open-mouthed and panting at the alien humans, calling them the Gypsies, the Remakers, the gods themselves. Yet even if that was what they were, he was not happy. They interrupted his routine, distracted him from his worries. “I have work to do.” But he had to look aside even as he said the words. How could anyone think of work when... ?

“I can water Gypsy Blossom.”

“Oh, no!” He shook his head furiously. “You think you’re getting out of this? You’re coming with me.”

“Just set a bucket beside my pot,” said the bot. “I can water myself.”

“I wish the priests weren’t in charge.”

“What do you expect?” asked Sunglow. “They’ve been talking about Gypsies and Remakers for ages. Now here they are.”

“I’m not sure that’s who they are.”

Sunglow stiffened slightly, but Gypsy Blossom said very quietly, “Nor am I.”

“What do you mean?”

“I watched on the VC when you and everyone went to see them land. And there was something about them that made me wish to hide.”

“But who else could they be?” asked Sunglow.

Dotson shook his head. “They weren’t supposed to come back. We were supposed to go to them.”

“Maybe they got tired of waiting?” said the bot. “Or...”

Dotson snorted. “Then they don’t have much patience. One of them, the one called Mark, even said we were making fast progress.”

“But the priests said they would return,” said Sunglow.

“Some priests did,” said the bot.

“Ours did.”

“That’s not what the Founder told us.” Dotson stopped at that, for it

suddenly struck him strange that those priests who preached the return of the Remakers were not in charge now that the gods had indeed come back. Instead, it was still the traditionalists, those who ran Worldtree Center and expected the Remakers to be waiting somewhere beyond the sky for the Racs to attain their stature. Yet at very least the arrival of the aliens reinforced the belief that the Remakers were real, just as had, many years ago, the discovery of the plaques atop the Worldtree.

“So what are you going to do?”

“We,” he said. “The same thing we did when they called us this morning. Show

up and show them around. Maybe that's why they called us then. To see how we handled it, if we went all trembly and fell down and started praying or kept our mind on pointing out the sights like good tour guides."

"Dreaming Tree did that."

"And now it's our turn." He sighed, a world of resignation in a puff of air.

"Scholar Starsight too, I suppose."

* * *

The path Dotson and Sunglow were following toward the Worldtree wound among banks of honeysuckle and beds of moss. Other Racs were on the path as well, most of them moving in the same direction, talking as they moved toward their offices and labs in the buildings ahead.

"They were in the Great Hall yesterday."

"They passed me so close I could smell them. Strange!"

"What will they do to us?"

"Do? Nothing! How could they?"

"But they're here. That's enough to change the world."

"Maybe cool it off a bit." The day was already warm for spring, and many of the Racs were panting, their tongues lolling to let their saliva evaporate and cool their blood.

"I hear the Farshorns think they'll put the tailless in charge."

"Last-made and best," said Sunglow. She was panting too.

"But dumb enough not to listen to your own Founder," said Dotson. So was he.

Someone laughed.

No one suggested that the aliens were not the Gypsies, the Remakers, the gods themselves returned from heaven to see how their makings were getting along.

The path ahead bent to pass around a pile of tumbled, lichen-covered stones that was all that remained of the Watching Place the Founder had built when he first realized the Gypsies were gods. Three Racs vanished around the corner and immediately reappeared. "They're just ahead!"

By the time Dotson and Sunglow reached the corner, the path was completely blocked.

“Let us through?”

“Wait your turn! We want to see them too.”

“We’re their guides.”

That drew attention. In a moment, it even opened up a narrow path through the pack.

“One of each!”

“Fair enough.”

As soon as he saw the humans standing not far from the main entrance to the

Great Hall, Dotson recognized them. Marcus Hrecker and Tamiko Inoue, as bonded to each other, he thought, as he and Sunglow, though they were much more alike. Neither had a tail, both had black hair on the tops of their heads, and their skins were much the same in shade, she a little yellower than he. There had been more variety in the larger group that had emerged from the Bonami the day before, but nothing like the array of patterns displayed by Racs.

Beside them the priest, Dreaming Tree, stared nervously at clumps of curious Racs and along the paths as if he knew how many more hovered just out of sight. Scholar Starsight watched the humans with a look of distaste. He had not seemed to recognize Dotson the day before; nor did he now.

“I feel like I’m in a zoo,” the human male was saying as Dotson and Sunglow came into hearing. He was about the same size as Dotson, but his tongue stayed within his mouth as if the warmth of the day did not affect him. His face, however, glistened with moisture, and when Dotson grew closer, there was an odor that nearly made him curl his upper lip even more blatantly than the scholar.

“What’s a zoo?” asked Sunglow.

“A place where people go to see strange animals,” said the female.

“We have one of those,” said Dreaming Tree. He looked at Dotson. “You’re late. The rest have gone already. Why don’t you start there? Then you can show them the library.”

“We are fascinated,” said Hrecker, and Tamiko nodded her head. “We want to see everything.”

“We’ll visit the Court of Ancestors first,” said Scholar Starsight.

As soon as the priest had, just as he had the day before, named Dotson

Barbtail and Sunglow to their guests, he left. “This way,” said Dotson, and he led the humans along the path that circled Worldtree Center. Racs stood aside before them, exposing just enough gravel for them to pass, and flowed in again behind them. Voices buzzed, a few confident, contented growls dominated by more anxious pitches. A few failed to restrain their fleers of offense at the human odor.

“They’re following us,” said Sunglow. Her own voice squeaked and sang.

Dotson shrugged. There hadn’t been that odor the day before, when it had

been cooler. It was part of their response to heat then, or a sideeffect. He glanced at Marcus Hrecker and thought the moisture on his face must evaporate like his own saliva.

The human female looked back and then scanned the watchers to either side and ahead. Her body tensed.

“No danger,” said Dotson. “They want to see you. They probably wish they dared to touch you.”

“Where are we going?” asked the male.

“Not far, Marcus Hrecker.”

“Just Mark.”

The doorway they wanted was just ahead, above a flight of stone steps paved

with rubbernecking Racs. Inside, the floor was tile, the walls polished wood interrupted by doorways onto rooms full of bookshelves and tables.

“This looks like a library,” said Tamiko.

“That’s what it is,” answered Sunglow.

The ceiling was arched glass beyond which the Worldtree and the higher roofs

of Worldtree Center were visible. Mark was moving as if he could not help himself toward where a ray of sun struck the wall. He touched the spines of the books, pulled one free of its fellows, examined its pages.

“A novel,” he said.

“You must have lights for night,” said Tamiko.

“Of course.” Dotson indicated a broad double door on the right. It was made

of dark wood with polished brass fittings. It opened easily upon a broad and roofless courtyard. Beds of moss were separated by narrow gravel paths. A trickle of water linked two rock-lined pools above which a dozen small dumbos flapped and swirled. A clump of trees provided shade for several wooden lean-tos, and boulders seemed clustered to serve as seats.

The courtyard appeared empty, but almost immediately Tamiko was looking up and saying, “Don’t those damned coons have anything better to do?”

The others looked up too. A row of windows overhung the courtyard. Behind them was a solid wall of spectators.

“They’d rather be called Racs,” said Hrecker.

“They’re still coons,” said Tamiko. “Big ones. But not as coony as those.”

Something was moving in the ground-level shadows, and then something else, and now a dozen knee-high quadrupeds surrounded them, squatting on the gravel. Their ears stood up alertly, and their muzzles gaped, showing sharp teeth. They were fat, and their tails were ringed.

“Our wild cousins,” said Scholar Starsight. “Their grandparents were ours as well.”

“We have biologists who study them,” said Dotson. “This is where they keep them.”

“No young?”

“In the dens.” Tamiko pointed toward the trees. “Did they make those lean-tos themselves?”

“Oh, no.” Dotson shook his head.

“They look like they want something.”

“Food, Mark. But we didn’t bring any.” The largest of the animals cocked its head at Dotson’s words, stuck out its tongue, and stalked off. The others followed.

“He understood you?”

“They’re quite intelligent. Is this what you call a zoo?”

“Ours have many kinds of animals, and we keep them in cages or behind fences. Otherwise they might harm each other or their visitors.”

“Or the visitors might harm them,” said Hrecker.

* * *

“We didn’t see them very well yesterday,” said Tamiko.

“They were in those cases, after all,” said Hrecker. Both humans held

ceramic plaques in their hands, tilting them to catch the light and make their engraved inscriptions more visible. Some of the lines were darkened as if by pigment or dirt.

“These are copies,” said Dotson Barbtail. “We keep the originals tucked away so that no one can drop them.”

“I understand.”

“We have paper copies too.” Sunglow reached a massive book down from a

library shelf and spread it on the table. “Photographs. They rubbed the plaques with ink to bring out the lines. Then they scrubbed them clean again.”

“This book.” Hrecker tapped the open page with a finger. “It’s a complete record?”

Sunglow nodded. “Part of it.” She indicated three other volumes, each one equally massive, on the shelf.

“Could we borrow them?”

Dotson felt puzzled. “Why? You already have them. You made the...”

Tamiko’s hesitation was just barely perceptible. “But we never kept a record

of what we left behind for you.”

A second later, Hrecker added, “It would save us time if we ever have to leave such a gift again.”

“Then I’m sure we can find copies for you.”

“Thank you.” Hrecker and Tamiko studied the pages in the book for some time

after that, almost ignoring their hosts. Eventually, Tamiko said, “They seem very complete.”

Dotson laughed. “Oh, yes. But they are still only summaries. A great deal of what they say made no sense until we had discovered almost all the details for ourselves. Your gift was not science and technology themselves, but a goad and a direction and a way to check our progress.”

“It seems to have worked,” said Tamiko.

* * *

Dotson Barbtail tapped the edges of the sheaf of papers that was his report. Done at last. Despite the time it had taken to show the humans the Court of Ancestors and the library and find a bookstore with a set of all four volumes of Leaves of the Worldtree. They had taken the books back to their ship early in the afternoon. Sunglow had returned to the apartment. He had gone back to his own work.

And he had actually been able to apply his mind to what he had to do.

It was strange, he thought. If the humans had arrived a few weeks before,

when he was still trying to protect his secret, to keep anyone from learning that he had stolen a seed and grown a bot in his apartment, to keep Sunglow out of his life and his quarters, when he had had so little attention to spare for his work that he had come far too near to being sent away, he would have had

plenty of time to guide them all over Worldtree Center. But now... He shook his head. He actually begrudged the time they took.

He put the report in an envelope and dropped it in the bin attached to the wall outside Senior Hightail's office. He would see it in the morning. For now...

He was sure Sunglow had told Gypsy Blossom all about the morning. So he wouldn't have to do that himself. The three of them could talk about it all and what it meant and what must happen next. And then...

But when he opened his apartment door, he heard more than two voices. Not just Gypsy Blossom. Not just Sunglow. But both of them, and strangers too.

"They made us!" cried a shrill and angry voice. "They saw the mistakes they had made in their earlier efforts. They perfected their design. No tails and better minds and fit heirs to what they left."

They were in the bedroom, their backs to the door, their ears deaf to the sounds he could not help but make. Only Gypsy Blossom was positioned to see him, and she was pretending to be as oblivious as all the rest.

All the Racs in the room were tailless. One, scraped clean of fur except on top of his head, was speckled with scabs. "We have fur," he was saying. "They don't. We should all shave like me."

Gypsy Blossom laughed. "If they were bots like me, would you plant flowers in your scalp?"

The shaven Rac twitched with offense. His belly jiggled.

"That's mere imitation," said Sunglow. Dotson was pleased to hear the anger

in her voice. She had brought these strangers, surely Farshorn malcontents, into his apartment and revealed the secret that would destroy him if it became known. Yet she did not sound entirely on their side. "When a wild Rac holds a book and pretends to read, that does not make it one of us."

"Then..."

"We should ask them," said the first angry speaker. "Ask them to help us

throw down the usurpers."

"The thieves of our heritage."

"Restore us to our rightful place."

"We could take Gypsy Blossom with us—"

"And then, we would be the ones, the only ones, with an actual Gypsy, a

Remaker—"

"A Remaker's child."

“Even better.”

“That would prove that we were the rightful heirs to the Worldtree.”

“No,” said Gypsy Blossom.

“What?”

“I said no. You could not succeed without my cooperation. And if you take me from here and the Rac who sowed my seed and tended me, I will surely denounce you.”

Sunglow was nodding.

“You might not succeed even with my aid. We cannot be sure that these humans are true Gypsies, for they have none of my kind among them.”

“That means nothing!”

“Nothing!”

Now Gypsy Blossom was staring deliberately at the room’s doorway. Sunglow

followed the bot’s gaze, and her eyes widened. She began to stand.

“You told me,” said Gypsy Blossom. “You gave me books that told me too. Many of them were bots like me.”

Dotson cleared his throat, and the others scrambled to their feet as well. No one said a word, though someone had released an involuntary hint of acrid scent from the glands every Rac carried beneath its tail.

He nodded at Gypsy Blossom in her pot. He looked at Sunglow, his expression sad, betrayed. But when he broke the silence, his voice rumbled and snarled as gently as a mother’s. “Do you forget?” he asked. “The Founder told us. Our Remakers had enemies then, foes who would destroy all they made. Including us.”

“No!” cried the shaven Rac. Seen front-on, he looked more like a newborn than an adult, for he had even shaved his genitalia. “They are gone. They have vanished. And if—“

Gypsy Blossom laughed. “But you said they are our visitors. And if the Remakers still live and can return, then their enemies surely live as well and can find us. Perhaps they have.”

Dotson Barbtail did not laugh. Still keeping his voice gentle, he said, “We cannot know. We have to study them, watch them, do nothing foolish that might destroy us all. Approach them as the Founder might have.”

“The Founder had no tail.”

“He was one of us.”

Gypsy Blossom pointed at the stack of books that still sat beside her pot.

“My reading says you didn’t listen to him then.”

Sunglow broke the ensuing silence. “That’s true. We chased the tailed Racs from the valley and tried to keep it just for us.”

“But,” said Dotson, “not before they had heard the Founder say that learning and discovery were holy tasks. They took that to heart, while the tailless Racs did not, and when they returned...”

“They were no better,” said Sunglow.

“No,” said Dotson. “The tailless invited their own defeat by barring the way

to the Worldtree. Then the tailed did the same, in their own way, and guaranteed more wars.”

“There will be one more!” cried the shaven Rac.

“I hope not. Things are better now. Tailed and tailless mingle in the valley, in congregations, even in Worldtree Center.”

“There aren’t many of us there,” said a female whose dark fur shaded to cream on her belly and hips.

“There will be,” said Sunglow.

“Unless,” said Dotson, “you start another war.”

“We’d get it all then!” said the shaven Rac.

Another snorted. “Not likely. They’ve got the guns.”

“But the humans—“

“No!” cried Gypsy Blossom. “I don’t trust them.”

“And if she doesn’t trust them...” said Dotson.

The rest were silent. Perhaps they were even thoughtful.

Not long after that, they left.

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CHAPTER 11

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The bluffs rose steeply from the valley's rim like the crater walls they were. Outside the valley, they sloped gradually outward and down to merge with level plain and rolling hills. Worldtree City gave way to fields and forest. Highways snaked across the landscape, leading out of sight to other cities. One ended on the plain, where grassland had been covered with strips of pavement. Beside those strips were parked squadrons of jets whose wings and fuselages bristled with armaments and antennae. There were larger planes as well, slender, wasplike helicopters, immense, half-buried hangars, and batteries of ground-to-air missiles.

"We've never had to use the missiles," a young priestess was saying with every air of pride. Her name was Silverside, and indeed her fur shaded from gray back through silver flanks to white chest and belly. Like the priests, she wore a yellow cloak and cap marked with black. "But we have them, just in case the Farshorns ever get this far."

"You have used the fighters, then," said Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. He had never been a soldier, despite his ancestry, but he was not impressed. He knew the human ships were vastly stronger.

"Of course they have," said Johnny Gatling. Today he wore a jacket beneath which Hrecker could glimpse an arrangement of straps. There was a bulge beneath one armpit, and his arms were crossed, putting one bony hand near whatever he carried. "Or they wouldn't have them in the open like this. Flight-ready."

"Maybe they just want to impress us." Ali Catrone was as unarmed as Hrecker. "But I don't see any propeller planes." When their hosts seemed puzzled, she pointed at a helicopter and added, "Horizontal, not vertical."

"Children's toys." The priestess mimed a finger winding up a small plane powered by a rubber band. "The very first planes we built for carrying people were jets. You helped with the plaques."

Gatling's face twisted into a darker scowl.

"Do you use those fighters?" asked Hrecker.

"Of course we do," said Silverside. "The Farshorns invade our airspace, attack a fishing boat or a freighter, try to overfly on spy missions."

“There’s a skirmish every year or so.” Dotson Barbtail shrugged matter-of-factly, as if the others’ doubts were irrelevant, as if he knew the coons’ military prowess was so great that they need not fear even the humans.

“Our planes are faster,” said the priestess. “They’re better armed and longer ranged. The Farshorns have no chance, but we have to keep reminding them.”

“That won’t last,” said Sunglow. Hrecker thought he was beginning to be able to read their voices. Their words were clear enough, but their tones did not change on any human pattern. Yet the history lesson of the day before seemed to be helping. Dotson and the priestess, both members of the dominant race, the one with tails, were confident and even complacent. That scholar—Starsight, strange name, but they all had names like that—was not with them this day.

The tailless Sunglow, on the other hand, despite her obvious attachment to Dotson, seemed less confident and even resentful.

“Farshorns?”

“Farshore. The other continent.”

“Is that where the tailless coons live?” Hrecker asked.

“Most of them,” said the priestess.

Were they oppressed? Or just outclassed?

“My people’s jets keep improving,” Sunglow added.

“And so do ours. We’ll always be able to win.”

Half a dozen unarmed observation planes were waiting on the runway. Pilots

and copilots were visible behind cockpit windows. Coons wearing ear-protecting padded helmets and military badges were wheeling staircases into position, opening cabin doors, and gesturing the passengers to leave the soundproof building for their tours of First-Stop.

Gatling and Catrone stayed together as they crossed the pavement. A pair of coon guides met them at the foot of the stairs, and the plane absorbed them. The other planes absorbed similar pairs and triplets of humans, with equal numbers of local guides, and then it was Hrecker’s and Tamiko Inoue’s turn to follow Dotson and Sunglow into a cylindrical cabin dominated by broad strips of tinted glass or plastic that gave an unobstructed view of the runways and departing planes outside. Comfortably padded seats waited for them. An array of six buttons in each seat’s right arm controlled swivel, tilt, and motion on the short track that crossed the cabin.

“On the left,” said the pilot’s amplified voice a little later. “The Glistens.”

Motors whirred. The plane tipped as the weight of seats and passengers shifted to the left. It adjusted.

“A fishing port,” said Sunglow.

“Named for mudflats?” asked Tamiko.

“No moon,” said Hrecker. “No tides.”

“There are cliffs,” said Sunglow. “Flat and smooth and black after rain.”

The cliffs were not visible even when the plane descended to improve the view, but they could see the fishing boats, a few under sail, most with the boiling wakes that indicated engines.

“There’s a frigate,” said Dotson. “Watching for floaters, illegal immigrants in small boats.”

Hrecker could see no land in the distance except a scatter of small islands.

“How far do they come?”

“You’ll see. But now...”

The plane’s path bent inland once more, over a forest that once had been a battlefield, a town built around a massive fortification, an open-pit mine.

“That’s Kitewing’s tomb.” A sepulcher of black stone set in an open field starred by paths. “He was born here. There used to be a village. His bones were moved to the Worldtree only later.”

“The capital.” A plain, gray building in a small town fifty kilometers from the valley. “We keep it separate in case of war. It might be a target, and we cannot risk the Worldtree.”

Hrecker thought that humans would surely see the sanctity of such a holy icon in quite another way. If no one would attack in its vicinity for fear of damaging it, then it would be the ideal shelter for rulers and bureaucrats and military planners.

On the other hand, Earth’s history made it clear that war cared more for targets than for sanctity. Perhaps the coons were right.

“It keeps the priests and scholars and rulers out of each other’s way, too.”

“Who rules?”

A look of vast surprise. “We do, of course. Not like the Farshorns. Every other year, we choose senators from each town, each profession. They meet here.”

“What do the Farshorns do?”

“They have priests and kings, and the children of priests and kings.”

“We don’t!” protested Sunglow in shrill tones. She faced Hrecker and Tamiko.

“There’s just one nation here. Across the sea, there are fifty, only some of which are ruled that way. My own land is just as democratic as this.”

Tamiko patted her hand. "Earth used to be that way too."

"It's all one now," said Hrecker.

"What's that?"

A complex of buildings not far from the capital, a center of learning even larger than Worldtree Center.

"Do they have any of those plaques here?"

"Of course," said Dotson. "Copies, anyway. A few originals on display. But here the focus is much more on our own world. History and government, literature and art, the biology of First-Stop, the astronomy of our own skies."

"Was Starsight from here?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"I've seen him in the Center," said Sunglow.

Smoking power plants and titanic mills. "Steel," said Dotson. "Aluminum. Petrochemicals. Vehicles. Aircraft."

"We've seen plenty of military hardware," Tamiko had said before they joined their guides that morning. "Watch for the factories. We need to know."

And now it was almost impossible to believe that the coons had existed as an intelligent species less than two centuries. Yet—Hrecker forced himself to think of human history. It had not taken much longer for Europeans to go from primitive agriculture and handwork to factories on just as grand a scale, not once the industrial age had dawned. Not once the Renaissance and the Enlightenment had liberated the human mind from the prison of the Dark Ages and invention and discovery had begun to bloom. And the coons had been given a boost at their very creation. They had been born enlightened. What they had most lacked was the sheer numbers to build a civilization.

Hrecker paused to do a little mental arithmetic. In one hundred years, humans could run through seven generations. If each generation doubled the one before, that would be enough time for a single couple to become two hundred and fifty people. In two hundred years, they could become half a million. If the Gypsies had just produced a few hundred or thousand breeding couples... If the coons bred just a little faster...

There was no sign of the facilities that had to exist to account for the tanks and fighters and missiles and ships. Hrecker wished he dared to ask, but Tamiko had already warned him against that. "If we show any special interest," she had said. "That could alert them. Not that it would do them any good. But it might make our job more difficult."

"Don't you worry about pollution?"

“Our population is small. We can afford a dirty technology. And besides...”

“The space station?” asked Tamiko.

Dotson nodded. “We were planning to leave as soon as we could.”

“Everyone wasn’t,” said Sunglow. “Not the Farshorns. Not even all the tailed Racs.”

“How will they live?”

“We were already designing power satellites,” said Dotson. “The space infrastructure would still be here after we were gone, we thought. And we expected plenty of ore and oil and coal to remain.”

“Where were you going to go?”

A shrug. “We wanted to find the Gypsies.”

“But now you’re here,” said Sunglow.

“You’ve done very well so far,” Tamiko said, and the coon’s back stiffened proudly, her lips parted, and she beamed at Dotson.

Hrecker winced at the effect Tamiko had. So far, he had let the coons believe what his superiors and Tamiko wished them to believe, that the Engineers were their gods returned. Now sympathy swelled in him, and he recognized the tragedy he was helping to create. Even if the Engineers left them in peace, the coons would surrender their dream, believing it pointless.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Tamiko’s chair suddenly spun to face his and her foot connected with his ankle. “Unh.”

Had the coons seen?

Perhaps not. They were side by side, staring out one of the plane’s broad

windows. The cabin was tilting, the plane beginning its descent. The coastline was visible ahead, a scatter of small buildings, a tiny airstrip.

“This is where we spend the night,” said Dotson Barbtail. “Edgewater. It’s a base for researchers and prospectors.”

The small crowd that met them held roughly equal numbers of tailed and tailless coons, male and female. There were few children, but near one edge of the runway was a line of wild coons, squatting on their haunches, watching their landing and reception.

The fattest coon Hrecker had seen so far met them at the foot of the plane’s fold-down ramp. “They call

me Sugarberry,” he said, introducing himself. “I run the guesthouse.” He must be, thought Hrecker, the closest thing Edgewater had to a mayor or a constable.

He turned and raised his voice. “Get back. Out of the way. Let ‘em through.”

No one paid any attention. The onlookers pressed closer even as they kept a respectful gap between them and the humans. Voices murmured, “The Remakers. Come at last. They look just like the pictures.” Someone reached out to touch Tamiko’s chest. When no one protested, more hands made contact, poked, pinched, tugged at cloth, and the murmur became, “They’re real! But no fur. No straps. So strange.”

“Out of the way,” growled Sugarberry. “You can feel ‘em up later, in the bar.”

* * *

Hours later, when the humans were alone in a room equipped with a single broad sleeping pad, Tamiko said, “There’s a difference here.”

Hrecker was flat on his back on the pad. He only grunted in reply.

“Back at Worldtree Center, there weren’t as many tailless coons.”

“So?”

“And they were watchful, wary. While the tailed ones strutted.”

“Even Dotson. But not as much as that priestess.”

“Even him,” she insisted. “Rubbing in his kind’s superiority.”

“I didn’t see anything strange about it.”

“You wouldn’t.” She kicked the side of his leg gently. “You’re a man.”

He blinked at her. “I didn’t know you were a feminist.”

“I’m not, not particularly. But I know a lord-and-master type when I see one.”

“He’s not that bad. She contradicts him, corrects him, argues with him.”

“Just like a woman? He lets her do it? That’s my point.”

“Are we like that?”

“Not much. But humans are, in general. Back on Earth.”

“Not in the boonies?”

“That’s where we are here, isn’t it? A frontier mentality. More equality.”

“No ideology, you mean. I didn’t see a single priest.”

“The ideology is getting along, surviving, helping each other. Tails be damned.”

“What about Gypsies?”

“That’s different.”

“I hope it is.” He sighed. “I like these guys.”

“They’re not human, Mark. They’re aliens.”

“Still...”

“Animals. Or not even that.”

“Engineered, you mean. Just things.”

She nodded.

He wished she hadn’t.

* * *

The only witnesses to their departure the next morning were the wild coons lined up beside the runway, their striped tails curled around their feet. Hrecker wondered briefly whether they were the same ones he had noticed the day before.

“Where is everybody?” asked Tamiko.

“Once was enough,” he said as the plane tilted its nose up and climbed.

“At work,” said Dotson Barbtail. “In the woods by now. Or in their labs.”

“Where are we going?”

“Farshore.”

An hour later, Hrecker understood how easy it must be for even small boats

to cross the sea. As their plane climbed and its course put sea beneath it, land became visible on the horizon. The two continents were separated by no more than a few hundred kilometers. Small boats could manage that in decent weather, if the wind was right.

The coastline was sand and rock and forest. The cities were smaller and farther apart. There were more mines, shipping their ores by truck and train to ports where ships prepared to cross the sea. There were military bases. The largest prompted Dotson to say, "That's ours. The site was part of the last peace settlement."

"You seized it," said Sunglow. "And when we tried to drive you off, to reclaim our own land, you bombed the capital."

"You were arming frantically. We were only enforcing peace."

"We..."

Hrecker looked at Tamiko and found her looking at him.

His smile felt strained, and he thought hers seemed slightly forced. Their

own differences were becoming clearer, stronger. Perhaps they would not last much longer as a couple. If the General...

The plane abruptly banked. The cabin speaker crackled into life and brought the pilot's shrill words: "Tighten those belts. We're in a hurry."

"Are we being attacked?"

Dotson didn't answer Tamiko. Instead, he unstrapped and headed forward, lurching as the plane tipped down at the nose and accelerated.

When he returned a few minutes later, he looked troubled. "We've been recalled."

"Why?" asked Sunglow.

He shook his head. His face, despite the alienness of its features, plainly

said that he knew but would not say.

* * *

When their plane landed outside Worldtree City once more, the mood inside was tense, anxious. The few words Dotson uttered were as shrill as the pilot's, and he would barely look at the humans. Sunglow, even though she knew no more than Hrecker or Tamiko, did not take long to decide to imitate him. The humans, baffled, chose to say nothing themselves.

Two other observation planes were already on the runway. Outside one of them a circle of coons

surrounded a single crouched human. Most held rifles in their hands and looked prepared to use them.

“That’s Gatling,” said Hrecker when they had taxied close.

“That gyppin’ idiot,” said Tamiko. “He’s got his gun out.”

“What did he do?”

Dotson Barbtail only shook his head.

“Tell us!”

“He shot a mechanic.”

“What for?” Tamiko sounded as bewildered as Hrecker felt.

“They were at Glenrock, a place like Edgewater, ready to leave. The mechanic was running toward the plane. And—“

“Let me talk to him,” said Tamiko.

The coon turned toward Hrecker, his expression plainly asking, “Would that

help?” Hrecker nodded. He wasn’t sure it would, but it couldn’t hurt. After all, Gatling was an officer of just one ship. Tamiko was an aide to the general commanding the entire fleet.

When they left their plane, heat struck them like a blow, concentrated by the pavement all around. Dotson and Sunglow both began to pant. Moisture instantly coated Mark’s and Tamiko’s faces.

The voices awaiting them were loud, shrill, and demanding: “Drop the gun... Like hell!... You’re under arrest... Mechin’ monsters... Come with us... And get my throat cut? Think I’m crazy?... We’re not beasts... Ha! Ha!”

The armed coons opened a path for the new arrivals.

“What happened?” asked Tamiko.

“We had a squeak in the undercarriage,” said a nearby coon.

“He’s the pilot,” said Dotson Barbtail.

“And this coon came chasin’ out of the hangar with a grease gun. A grease

gun!” Gatling’s eyes were sunken, staring, pupils wide and black. Water ran from his forehead into his eyes, forcing him to blink again and again and again, and down his cheeks. His lips were drawn back from his teeth. Tendons showed taut even through the cloth of sleeves and pants. He sounded on the verge of hysteria. “I thought sure he was after us. A grease gun! So I shot him.”

There was silence until Tamiko sighed and said, “I’ve read your dossier.

You're good at jumping to conclusions."

He said nothing. He did not lower his gun or look any less besieged.

"He made a mistake," she said to no one in particular.

"It was still murder," said Dotson.

One of the coons said, "Let us have him."

Gatling screamed: "No!" The gun was aimed at Dotson now.

Tamiko shook her head and sighed and approached the man. "I'll take care of you," she said. "I will. You know I'm close to the General."

Gatling looked at her. He licked his lips. His gaze darted at and past the other humans, across the coons that surrounded him with weapons just as deadly as his own. He could not help but see that he had no hope of shooting his way to freedom.

She held out her hand, chest high, chin high. "Give me the gun."

The crowd was deadly silent, waiting, expectant. Suddenly Hrecker knew what

was about to happen. He should have known Tamiko could do it, but...

He wished he dared to close his eyes or turn away. He wished his father and grandfather did not spring to mind with words all their own: "She has to do it. You know she does. The General would if he were here."

He wished he did not feel ashamed of who and what he was.

After a long moment, Johnny Gatling laid his gun on her palm and took a deep breath.

He too knew what was about to happen.

Tamiko closed her fingers on the handgun's grip and pulled the trigger.

Johnny Gatling's left eye disappeared.

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CHAPTER 12

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The Racs had no difficulty with the idea of rapid, drastic punishment. They had officials whose job it was to investigate crimes and find criminals, but they came into play only when the miscreant was not caught in the act or persuaded to confess. Thieves were turned over to the police who immediately shipped them to labor camps; repeat offenders had their tails docked—if they had tails—and were banished to Farshore. Rapists lost more than their tails. Murderers were executed quickly and quietly.

Yet the Racs had always thought their gods more benign than they were themselves. They were creators, the Remakers who had raised Rackind from the animals in the forests and given them both knowledge and the thirst for more. They were nurturers and teachers. They were as loving and forgiving as only a mother could be.

“They left us only one myth that has anything at all to do with destruction,” said Gypsy Blossom. She remained rooted in her pot, but every muscle, bone, and joint were clear beneath the thin leaves that covered her furless skin. It was impossible to look at her and believe she was more plant than animal, that she had grown from a seed.

“The one about the enemy among them,” said Sunglow. “The one who tried to kill a...”

“Yes,” said the bot. “And they were victims, not actors. They did not even punish, for the enemy leaped to his own death.”

“We have no way to tell if that was how they handled such things all the time. There’s only that one example, one incident, one myth, if you like.” Sunglow seemed to be groping for some way to say that the humans now on their world were indeed the Gypsies of which all Rackind dreamed. “But Johnny Gatling did that too. He handed her his gun, and he must have kn—“ She stopped abruptly, panting lightly. The contradiction was too much. Yes, he had aided his own death. But if they were Gypsies, he could not have done what he had done before that. And Tamiko could not have...

“Could they have changed that much?” asked Dotson Barbtail. He stood by the window, hands clasped behind his back, his muscles taut with tension, his mouth open. He too was panting. The heat had penetrated indoors now.

“If they are even Gypsies.”

“They have to be!” cried Sunglow. “Who else could they be?”

“The enemy the Founder mentioned.”

“They must have changed,” said Dotson. He looked at the bot. Her skin and

leaves were dry despite the heat. But of course, he thought. Plants transpire. They cool themselves by letting water evaporate through pores. Bots were thus an improvement on the human or the Rac design. “It’s been just as long for them as for us.”

“Time-dilation,” said the bot.

“Okay.” He nodded. “A little less, depending on how far and how fast they’ve traveled. But still... I can imagine a Remaker making Johnny Gatling’s error.

Thinking he was under attack. Acting immediately, reflexively, to protect himself and those around him. But what Tamiko Inoue did—“

“She wanted to show us that her people would not tolerate savagery.”

“She did not succeed.” When Racs executed a murderer, they did it discreetly, away from public view.

“But they are Gypsies!” cried Sunglow. “Remakers! They said so!”

“Did they really?” asked Gypsy Blossom.

But neither Rac could recall any human actually saying, “We are the Gypsies. Your Remakers. Your gods, come back to you.”

“They aren’t all like Tamiko,” said Sunglow at last. “Or Johnny Gatling.”

“There’s Mark,” said Dotson.

“I like him.”

“So do I.”

“She’s a soldier, isn’t she?” There was no note of surprise in Sunglow’s voice, for the Racs made little distinction between the sexes in their armies.

“And he’s a scholar.”

“How do you know that?” asked Gypsy Blossom.

“He didn’t say. But it shows. He respects knowledge, he cares about books.

It pleased him to hear that the reason for our rapid development is our own love of knowledge.”

“That shouldn’t have surprised him,” said Sunglow.

“Then it’s another reason to think they are not Gypsies.”

“And the others?” persisted the bot.

“Huh?” Dotson had lost the thread.

“When they heard... ?”

“I think... I think it scared them.”

All three fell silent.

All three stared out the window. The Worldtree was there, the emblem of the

Gypsies and all their gifts. Beyond it, not visible but there, a presence in their minds, was the Bonami, the human ship. Above, in orbit, was the rest of the human fleet.

How could the humans possibly be Gypsies?

If they were not, were they friends?

Or were they enemies? The enemies of which the Founder had warned, who

would, if they could, destroy all the Gypsies’ efforts, all the Remakers’ makings. Who would therefore try to destroy the Worldtree, the Racs, even First-Stop itself.

“They have to be Gypsies,” insisted Sunglow. But her voice was plaintive and uncertain. “They do.”

“It wouldn’t do any good to ask them,” said Gypsy Blossom.

“Why not?” Dotson turned to face the plant.

“If they are Gypsies, they would say so.”

“Of course. They would,” said Sunglow.

“If they are not Gypsies but are friendly, they would say so.”

“And if they are foe,” said Dotson. “If that’s the case, they would not say so. They would say they are Gypsies, or that they are friends.”

“Or they would say nothing,” said Gypsy Blossom. “They would let our own wishes tell us lies.”

“They have hinted,” said Dotson. “I think they have.”

The petals on the bot’s scalp trembled as she shook her head. “They have said nothing plain.”

“They could have lied.”

“But there is only one possibility that says nothing.”

“Those hints...”

“We cannot know,” said Sunglow. “We cannot be sure.”

“Until...”

* * *

Those Worldtree Center priests and scholars and administrators of highest rank held the offices and laboratories closest to the shaft of the Worldtree and highest above the floor of the valley. Those with the highest ranks of all held rooms for which the Worldtree itself formed one gently curving wall. They could lay their hands on rock that had once been wood as Remade as their own flesh. Those highest in the Center’s buildings had windows and a view as well, but what counted was the sense of a thin, thin barrier between one’s hands and the heartbeat of the gods. Some even swore they could feel a pulse, faint and far away, or a quiver, a trembling of walled-off flesh.

Dotson Barbtail had windows in his office and lab because he had hardly any rank at all. If he were any further from the Worldtree, he would be outdoors among the moss and honeysuckle. Yet he did not mind. Power and hierarchy were not what drove him. Curiosity and inquisitiveness were. Like many Racs, he did not feel that his gods had set him an unpleasant task when they said, “Go forth and learn.”

If he glanced through a window, he would see long shadows that said the afternoon was nearly done. Soon he could go home to Gypsy Blossom. Sunglow would be already there, or she would arrive soon after. She had had the humans to herself this day, guiding them about the city and the Center.

Were there limits to that task of learning? He had known he would be in trouble if anyone caught him stealing a seed from the Great Hall, but he had felt that he was acting in perfect consonance with the Gypsies’ prime directive. What would grow from those seeds? Plant one, and see. That was the soul of the scientific method: Check it out. All else was commentary.

Limits? There was no knowledge the Rac mind should not seek, no question too touchy to ask, no topic too sacrosanct to study.

That was also the official philosophy of the culture centered on the Worldtree, although some things—the Remakers themselves, the making of the Racs, the quest for knowledge the Racs believed they had been set—were givens, fundamentals of the Rac identity. They were not to be doubted, not to be challenged, never to be changed.

What the priests debated was whether the quest for knowledge should end once the Worldtree had been scaled, or once the first thundertrees had been launched, or once the first space station had been built. Whether the Gypsies, the Remakers, would return to raise their makings to their celestial heaven, or whether they must be sought among the stars. Whether effort could be rewarded and, rewarded, end, or whether it must go on and on and on, forever.

For Dotson, it was enough that there were unanswered questions such as the nature of a seed, or the match between the Remakers' own biology and the Racs'. The records the Remakers had left behind, describing the science and technology behind what they had done when they Remade the Racs, were mostly accounts of the former. He needed the technology as well and the equivalence between science and technology if the Racs were ever to become makers—remakers—in their own right.

The first step was the enzymes he sought now. The restriction endonucleases, ligases, and polymerases. The tools which would allow Racs to cut and splice the material of their genes just as the Remakers had done so long before. The tools to make singing dumbos, mossberries as big as heads, trees so filled with explosive liquids that they could be used as thundertrees indeed!

His lab was shelves of bottles and jars, a microscope, a device for casting electrophoresis gels, an ultraviolet spectrometer, a centrifuge, a freezer, a pair of incubator chambers. He was bent over his work counter, carefully removing three small ovals from a gel, when the door opened.

He paid no attention. He could not take the risk of mixing the ovals up. Each one had to go into its own labeled and stoppered tube, where the material of the gel would dissolve and the purified protein the electrophoresis process had concentrated in it would be released. Later, once he had accumulated enough of these proteins, enzymes, molecular tools, he and others could use them to isolate the genes behind them, to splice those genes one to another and stimulate their activity, to make the tools in ever greater quantity. And then...

“Dotson?”

The voice was Sunglow's. He ignored it. This one, here. This, so. This, ah.

Doublecheck the labels. Add the reagent. Stoppers. In the rack. Stand and turn and open the nearest incubator.

“Dotson?”

Set it down carefully, carefully, quite paranoid about the possibility of

dropping and breaking and undoing all the work and having to wait for more deep-sea and hot-spring bacteria to grow and then to harvest them once more.

And finally turn and smile at golden Sunglow, welcome now that he could spare attention, and say, “Yes?”

“They wanted to see what you did here.”

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker stood behind her shoulder, peering into the lab and

looking as confused as he surely would himself if he visited a physicist's lab. Tamiko Inoue was not with him, but another human female was. Ali Catrone—was that her name? But she was a colleague, not a mate. Their stances held no hint of attachment between her and Mark.

The three visitors pushed into the lab. Behind them were two more strangers he did not recognize. The man was muscular, relaxed, a little shorter than Mark. The woman wore brown hair in a tight coil above a pale face.

“Larry Kentaba,” said Mark. “He’s Johnny Gatling’s replacement. And Sarah Rosnik.” The cogwheel on her breast was pierced by a staff around which twined what seemed to be a vine. He did not say what the woman’s job was, but Dotson thought she seemed to recognize the apparatus in the room.

“Where’s Tamiko?”

“Back on the ship. Her boss is having a staff meeting, and she has to be there even though it’s only over the com.” Mark glanced at the other humans.

“Like Sunglow said. We wanted to see your lab. What do you do?”

“He’s a biologist,” said Sarah Rosnik. “That’s obvious.”

“That covers a lot of ground.” The air Mark blew through his nose seemed to say he did not like the woman.

Dotson nodded. “The plaques tell us so much we cannot understand until we work it out for ourselves. The Gypsies recorded their own biology. They left us a brief survey of what they had found here. But the two accounts were not at the same level of detail. They expected us to study our own world’s life for ourselves.

“Which we have done, of course. But now we have to match what we have learned to what they told us. Perhaps you could help.”

Rosnik lurched backward half a step and froze. That clear signal saddened the Rac. These humans might or might not be Gypsies, but the Racs had already received all the help they would ever get.

“What’s this?”

Ali Catrone was touching the apparatus that ran heavy voltage through his

gels, forcing proteins to migrate, each one at a speed depending on its size and chemical properties. He explained that, added that special dyes could reveal where the proteins wound up in the sheet of gel, and then he held up one of the tubes he had just filled. “Once I know where the proteins are, I can repeat the separation without the dyes and isolate them for further study.”

“What are you looking for?”

He crossed the room, forcing his visitors to move aside. “Here,” he said. On

the wall was a reproduction of a Gypsy plaque, the lines of its engraving far darker than in reality. The humans leaned close to see.

“Jesus!” said Sarah Rosnik. Dotson had no trouble reading her face despite the gulf between their species. Her eyes and lips and nostrils, the sudden paleness of her skin, they all said that she might just have stubbed her toe and looked down to find a disemboweled child.

Mark looked puzzled. “Doctor?”

“I didn’t see this one in those books you got us,” she told him.

“They’re big books. And you haven’t had the time to study them thoroughly.”

“This should have bit me when I saw it. Plasmids.” She spoke the word as if

it were the baptismal name of the Anti-Christ himself. “DNA polymerase. Viral transduction.”

“Genetic engineering. I know those words,” said Larry Kentaba. There was a gun in his hand. “Should I... ?”

Dotson Barbtail recoiled from the group. So did Sunglow. Their danger was beyond all possible mistake, and as the fur on their backs and shoulders rose they retreated side by side against the counter where he had been working. Neither one had any doubt that this Kentaba was indeed Gatling’s replacement.

Nor could they any longer believe that these humans were Gypsies, their Remakers.

Remakers could not possibly react so violently against the signs of their own technology.

The shattering of illusions was almost audible.

“No!” cried Mark, though now his face too bore all the signs of shock and revulsion.

“Not yet,” said Rosnik. “We have to tell...”

“They’ll talk!”

“Do you think that matters?”

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CHAPTER 13

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Just before the laboratory door slammed shut behind them, Marcus Aurelius Hrecker jerked his head and saw the wreckage of the lab's com, the two coons staring after him, their mouths agape, their teeth showing. They looked like animals, the thought struck him. Jumped-up animals with muzzles and fangs and fur and upright ears. Their hands bound behind their backs and anchored to separate legs of the counter. But...

His heart twisted in his chest. "They haven't got long," he said. "Not now."

"Shut up," said Larry Kentaba. He was crouched, leaning forward, swiveling his head, searching the corridor for signs of danger. The gun was no longer in his hand, but a passing coon still gave him a wide berth. When it was far enough away, he hissed, "Don't give them any clues to what we're going to do."

"We can't!"

"That's what we're here for, asshole."

Hrecker slumped. Of course they were. Pursuing the Gypsies and all their

works. Rooting out all the universe's unnatural, genetically engineered contaminants, wherever they might be found. Except for the conveniences back home.

Ali Catrone made a spitting noise. "It was a bigger asshole who pulled his

gun in there. If we'd kept our mouths shut—"

"They'd never have suspected? We wouldn't have had to tie them up? We wouldn't be running now, in case someone finds them?" She nodded, but his back was to her. He didn't see. "It's too late now. Where's the gyppin' staircase?"

"Over there," said Hrecker, pointing.

"Why they don't have elevators," said Sarah Rosnik.

"We're only on the second floor."

"Let's get out of here before they start to shout."

"Should have gagged 'em."

"The door's thick enough."

No one spoke again until they were outdoors, in the car the coons had

trustingly provided for their use, and rolling back through air as honeysuckle-scented as that of any Earthly summer toward their ship. Then Kentaba said, "I should have shot the monsters, not the com. You shouldn't have stopped me."

“We’d never have made it back,” said Hrecker.

“That doesn’t matter. They’re monsters.”

“Of course it matters,” said Sarah Rosnik. “We need to report.”

“We can’t be sure,” said Ali Catrone in a placating tone. “We only think the Gypsies made them.”

“Not that.” Kentaba shuddered theatrically. “That one’s a gengineer himself.” He glared at Hrecker. “You should have spotted that already. That was your job, wasn’t it?”

Hrecker did not object that this was the first time that he had visited Dotson Barbtail’s lab to see any clue or that the coon had said anything at all about his own work. Instead, he said, “No, he isn’t. He’s a biologist, a biochemist, a molecular biologist. He hasn’t mixed any genes.”

“He’s working on it,” said Rosnik. The car hit a bump in the pavement and the caduceus on her breast flashed with sunlight. “He’s collecting the tools.”

“But he isn’t one.”

“Yet. The intent is there, and that is quite enough.”

Many millions of human beings belonged to religions that insisted the

thought of a sin was just as bad as the sin itself, just as worthy of repentance and punishment. What she said did not seem strange to Hrecker.

“We’ll have to kill them all,” said Kentaba.

And Hrecker knew no argument was possible. He was one man alone. He had no

hope of convincing the Engineers to stay their hand, no hope of gaining mercy for a world, a species, a friend—for that, he realized, was how he thought of Dotson Barbtail even though he had first met the coon only days before.

They themselves said the Gypsies had made them. They said the Gypsies had gengineered and grown their Worldtree and filled its treasure chamber with all the secrets of a thousand years of human striving. Human striving, human secrets, secrets it was treason to share with unhuman aliens, made or not made.

Now had they revealed their dream of imitating their makers and becoming gengineers themselves just as soon as they could manage it.

It was no wonder that Engineers like Kentaba and Rosnik and, he supposed, even Catrone had to see them as anathema. It would be no wonder when General Lyapunov declared the pogrom, the jihad, the crusade that would cleanse this world.

Why didn’t he, Marcus Aurelius Hrecker, agree with them? They were expressing the beliefs by which he had lived all his life. The official, pervasive dogma of the Engineers. A dogma that had somehow not gripped him so tightly that he could not sympathize with old ladies holding out mugs of African violets or

men seeking green beauty in frondlike tanks of algae.

Still... Should he have seen what Dotson Barbtail really was? Had there been clues? As the car leaned into the last curve before it left the valley's circle and hit the straightaway leading to the landing field, he looked back over his memories of the last few days.

No. No clues. No mention of the coon's work.

He should have asked sooner.

But he had been focusing elsewhere, and his own mind was tuned more to the physical, not the biological. Certainly not to engineering.

Not that he had spotted the plaque with the quantum physics data, the seed of future Q-tech just as surely as Dotson Barbtail's lab held the seeds of future engineering. That had been Ali Catrone.

He hadn't been paying attention, had he? He had been playing tourist.

He had simply never thought to ask the coon what he himself did.

The smell of charred ground rose around them. The ship loomed over them. The car's brakes squeaked as Kentaba leaned on them.

"Into the ship! They'll figure what's going on soon enough."

Hrecker hurried with the rest. He had liked Dotson Barbtail. "Couldn't we stop them from developing the engineering? Teach them? Swing them our way?"

"Fat chance!" That was Rosnik. "They're imitating their gods. If we tried that, they'd spot us right off as the devil."

"If they haven't already." But Hrecker muttered the words softly, beneath the others' hearing, as they moved through the ship's corridors.

"Missionaries!" said Ali Catrone. "Save the damned heathens!"

Hrecker did not even mutter his fleeting thought that perhaps the coons did not need saving.

The control room door was shut. A pair of robots on the narrow ledge above it were immobile except for their antennae. A guard stood before it and blocked their way when they approached. "Staff meeting," he said.

"This is urgent," Kentaba shouted. "We've got the proof we need."

The door opened, and Tamiko Inoue was there. "I could hear you through

this.” She patted the thick steel of the door. Behind her Hrecker could see a row of video screens showing General Lyapunov, his other aides, the fleet’s captains. The only other person present in the flesh was Captain Quigg.

“What have they got?” asked the General’s voice. He looked very patient.

Larry Kentaba pushed past Tamiko. As soon as he was fully in the control room, he began to talk.

* * *

“We know enough,” said Captain Quigg. “They’re trying to become engineers themselves. It hardly matters whether the Gypsies made them or not.”

“But they did,” said one of the General’s aides, a face Hrecker did not recognize. “This world is so polluted—“

“Burn it,” said another. “We brought warheads enough.”

General Lyapunov shook his head.

“How can we do that?” asked Ali Catrone. “I’d feel guilty for the rest of my life.”

Someone laughed.

Tamiko was quick to say, “That wouldn’t leave much for us to use later on.

And it’s a pretty world.”

“Just the coons then.”

Hrecker made a face. “Our own history... We don’t remember our Hitlers fondly.”

“Because he was wrong,” said a ship captain. “He killed innocents.”

No one had to say aloud that engineers were deliberate, cold-blooded, malicious evil, their products damaged goods to be destroyed in the name of quality control.

“They might have evolved naturally,” Hrecker added. “I’ve seen the animals they came from.” He looked at Tamiko. “You too.” She nodded. “They’re as smart as chimps. Maybe smarter.”

“But they didn’t evolve,” said Tamiko.

He sighed, looked down. Why did she surprise him? He had known all along

that she was more in tune with the Engineer ideology than he. If she were not, she would never have been picked as a general’s aide. “They didn’t have the chance,” he said. “But the Gypsies didn’t give them that much!”

“They gave them enough.”

“They only moved them a few millennia ahead.”

“That gyppin’ tower full of plaques,” said Captain Quigg. “Knowledge. Science and technology.”

“We could take all that away,” said another captain. “We have the guns.”

“As long as we leave them their lives,” said Hrecker. “And their world. It was theirs before the Gypsies came, after all.

“Flatten it all,” said the aide on the General’s right. “Every building, every road and mine, every factory and school. Back to the stone age, and let them climb back all on their own.”

“We could always exterminate them later,” said the aide on the General’s left. “If we decide we want the place for ourselves. But it would surely serve us better to keep the coons alive. As bait. If the Gypsies ever come back to check on them, we could have a trap waiting. And then...”

No one suggested that the coons would still have their memories.

“The tower, yes,” said Hrecker. He wished they could simply leave. “Hunt out the plaques and their copies. Burn all the books that discuss what’s on them. But leave them what they’ve done themselves.”

“Impossible,” said Tamiko. “Books are too easy to hide.”

“You’d give them too much time to organize resistance.”

“Easier to—“

“But—“

“Enough.” General Lyapunov did not have to shout. The word and the tone of command were all he needed. “There is nothing to debate.”

He looked through the screen of the com at Captain Quigg. “Are all your people aboard?”

“One team is at the university. Another is looking over the launch facilities.”

“Get them back. Immediately. Then seal the Bonami. There may be an attack.”

Captain Quigg wasted no time in transmitting the recall signal. “Then...”

The General nodded. “The Ajax itself will take out the space station. The rest of the fleet will address the coons’ military and industrial facilities.

When no more resistance is possible...”

This was their mission. Hrecker knew it, had known it from the start.

But now his eyes burned. His throat clenched. His stomach twisted.

He hung his head to hide what some might see as signs of treason and left the room.

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CHAPTER 14

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Sunglow’s voice was pitched higher than Dotson Barbtail had ever heard it, keening, shrieking, grating like too-hard chalk on slate. “We are dead!” she cried. “All dead! They are the enemy the Gypsies fled, the enemy they warned us of. They will destroy us all, tailed and tailless gone, extinct, the Worldtree felled.” She sobbed betrayal, fear, and grief.

Her eyes were shut, clamped tight, closing out the world that had turned on her.

When she paused for breath, she struggled.

Dotson Barbtail heard her tone but not—or just barely—her words. He was

staring, watching her hands and wrists twist against each other, the muscles of her arms bulging beneath the fur, the skin tearing, the blood. The humans had bound their hands behind their backs, tied them to legs of his work counter. Sunglow was fastened to the next leg over to his right.

He wished he could help her, free her, free them both. But his hands were useless. There was no way he could reach her bonds with his teeth. There were no tools.

But...

There had been no rope, no cord. They had used the roll of packing tape he

kept on top of the freezer. That was plastic. And on the counter, there, in back, behind his back and toward his left, was a bottle of acetone.

He used the solvent for removing labels from glassware. But it could do more than that...

Some plastics acetone would not touch. Some it would dissolve as quickly as a summer day would melt a snowflake. The tape was like that.

He got his feet beneath his butt, swore when he stepped on his tail, twitched it aside, and pushed. His bound wrists slid up the counter leg until they were stopped halfway, where the drawers began.

They had checked, hadn't they? Nothing but paper and cloth within reach.

He gripped the leg tightly in his hands. He grunted, strained, and twisted.

His shoulders shrieked in protest, but he did not give up. One leg was up. A hip. Over the edge of the counter.

The bottle he sought was still behind him, but his foot could reach it.

Couldn't it?

No. His toes reminded him that there was more than one bottle. There were several, and toes could not read labels.

His shoulders creaked. His claws scrabbled on the countertop, against the wall behind, against the bottles' glass.

Sunglow's eyes were open now. Her voice was silent. She was crouching—lucky she, no tail to step on—twisting, straining to see what he was doing.

He did not try to explain. Instead he closed his eyes and struggled to visualize his own workspace. How many bottles?

"Four," said Sunglow as if she could read his mind.

But which was the one he wanted? He cursed. He thought he knew this

countertop as well as he knew Gypsy Blossom's petals or Sunglow's fur.

"The one on the end is pink."

There, he thought. Then it had to be one of the other three, didn't it? He

hooked them with his foot, careful not to tip and roll and smash—though that might be just as useful—and tugged them toward the counter's edge.

"Ahh." He rolled off the counter and relieved the strain on his shoulders. He twisted to see the bottles, and yes. That one. One foot could tug it to where his teeth could grip the top. He could set it on the floor. And now his hands...

Fumes stung his nose and made his eyes water furiously. Sunglow blinked and cried, "What are you doing?" as frantically as she had shrieked, "All dead!"

Liquid sloshed on his hands and wrists, cold, stinging where he had abraded the skin. More fumes flooded the room and made him gasp. Tape loosened its grip. He was free.

A moment later, so was Sunglow.

The first thing he did was open the nearest window. Then he plugged his

freezer and incubators in once more. He did not think they had warmed or cooled enough to suffer any harm.

"You think that matters? There'll be nothing here tomorrow. Or next month.

Not you. Not me. Not even the Worldtree!"

"Maybe so," he said. But he could not simply give up.

"Of course so!" she shrieked. She grabbed the cord he had just plugged in

and yanked. He seized her hands and pried her fingers loose, crying, "No!" as

shrilly as she screamed and sobbed, "It's useless! We're dead! They'll—"

Someone pounded a hand against the lab door and pushed it partway open.

"What's going on?"

Sunglow tore herself away from Dotson's hands and yanked the door. It boomed when it slammed the wall. "They're not Gypsies!" she screamed at the startled Racs in the hall. The nearest, Kinky Thinson, was a student who sometimes helped Dotson in his work; his tail bent twice near its root. "They tied us up and went away!"

And there was Senior Hightail, fur frosted gray, whiskers white, growly calm. "Who is she, Dotson? What's going on?"

Dotson ignored the first question. "The humans were just here. They saw what I do, and suddenly..." He

shrugged and gulped and tried to smooth his voice. “They tied us up and fled.”

“They’re lying,” someone in the hallway said.

“Why?”

“The Farshorn insulted them.”

“They took offense.”

“She couldn’t help it.”

“It wasn’t that,” said Dotson. Why did so many people think the tailless were no better than children or savages?

“He said, ‘Genetic engineering.’” Sunglow too sounded resentful. “Then he had a gun. He wanted to kill us.”

“Yes,” said Dotson.

The murmur in the hall grew high and tense. “Not Gypsies,” came a worried voice. That much was now obvious.

“No!” Or was it?

Silence, broken only when Kinky Thinson whispered, “What will they do?”

“They are the enemy.”

“The Founder said...”

The air filled with the acrid, involuntary emissions of panic and arousal, flight and fight.

“Destroy us all.”

“Can they do it?”

“They’ll try,” said Senior Hightail. His voice too no longer growled, saying

plainly that he thought it plain enough, the possibility very real. “It doesn’t matter whether they succeed. They’ll destroy so much.” He fell silent for a moment. Then he stepped forward and laid one hand on Dotson’s shoulder. “I’ll pass the word. The government. The military. They’ll know what to do, or what to try. You go home.”

“We’re dead!” screamed Sunglow, and several of the Racs in the hall echoed her cry.

Dotson closed the door once more.

“We’re dead!”

“Not yet,” he said, and his voice was somehow calmer. “We can’t just lie down for them. We have to do everything we can.”

“We can’t!”

“Shh. Easy. Easy.” He tried to calm her as he checked his electric cords once more, wishing there were more he could do for her, for him, for all his kind. But there wasn’t.

Futility welled up in him, muffling every sense, every thought. All he could do was tug Sunglow by the hand past the Racs who lingered still outside his office, saying in answer to their insistent, anxious questions, “I don’t know what they’re going to do. Yes, I’m scared. Of course we have to fight. I don’t know how.”

He kept her hand in his. He tugged her across the darkening valley, past beds of moss and banks of honeysuckle. He turned to look at the Worldtree, high against the purple sky, emblem of creation and purpose and destiny.

Already their fellow Racs were spilling from apartment buildings into the street. Their voices sang, their pelts smelled of interrupted baths and dinner preparations and outright fear, their heads bent skyward, searching for signs that the rumors their friends had called them with were true. Or not. Preferably not.

Surely crowds were also in the streets of Worldtree City above the bluffs, and a kindred din and reek were rising. But Dotson could hear no hint of that. The growing crowds around him filled his ears with their noise and blocked his path even, when he finally reached there, Sunglow still in tow, on his building’s very stoop.

“What’s going on?” The voice rang from the pot near the window even as the lights flicked on to dispel the advancing dark. “Are they leaving? Are the real Gypsies here too? I can see the space station and the fleet, and nothing’s happening. What is it?”

When the bot ran down, Dotson crossed the room to crane his neck and peer upward himself. Yes, the space station and the human fleet were visible, glinting sparks in the black sky. Just the other night, they had been above the roof, visible only from outdoors. Even synchronous orbits, he knew, did not look perfectly motionless from the ground. They shifted north and south, drifting, oscillating. And there they were tonight, clear of the roof’s edge by a finger’s width.

How interesting, he thought, and he was just beginning to realize how numb he was when Gypsy Blossom spoke again: “What’s going on? Tell me!”

Obedient at last, he told the bot what had happened in his lab.

In the ensuing silence, the anxious, fearful cries of the crowds outside the window seemed very loud.

“We’re overreacting,” said Sunglow. She both smelled and sounded desperate.

“We have to be. Jumping to conclusions. Misinterpreting what they said.”

“Then why did they aim a gun at us? Why did they tie us up?” He grimaced as if in pain and watched the bot do the same. How many Racs, like her now, would decide the truth was too painful to accept? How many would deny the evidence?

How many would simply turn numb and let come whatever came, even death, disaster, the destruction of all their world?

After all, the best any Rac could do was to stand in the street and watch the sky. Or perhaps they could go to the landing field and stare at the great spaceship there. Or go home and stare numbly from the window.

She shrugged. She didn’t know how many would react her way, his way, any way at all. She didn’t care. “But they’re nice people. Some of them, anyway. Why would they... ?”

“They are the enemies of our Remakers. They think Remaking is a crime.”

“I was right,” said Gypsy Blossom. “I just was not suspicious enough.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Dotson stiffly. What difference did it make? “But what will they do now?”

“Nothing,” said Sunglow. “Why should they? We are not their enemy.”

That was when the voices in the street outside began to scream.

Dotson leaned forward, his forehead against the glass.

Sunglow was beside him, staring out at the crowd that stared upward and pointed and moaned and sobbed.

Together they too craned their necks, looking for...

The human fleet, nine glints against the dark, was still there.

Where the bright spark of the infant space station had been there was now a flare of light.

“Nooooooo.”

Dotson was not sure whether that was his voice or Sunglow’s, indoors or out.

A faint click announced that Gypsy Blossom had just used the remote to turn on the VC.

“...clear explosion,” said a voice that cracked and broke behind waves of static. “There can be no survivors.”

Dotson turned around and felt his ears go flat against his skull. The VC screen was filled with a trembling, blinking face, its fur disheveled by fingers that pinched at cheeks and brow and chin, its own ears pressed back in a reflex response to dire threat that went back to the wild Racs from which the Gypsies had remade them.

“We thought—“ The newscaster shook his head abruptly, desperately, and stopped. Everyone knew what everyone had thought. He took a deep, deep breath. Again. And again, hyperventilating. “They destroyed the station. No warning.

They fired a nuclear missile.”

The face was replaced by an image of the Cascade. A round port opened in its hull. Gases billowed. A metal cylinder appeared, moving slowly, faster, faster yet, streaking invisibly toward its target.

“They saw it coming. We saw it coming, with our surveillance cameras. There was no warning.”

The image cut off in a burst of static. The screen was black.

Sunglow had turned away from the VC, back to the window. Now she said,

“Look.”

Dotson looked first at her. Yes, her ears were also flat, and the fur of her neck and shoulders and back was beginning to rise, increasing her apparent bulk. The harness she wore now cut deep fissures in her outline.

He looked out the window, out and up and deep into blackest night, and he could feel his own pelt responding to her example, to the hormonal surges of anger, fear, and panic, to the need for all-out battle. A prickling beneath his tail announced the discharge of scent a moment before his nose confirmed the news. His lips curled back involuntarily to expose his teeth. He gasped.

The glints that were the human fleet’s nine ships were brighter, spouting incandescent flame, moving.

“They’re moving now,” said the VC’s voice. The picture was still absent.

“Coming down, out of orbit. We don’t know what they plan.”

They were bringing doom. Bringing the doom the Gypsies themselves had feared and fled. Bringing the doom of which the Founder himself had warned.

“We can’t run, can we?” asked Sunglow quietly. No one answered.

The image showed the Bonami at the landing field.

“We’ve tried to ask them. But they’re not taking calls. Not in space. Not down here.”

One ship cut its engines, and then another. Another. They kept on moving, diverging now. Another. They had picked targets on the ground below them, and they were coming, coming... Dotson wished he

could measure and compute their trajectories. Different trajectories, he was sure. Different targets.

Were any of them heading for the valley, the Worldtree? For him and Sunglow?

He could not tell, and if he could, there was nothing he could do.

One arm crept around Sunglow's back even as she clutched at his own chest.

They leaned against each other, ears still back, fur erect, breathing hard, their nostrils filled with the scent of their fear, staring at the crowd outside, at the sky, at moving sparks and course correction flames and distant stars.

That crowd outside was silent now, silent except for the rhythmic sough of hyperventilation: "Huh! Huh! Huh!" Hands clutched at hands and shoulders, contact, saying, "We are together." Every individual in the street stared upward, teeth bared, ears back, fur pushing out their boundaries. Even the children, their eyes wide with terror, bristled in the vain hope that they could bluff their foe into retreating, head down, tail between its legs, gone to seek some easier prey.

But humans didn't have tails, did they?

And why did Dotson think they didn't bluff worth a damn?

The starship glints were gone, occluded by night and world, rooftops and

bluffs. Even Worldtree and Worldtree Center.

"We'll fight, won't we?" said Gypsy Blossom.

Of course they would. The teeth and bristling pelts on every Rac in sight

insisted there was no other option. They could not flee as the Gypsies had. They could not hide among the stars. And no truce was possible with creatures who hated and feared and refused to talk.

"What with?" asked Sunglow.

The waiting Racs still did not move. The humans were coming. It was only a matter of time.

The only question was, "What then?"

And every Rac thought he or she knew the answer.

The first missiles marched a line of fire across Worldtree City above the

bluffs, through neighborhoods of single-family homes and apartment buildings, through parks and factories, through night-vacant schools. Behind them came the thundering roar and shriek of spacecraft in atmosphere, rockets thrusting to balance against the tug of gravity. More missiles struck in the valley, tearing craters where moss and honeysuckle grew, stripping roofs from Worldtree Center's libraries and laboratories and offices and halls of worship, crumbling walls, striking, striking, striking even in the ring of buildings nearest the bluffs.

They could no longer hear any voice attempting to narrate the progress of catastrophe. The VC set was silent, its screen dark. Every broadcast station on the planet had surely died in the first moments of the bombardment. So had the power stations, for the only lights now visible in the night were the fires that bloomed in gaudy flame and pungent smoke and noise and noise and noise. Rubble rained from the sky and broken masonry flowed across the pavements. Shrapnel flew and struck and sliced into both walls and flesh. Sound was boom and crash and scream of pain and terror.

Few died in the collapsing buildings, for nearly every Rac who lived in the valley was out of doors, watching the sky and wondering when the attack would come. Until the moment when they knew.

Thousands died in the streets, struck down by bricks and shingles and beams of wood and steel. The gutters ran red with their blood.

More thousands died from the blows of shock waves emanating from nearby explosions. Others died of simple shock, unable to accept what their senses were telling them.

“It’s gone.” Sunglow’s voice was stunned. The window frame before her was empty, its glass shattered and fallen to the street below as a million dagger shards, but that was not what she meant. Beyond, visible past the wreckage that had once been a street of homes and shops and dormitories, lit by flame from the valley and the city, was the Worldtree. Around its feet were a few small buildings. Old structures. The oldest, built of massive stone, used now for little more than storage.

Almost all the rest of Worldtree Center was rubble.

One end of the Great Hall was among the few exceptions.

Something flickered in the sky. A flash of light stunned their night vision.

An explosion shook their building. There were creaks and groans, the shrieks of tearing wood and steel.

The wall before them fell away in dust and rubble.

The floor tilted.

The structure that had sheltered them so far snapped and popped and leaned.

Dotson swore and grabbed his mate, but there was nothing he could do but try

to balance on the floor beneath him as it thrust from the collapsing building and rode a wave of rubble into the street. But the floor flexed and buckled and cracked, and when it struck the broken wall across the street, its sudden lurching halt threw them tumbling and sliding across the shattered wood.

There was blood on his hands when Dotson rose to his knees. He studied his palms and wrists in the fireglow. Splinters.

“Sunglow?” Where... ? There. Sobbing. Sitting on one haunch, the other dark and shiny-wet with her own blood. Plucking fragments of flooring from her hide.

“I’m all right.”

There was no sign of Gypsy Blossom until he looked toward the pile of rubble

that had stopped their ride. She was tumbled against a block of masonry, but she was alive. One leg was bent, the other straight. Her arms were groping for a grip on something, anything, solid and unmoving and trustworthy.

“No!” Dotson seized her hands and winced at the strength of her grip. “Don’t move. We’ll carry you.”

“No,” she said. “I’m okay.”

“But your pot’s broken.” A few ceramic shards still clung to the dirt surrounding her feet. The rest were scattered in the rubble ahead.

“I’m bleeding too. But that’s just splinters, just like you.” She pulled against his hands until she was sitting up. Then she bent and began to paw the dirt from her feet, combing her fingers through her roots. As the roots came free, they coiled and retracted to form a neat ruff around her calves. “It feels right,” she said. “Like it was time anyway.”

Sunglow was on her feet now, stepping cautiously toward them. “Can you walk?”

“I don’t know.” A slender spear of wood jutted from her upper arm. She tugged it free, and blood as red as any animal’s dripped from the wound.

“We can still carry you.”

The bot shook her head. “I’d only slow you down.”

“Where can we go?”

The light was growing brighter, and waves of heat were beating down. Dotson

looked up, shading his eyes against a great roaring, thundering ball of incandescent fire descending toward them. One of the human starships was landing in the valley.

They could not stay where they were, could they? An hour before, there had been buildings here. A street filled with waiting, watching Racs. Now there was only rubble and bodies and screaming, wailing survivors.

A sky filled with alien thunder and the distinctive scream of Rac fighters, in the air at last, ready to attack the enemy with their own cannons and missiles.

There would be ground-to-air missiles too, erupting from buried emplacements prepared against Farshorn attack. Finally the humans would feel the bite of their victims.

But the glare and roar continued, never faltering. Explosions lit the air above the bluffs, and the screams of fighters died. More explosions marked the deaths of missiles. The air reeked of dust and blood and the chemistry of murder.

“The tunnels,” said Dotson Barbtail. “In the bluffs.” Where natural caverns, worn as water seeped through rock shattered by the impact that created the valley, had been shaped into passageways and

storerooms and parking garages.

“Let’s go.” He pointed toward the mouth of the nearest tunnel, Turnstone. A black oval rimmed by polished slabs of stone, it was as visible as if the sun were standing at high noon. “That way. Run.”

Gypsy Blossom took her first awkward steps, arms windmilling to keep her balance, going to one knee when the broken floor sagged beneath her.

“Grab her arm,” said Sunglow, and they did. One of them supported the bot on each side. They lifted her bodily across gaps in the rubble. They boosted her over obstacles.

As they neared the bluff, the ground smoothed out. They stumbled over a curb, and there was pavement beneath their feet. They were on the road that entered the tunnel to carry traffic above the bluff, to Worldtree City and beyond.

But Worldtree City was now as ruined as the valley and Worldtree Center. The tunnel no longer led to a passageway but to shelter, just as it had long ago, when the Racs themselves had warred over this valley.

The bot shook them free, staggered, and ran on her own. She was not as fast as they, but she was fast enough.

It was only a moment more before all three reached the cavern and shelter.

Dotson was not surprised to see they were not alone.

He was surprised at how few Racs were gathered just within the tunnel mouth

to watch the destruction of their Jerusalem.

Had so many died?

Or had they fled deeper within the sheltering rock?

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CHAPTER 15

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When Ali Catrone lifted her head from the screens and indicators of her drive room station, her eyes looked haunted. Her lips were a grim line, her brows drawn together above dark shadows, her gestures abrupt and jerky.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker felt no more cheerful than she. Yet both kept their attention on the displays before them, their fingers moving jerkily to keep the flow of power to the Bonami's weapons systems flowing smoothly and the ship itself poised for immediate liftoff if the tide of battle should somehow turn.

Though "battle" was hardly the right term. The destruction that raged outside the ship was almost wholly one-sided. Human missiles rained down while the coons scrambled and fled and died like the denizens of a Martian city cracked open by a quake. There was no resistance in the valley other than a few brave fools with rifles and shoulder-mounted missile launchers, a single platoon of useless tanks, finally a first squadron of military jets. Elsewhere the story might be different.

They were the only two in the drive room. She was here because the drives were her responsibility, he because his only ship-based experience was on the shifter board. The rest of the drive crew were at weapons stations, scanning the skies and ground for attackers and selecting targets both for defensive particle beams and for offensive missiles.

The demand for power fluctuated from moment to moment, soaring when the ship's particle beams were fired. They could destroy an incoming missile in milliseconds or attack nearby ground forces. They could be used on distant targets only in space, where there was no air to ionize and absorb the beam.

The ship boomed and rocked and trembled as the Engineers' own weapons shook the ground on which it sat. It rang when shrapnel flew from exploded buildings and vehicles and struck its skin. Yet no alarms rang or hooted to signal penetration of the hull. The Bonami and all her sister ships had been well built.

Hrecker wished he were a religious man, for then he could pray. But that wish did not distract his attention from the shifter board. He smoothed response curves and adjusted controls, struggling to keep the probability field confined within the ship, within the field. If it swelled too much, he knew, it might encourage a missile to strike more squarely or find the hull's weakest point. It might even permit a missile to tunnel through the hull. Either way, the results would be catastrophic.

He also made sure the basic underpinning of the ship's power generator functioned efficiently and reliably. Ali Catrone controlled power levels and was prepared to shunt every terajoule to the drives themselves the moment Captain Quigg demanded flight.

Tamiko was in the main control room, in constant touch with General Lyapunov and the other aides and captains, coordinating the attack on the coon civilization.

Did she too wish she could pray? He stole a glance at Catrone. She did, he thought. At least, there was a tiny cross held snug against the hollow of her throat by a slender chain. But for what? Success in their effort to destroy all the dreams of a people, a species? She was an Engineer, after all. Anti-Gypsy. Anti-engineering. Yet he thought she might not be quite as vindictive and destructive as many others.

Or would she pray for survival in the face of the coons' violent resistance?

Or for absolution?

The screens told the tale. The fleet's missiles pounded cities and mines, refineries and factories, universities and hospitals. Mushroom clouds rose above military bases and airfields and ships at sea. Smoke billowed, flame glowed and gouted, and when the wind blew vision clear, there were ruins, rubble, destruction, death. Particle beams brought down every coon fighter that took the air and nearly every missile that they launched. Hrecker felt quite awed by the scale of human power.

The destruction was hardly total, for most of the missiles' warheads were not nuclear and the human arsenal was not unlimited. But it was vast enough for terror, vast enough to make resistance impossible, vast enough to force the coons to accept new masters. Vast enough to make the coons hate everything that smelled of human.

The ship shook once more. He almost grinned at that proof that they had not yet quelled all resistance.

But the ground was trembling less. The meters showed fewer power surges. The screens showed smoke already dissipating.

The coons had lost. Of course they had.

Easy meat.

The humans had won. Of course they had.

It was over, and human ships were on the ground, the Cascade and Gorbachev

beside the Bonami on the landing field, the Bolivar, Drake, Saladin, and Toledo squatting in the valley. The Ajax, too big and fragile to land, was still in orbit.

A speaker crackled into life, and the voice of General Lyapunov said, "We have won. The coons no longer have a space station or launch facilities for their rockets. They have no factories or military bases. Their ability to resist us is at an end. Soon they will be no threat either to us or to our descendants."

The General paused as if for breath. When he resumed, his voice was caustic. "If any doubters remain within our fleet, let me assure them. We cannot afford to leave these alien creatures alone. They are far too vicious to trust."

The screen showed massive concrete slabs exploding from some farmer's field. Smoke gushed out of the ground, and then a pointed cylinder slid into view, rising, accelerating, adjusting course, and finally merging with a human starship in a titanic explosion that left only an incandescent cloud.

The General sounded very satisfied when he said, "They actually used nuclear warheads against us. But only two got past our defenses." There was a moment of silence. "The Pizarro and the Villa. We will remember them forever, and we will have vengeance on their treacherous killers."

The screen now held a different image. A line of tiny print identified its source as the Saladin. It showed the tower the coons called the Worldtree rising above a shattered Worldtree Center.

Hrecker did not feel victorious.

He looked across the room at Ali Catrone. She was rubbing her forehead with

the fingers of one hand. She did not either.

Neither of them dared to put into words their guilt and shame, or the thought that the loss of the Pizarro and the Villa was richly deserved.

“Remember that treachery,” said General Lyapunov. “The coons undoubtedly have more in store. They must have hidden weapons caches. They may even have more nuclear missiles. We must therefore remain constantly alert.”

He paused once more. “For a while. Soon enough they will tell us where everything is hidden. We can be sure of that.”

“They cannot win,” said Catrone stiffly. “They never had a chance.”

Hrecker only nodded.

* * *

The roof and one wall of the building were colorful fabric panels taken from a factory where the coons had made sails and tents before the humans came. The other walls were thick masonry, the stone blocks only crudely shaped but so fitted and mortared together that they had survived the explosions that brought down nearly everything else.

Coons had labored under the stern eyes of armed human overseers to clear the building of broken furniture, crates of records, bad paintings and sculptures, and other detritus of civilization. Now they labored outdoors, clearing rubble, exposing whatever rooms and hallways had not been crushed or shattered, burrowing into the remnants of the Great Hall, seeking and setting aside the Gypsy plaques that had been stored away or on display.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker leaned on the handle of his sledgehammer and fished a rag out of his hip pocket. He wiped the sweat from his face and neck and chest. He stared up at the valley’s rim, where some trees still stood among the ruins. And there, where the bluffs fell toward the pass between the valley and the landing field, were groves, remnants of the forest that must once have covered all the area. A place of shade and comfort.

The weather had turned hotter, and it was especially hot here, among the shattered stones, beneath the fabric that held in the stifling air even when a breeze made the roof and wall billow and flutter. He thought that he deserved this job. So did every other Engineer on the eight remaining ships. Yet sheer muscle-aching labor and hothouse sweat hardly seemed enough to expiate a sin as enormous as the one they had already committed.

The plaques, both whole and broken, were brought into this building and dumped on the stone floor before him. He smashed them, pulverized them, ensured that they could never again be used for anything but sand and gravel. A number of the best specimens had already been crated and loaded onto the Bolivar for return to Earth and display as trophies.

Against one wall of the room were six cages built of metal bars. Each one held a coon, three each of tailed and tailless. They too would go to Earth. For now, they only watched the horror he was committing. Their eyes glowed with anger. They said nothing.

Not far from the cages was a jumbled pile of battered armor and antique weaponry. That too was destined to go home with them. More souvenirs.

“Shit.” Eric Silber was squatting over the results of his latest efforts, stirring the fragments. He drew several aside. They were large enough to show fractions of what had once been inscribed upon them. “Hit ‘em again.”

Hrecker obliged.

This time Silber was more satisfied. He smirked and used a broom to sweep

the pile of powdered plaques under the edge of the canvas to join the ruins outside. The smoke of burning books and archives pushed past the cloth and made both men cough.

“Gyppin’ coons,” said Silber. “They ought to let us have some fun.”

Hrecker knew what he meant. Shortly after the landing, Silber and several

other Engineers had taken guns and gone coon hunting.

“I mean,” said Silber. He touched the holster that still hung from his belt. “It’s not like we really need to do this. Kill ‘em all, and it doesn’t matter a damn if we leave the goddam plaques intact.”

“We’re knocking them back to the stone age,” said Hrecker. “Turning them into slaves. That’s not enough?”

Silber stared at him coldly. “You’re a sympathizer. I ought to report you.”

He shrugged. “Go ahead.” He felt that there was nothing they could do to him

that he did not deserve. This place, this Worldtree Center, had been both university and temple, a center of tradition and learning and worship all at once, and he felt that in aiding its destruction he was committing sacrilege as great as any Vandal newly come to Rome.

The canvas bulged where it met the wall, and a coon stepped into the room. He wore the black-marked yellow cloak and cap of the priesthood, and the toes of one bare foot were crusted with dried blood. His fur was gray marked with brown spots and swirls.

“Where did you come from?” asked Silber.

The alien coon said nothing. He only stared at them, at the cages and the

prisoners they held, at the sledgehammer standing on its head beside Hrecker’s leg, at the broom now propped against the wall, at the stone floor streaked with the dusty legacy of creation and history.

“A basement someplace,” guessed Hrecker. He couldn’t possibly have come from beyond the ruins that surrounded what the coons called the Worldtree. If he had walked across the valley, the guards would

have promptly added him to the work gangs. Or the trenches full of bodies.

“Talk, goddammit.” Silber unsnapped the flap of his holster. “What do you want?”

The canvas bulged again, this time to admit a naked coon with a basket of plaques. She wore not even a belt, much less the straps that had been normal attire just days before. She froze when she saw the priest.

“Right here, boy.” Silber pointed. “Just like before.”

Her head jerked sideways. She stared, wide-eyed and trembling, at the

priest. She did not obey until he bowed his head as if in resignation. Only then did the ceramic plaques crash onto the floor. Several broke in two or four or more.

“Hit ‘em, Mark.” Silber stared at the priest and licked his lips avidly.

When Hrecker did not move, he drew his gun and pointed it at the human. “I

said, hit ‘em.”

Hrecker blinked. Tears ran down his cheeks. But he lifted the sledgehammer into the air.

“No,” said the priest. “Please. Don’t destroy them all.”

Now the gun was aimed at the coon. “Are you trying to tell us what we should do? Are you?”

“Please—“ His arms rose and spread, hands open, begging.

The slave—there was no other word—who had brought the plaques cringed.

Hrecker looked at his hammer. He looked at the back of the other man’s head.

He wished he dared to...

“You’re like rot in a piece of fruit,” said Silber. “We have to cut it out and throw it away before it spoils all the rest.”

“The rest of what?” But Hrecker did not say that aloud. He knew the answer.

The rest of the universe.

The gun barked.

The cages rattled. The prisoners coughed and keened and froze when the gun shifted in their direction.

Silber poked the priest’s body with one foot. He bent and picked up the yellow cap that had given the coon the appearance of black crown and ears. He put it on his own head.

He took the cloak as well, made a face at the bullet hole and bloodstain that now marred it, and draped it over one shoulder. Then he pointed his gun at the other coon, the slave. "Get that garbage out of here."

* * *

He had known their room was small, but it had not felt too small until after he had been able to step outside the ship. Belt Center 83 had been roomier. So had the tunnels of Mars. But both had surrounded him with walls, and when he had walked on Mars's red surface, he had remained hemmed in by a protective suit.

He had lived in such places almost all his life. He had been used to them, comfortable in them, uncomplaining and even happy. Here, on Tau Ceti IV, the Gypsies' First-Stop, the air was bounded only by dirt and vacuum and held in place by gravity. The only walls were the horizons.

The same had been true of Earth, of course. But that world's air smelled far more used. Its population was immensely greater, its industry far more extensive, its smokes and fumes more pervasive. They had been so since long before the Gypsies had ever dreamed of making coons. Or Racs. Since long before anyone had even dreamed of Gypsies.

"Why?" he asked. He was sitting naked on the edge of the bunk, his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands.

"Why what?" Tamiko was two feet away, dropping her shirt into the laundry drawer. Her skin was golden, her breasts small and pointed, her buttocks tight, and those aspects of her now interested him not at all.

"We're destroying so much," he said. "Their space program and industry, the plaques and libraries. I can understand that. But..." He shook his head and told her about Silber's shooting of the priest and looting of the corpse.

"That's just murder," he added. "Mindless violence. Why do we have to be like that?"

She turned to face him. "What's the matter? Depressed?"

"Murder," he said again. He hated the thought of what he had helped to do, hated himself, hated...

"Maybe you should have gone back to Mars."

"Maybe so." Her? Could he hate her too?

"It's necessary, you know. We can't leave them here, ready to move into space and attack us or unleash more monsters."

“We could have tried to make them friends and allies. That would keep us safe enough. And we could have converted them, made them Engineers.”

Her laugh was a chopped-off bark. “Hah. When their gods are Gypsies? Besides, this is better for them. When they rebuild, they’ll have a civilization all their own, uncontaminated by those heretics.”

Hrecker wondered. Surely they would remember. “They’ll remember us.” And want revenge.

“We’ll keep an eye on them. We’ll come back. We’ll purify them again if we have to.”

“Murder.”

“You shouldn’t be so upset. It’s not like what Silber did was unique. There have been a lot more deaths.”

He nodded.

“We don’t even know how many died in the first attack.”

“Or the coon hunts.”

She made a face. “Those really weren’t necessary, were they?”

Though they continued, he thought, in different form. General Lyapunov had

despatched teams to scour both continents, searching out the aliens’ remaining heavy industry and armories, whatever might serve to revive too soon the space program or fuel a drive for vengeance. There would be more missiles, more gunshots, more deaths.

“Do you think Dotson and Sun glow are still alive?” he asked. “They seemed like good people. Even if they were coons.”

She shrugged. “They lived in the valley, didn’t they? We pretty well shredded the place.”

“So they’re probably dead. Do you approve of that?”

She hesitated before she nodded. “Not really. But if it’s necessary. For the sake of our mission and our destiny. Even that.”

Hrecker got to his feet and opened the narrow cupboard in which he kept his own clothes.

She struck a pose beside the bunk. “Coming to bed?”

“No.” He didn’t look at her. He couldn’t. All he could do was select fresh underwear and shirt and pants and socks and begin once more to dress.

“Maybe later?”

“Maybe.”

But he thought that he might use the other bunk.

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CHAPTER 16

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Few Racs appreciated just how much empty space was concealed within the bluffs surrounding the valley. They knew of the parking areas where they kept their personal vehicles, and they knew of the long switchbacking ramps that led up to Worldtree City. The natural and artificial caverns that earlier generations had used for granaries and armories and even dwelling places were largely forgotten despite childhood school trips and occasional “Did you know?” news stories.

Those caverns amounted to a small city, now populated by refugees from both the valley and the city that had stood above the bluffs. Fortunately, there was no great shortage of food and water. The water came from reservoirs, deeper caverns that had first been sealed and filled not long after the Gypsies left First-Stop. The food had been stored in those caverns that were still in use as warehouses. There was not enough to keep all the Racs who had lived in the valley and in Worldtree City alive for long. But the local population was now much smaller than it had been a few days before. Used carefully, the food on hand would last for months.

“I can smell rain.” Dotson Barbtail stood on a slab of rock human missiles had pried from the face of the bluff. Before him was a mound of more rock and soil, fractured masonry and twisted steel, wooden beams and tree limbs, that blocked the roadway and nearly plugged the Turnstone tunnel. A scrap of bloody cloth was impaled on one of the branches. A hand curled around a piece of wood that must once have been the arm of a chair. The space above the mound let in the scent of moisture and provided a glimpse of clouds.

“Maybe it will be enough to douse the fires.”

The air also carried a mix of stench that spoke of spilled honeysuckle

nectar, broken sewer pipes, bodies already rotting, vermin wastes accumulated within now-tumbled walls, and dust. The vapors of the human explosives provided an acrid grace note.

Behind him voices wailed and keened and sobbed. Grief and anger, rage and fury, indignation and outrage had swept the refugees like an emotional firestorm all night.

Children huddled in silent twos and threes, eyes huge in the dim light of the tunnel. They were staring at Gypsy Blossom, and a few were pawing at their faces just as Sunglow had done when she first saw the bot. A mother cradled the body of her infant in her arms. Her mate closed his eyes and aimed his gaping muzzle into the darkness overhead as if to howl, though he made no sound at all.

“They don’t know we’re here,” said Sunglow. Her voice was higher and tighter than Dotson had ever heard it, but that did not surprise him. His was no calmer, nor any other Rac’s. He could not believe he or any member of his kind would ever again hear the growls and snarls of happiness.

“They don’t care,” said Gypsy Blossom. Her wounds already scabbed over and healing, she stood beside Sunglow, in a clear zone surrounded by other Racs, and she did not seem out of place even though many of the Racs around her could not seem to look away from her. Those who could showed a tendency to stare at Dotson and Sunglow as if the magic of the strange being beside them were theirs as well. It was no secret who was responsible for the bot’s appearance.

“Where did she come from?” Dotson turned, and there was Senior Hightail. His fur was filthy and bedraggled, and his eyes were open wide, staring fixedly at Gypsy Blossom. “It’s a bot. I know it’s a bot. But there aren’t any bots. They all went away with the Gypsies.”

“Yes, sir,” said Dotson. He felt sorry for the older Rac, whose face said that his ability to cope had, at least for now, been thoroughly exceeded. “But...”

He felt relieved when he was interrupted before he could say the Gypsies had left something besides the plaques.

“What can we do?” The Rac who faced the bot belligerently, head thrust forward as if daring her to say she had no answer, was that same tailed Rac Dotson had first met in his own apartment, claiming that Racs should try to imitate the humans by shaving off their fur. His own fur had begun to regrow since then, until he now seemed covered in velvet.

“How can she know?” asked Sunglow. “She’s not a Gypsy, Skin, not really.

He...” She glanced up at Dotson on his rock. “He just grew her from a seed.”

“Was that it?” asked Senior Hightail. His voice tailed off as he slumped against the tunnel wall. “I remember those. I wondered once...”

The other Racs paid no more attention to him than they had before. Gypsy Blossom was a bot. Bots were Gypsies, and if this one were not, she was still an emblem of the Racs’ Remakers, an icon, and all they had for hope. Her sudden appearance was the sort of miracle that only witnessed to their gods’ concern for their fate. Even if the hand of the gods was the hand of a thief in the night.

Dotson looked away from his superior, toward the ruined valley beyond the tunnel mouth. To think that he had worried about keeping her a secret. No one failed to recognize her. No one failed to welcome her appearance, though surely that welcome had more than a little to do with the crisis they all faced at the

hands of their Remakers' ancient enemies.

“What now? What can we do?”

Who had said that? It did not matter. Every Rac in the vicinity was watching

him, him and Sunglow and Gypsy Blossom. And why should they ask him? Did they expect him to produce a starship full of rescuing Gypsies as easily as he had produced a single bot? Or was it just that having produced that bot, he was now associated with the destiny of his entire world, the center of his species' identity?

He sighed and, wishing that he could deflect their focus, said, “The Worldtree is still there.”

But that was almost the only thing that remained the same as it had been the day before. Explosions and shrapnel and the searing heat of landing starships had reduced moss and mossberries and honeysuckle to tattered scraps clinging to the borders of scorched earth circles. One clump of honeysuckle, half its branches broken off, clung to life not far from the Turnstone entrance. A small dumbo with a jagged tear in one wing clung to a stub, its movements jerky and fearful.

The dormitories and shops and homes that had ringed the valley were gone, pounded into rubble from which smoke still rose. Most of Worldtree Center was no better, though a few walls remained, a scrap of roof, the sturdy core from which the modern Center had grown.

The starships were there too, four of them, positioned to surround the ruins of Worldtree Center and command the valley.

“What are they doing?”

Armed humans directed captive Racs into the Center's ruins and set them to

bending, lifting, sorting, finding. That much was clear even from a distance.

What was not clear was what they found.

Periodically a flurry of ringing blows told of steel striking stone.

“What are they smashing?”

The silence that followed that question suggested that everyone knew what was being destroyed.

“Why?”

No one asked, “What have we done?” The Rac religion was not one that insisted disaster was divine retribution for one's sins.

“They don't even know what they're doing,” said Sunglow.

“Yes, they do,” said Gypsy Blossom. “Make no mistake. What they have done so

far was no accident.”

“They are the Enemy,” said Dotson. It seemed so clear now. “The Enemy the Founder warned us of. Destroying the Gypsies’ works. Destroying the Gypsies themselves if they ever find them. That’s why our Remakers fled their own world.”

“Is it why they left us?”

“Did they know this was coming?”

“How could they? So long ago!”

“We had to develop on our own,” said a young priest. “If they had stayed, we would forever have been as dependent as little children.”

“To learn and prove worthy of their return,” said a second, older priest.

The first priest glared. “To go forth and find them.”

Dotson sighed. So many of the onlookers were watching him, not the priests,

not Senior Hightail, not any other elder, more experienced Rac. Did stealing a seed and raising a bot, a remnant of the Gypsies who had Remade them all, make him a leader? He hoped they would not expect that of him, for he felt entirely inadequate.

But they did. He could not escape that truth. He said, “First we have to survive the Enemy.”

“We can’t fight them off.”

“They’re too strong, too well armed, too powerful.”

“We’re not defenseless.”

“We take out military targets first. You can bet they do too.”

“Then we should tell those humans,” said a voice from behind the crowd. When

Dotson tried to see who spoke, he could not penetrate the darkness. “Go and speak to them, tell them we are not their enemies, not to be feared or hated, not to be smashed like dumbos in a hail storm.”

“Yes!” cried the velvet-pelted Skin. “Shame them with moral force, as when the Farshorn blackbrows offered the slavers their entire tribe.”

“The blackbrows are extinct,” someone said. “The slavers sterilized them.”

“The humans are just as shameless,” said Gypsy Blossom. “They will not listen.”

“We should try anyway.”

“What else can we do?”

“They’ll destroy you. Or turn you into slaves like those.” The bot gestured toward the Racs who were picking through the rubble while humans stood aside, holding guns.

“We have to try!”

“Yes!” said Sunglow, and when Dotson grabbed her arm as if to keep her from leaving his side for the sunlit, cloud-rimmed valley outside, all ruination and death, she twisted free. “I’ll go!”

“No!” cried Dotson, his hand still stretched toward her, the fingers working as if he could bind her with the air itself. How could he let her go outside and confront the slaughterers? They had no tolerance, no mercy, no compunction, no reason, no love for the strange and different.

“You will die,” said the bot.

“We have to take that chance,” said the voice from the rear.

Other voices sounded agreement, eagerness to grasp whatever hope they could, desperation, and yet a note of resigned awareness that their chances of success or even survival were nearly nil.

Yet were their chances any better if they stayed within the caverns?

How could Dotson refuse to let his mate go forth? Her life would be at stake, yes. But it would be no less at stake if she remained with him.

And how could anyone possibly consider him a leader when he could not sway them on this?

“The bot should go with us too.”

Dotson began to shake his head, but Gypsy Blossom was already speaking. “No.

That would only inflame them.”

* * *

By the next dawn, someone had positioned a small truck at the end of the Turnstone tunnel. Dotson Barbtail stood on its flat bed instead of the rock, and now there was room for others to jostle beside him, all eager to see what happened. Gypsy Blossom stood just before him, the perfume of her petals

swamped by the stench that rode that fraction of the valley's damp air that floated over the pile of rubble.

Many of those gathered in the tunnel were watching Dotson and the bot, some overtly, some more cautiously, pretending to stare into the valley but shifting their eyes toward the pair whenever they thought they would not be noticed. One was the representative of their gods. The other was that representative's foster parent. Perhaps he was an intercessor for them all. Certainly their minds equipped him with an aura of potency.

The bot hardly seemed to notice. Dotson squirmed beneath the weight of all the attention and forced his own mind outward, to where Sunglow, his mate, risked her life, his sanity, on a reckless gamble.

The night had thinned the ranks of the demonstrators. Hours of reflection and talk and anxiety had dimmed their hope that the humans could simply be told what evil they were doing, shown that Racs were no threat to their lives or world, persuaded to depart what was left of this world. Yet enough remained, and in the hour before dawn small groups of Racs had stepped or crawled from the mouths of each of the many tunnels that pierced the bluffs, leaving the safety of the caverns to protest in the only way they thought they had.

Now they walked toward the center of the valley, picking their way through mist and drizzle and over the rubble that had been their homes two days before, converging slowly on the four starships and the ruins of Worldtree Center.

"Idiots," Dotson breathed. He wished he could have stopped them all, certainly Sunglow but not just her. All of them. For all of them would...

The humans knew they were coming. The starships closed their entrance ports. Men appeared on the edges of the ruins that had been the center of the Rac civilization. They wore broad-brimmed hats and long coats from which the water dripped. In their arms were guns of unfamiliar shape.

"The size of those magazines," someone said. No one objected that she had to be guessing what the curved projections from the guns were. Function and form never went together more obviously than with weapons.

When the Racs within the ruins paused in their labors to see what was going on, one of their guards fired into the air. The slaves obediently returned to sorting through the rubble. One crew seemed to be clearing the floor of what had been the Great Hall. To one side was a stack of wet-glistening metal, the antique armor that had been on display there, more battered now than ever.

The rhythmic sound of steel on rock paused and resumed.

Was that Sunglow drawing near the humans and their guns? But there were

several golden blonds out there in the valley, some of them tailed, some tailless, and every pelt looked darker when it was wet. He could not tell.

He squeezed Gypsy Blossom's shoulders in his hands until she squirmed in protest.

The demonstrators now formed a thin, defenseless line just beyond the exposed foundations of Worldtree Center. An even thinner line of humans, each one standing on some stub of wall or block of fallen masonry, faced them, their guns leveled.

A Rac stepped forward from the line of demonstrators. Who was it? Not Sunglow. Wrong color. But who? The one called Skin? Someone else?

Was he speaking? Or she? Were the humans answering? Dotson could hear nothing. He wished he had binoculars or a telescope. Then he would at least be able to see moving lips and expressive faces.

The tableau did not hold long enough for anyone to fetch such things, even if they were available.

The speaker for the demonstrators jerked, flung up his hands, and toppled. An instant later, the barking burst of gunfire reached the watchers in the tunnel. Most gasped. A few screamed. More guns added to the noise. Gypsy Blossom said, "I warned..."

Now more of the demonstrators were falling.

The rest were fleeing.

The humans were leaning forward, raising their guns to their shoulders to improve their aim, running in pursuit.

The sound of gunfire was constant, abrading the ears even as it brought down the Racs.

Few reached the safety of the tunnels.

None reached the Turnstone tunnel, where Dotson Barbtail waited for his Sunglow to return.

* * *

Dotson did not leave the back of the parked truck all the rest of that day. For hours he stood still, staring through the narrow gap between the mound of rubble and the roof of the tunnel. His hands remained on Gypsy Blossom's shoulders, as tight as ever, tighter, and the bot no longer protested.

A few of his fellow Racs remained, staring alternately at the valley outside the tunnel and the pair that stood so still.

The light rain had stopped. The clouds were still there, though they broke from time to time to let the sun shine through. When that happened, the valley steamed.

What was he looking for? Dotson hardly knew. The dead Racs would never rise and walk again. The humans were making sure of that.

One of the fleeing protestors had nearly made it to safety before he fell. Now he lay on a scrap of bare pavement, legs twitching uselessly, blood pooled around his waist, watching as two humans stalked across the rubble.

One of the humans trained his rifle toward the nearest tunnel. The other kicked the dying Rac in the head. When that drew no response, he put the muzzle of his own rifle to the Rac's right eye and pulled the trigger.

When they were gone, a single half-grown Rac dashed from the tunnel and fell on her knees beside the body.

A moment later, she too was dead. Perhaps her scream of grief and pain had drawn the humans back, or perhaps they had simply been waiting out of sight.

What was Dotson looking for? Sunglow was out there somewhere, wasn't she?

He wished he dared go hunting for her, but there was no sense in that. He would only die as well.

Some of those who shared his vigil left and returned and left again. Someone brought him and Gypsy Blossom food. He ate, and dimly he was aware that the bot needed sunlight as much as food, sunlight that was hardly to be had where they were forced to hide.

Voices murmured behind him and to the sides.

"What can we do now?"

"It's hopeless."

"We can't even get out of this hole."

"The tunnels are plugged even worse up top. Buildings fell in them."

"I heard someone tried to make it out past the landing field."

"Tried, huh."

"Yeah. They're as dead as those idiots out there."

When Dotson stirred at that, Gypsy Blossom seemed to read the protest in his

mind. "They were idiots," she said. "So was she. Most people are smart enough, when they burn one hand, not to stick the other in the fire. And you called them that yourself."

He knew he should feel something, anything. He should glower and grieve and rave. He should seize a weapon and charge out of the tunnel, assault the humans single-handed, bare-handed even, and die in raging honor. He should join Sunglow, wherever she now was, idiot or no, as soon as he was able.

But he didn't. He let himself subside at the touch of the bot's hand. He watched the valley floor as tendrils of vapor rose and the ground dried. He wished that he could see the bodies more closely. Was that a blond? It was hard to tell, for it was shadowed by a piece of rubble. So was that one, and that other was so stained by mud and gore that he could not tell.

That one? No. The color was right, but its abdomen was bloated by rot. It had been dead too long, ever

since the initial bombardment.

“They’ve found a hole in the city. Working on it now, clearing it, making it larger.”

“Are there—“

“Yeah. But they won’t be able to see much after dark. And there’s plenty of cover.”

A hand fell on his shoulder as firmly as his own still lay on Gypsy Blossom’s. “You’re Dotson Barbtail? The guy with the bot? C’mon. You’re wanted.”

He tried to ignore the hand, the voice, the tug away from the view of the valley where he had last seen Sunglow, but then “Why?” sprang into his mind, and he turned.

“C’mon.”

The other Rac’s pelt was scorched bald in spots, and his eyes seemed as

glazed as Dotson’s own. Yet that did not keep him from leading Dotson and Gypsy Blossom down the tunnel at a trot. They rounded a bend and passed through a blackout curtain to find bright electric lights. The power came from the same underground stream that filled the reservoirs. They turned left and entered a cavernous room packed with refugees. Beyond that was a narrow corridor. They passed a chamber that still retained curtains of flowstone, and then they came to a low-ceilinged garage whose walls were lined with emergency vehicles.

“The infirmary,” said his guide. “Where the medical supplies already were.

She’s over here.”

They rounded an ambulance whose polished surface was filmed with dust lofted by all the explosions and fires outside. Dotson let his fingers follow the trails someone else had left across the vehicle’s windows. When he reached their end, there was the storeroom, a walled-off portion of the room, an open door, Racs moving efficiently in and out with bandages and intravenous bottles and folded stretchers.

“Where?”

“Not many made it, you know. But she did. Got to Skyclaw, three tunnels over.”

A few feet more. A row of unfolded stretchers on the floor, some of their occupants quite still, others shifting in obvious pain, that one staring. Staring at him.

He almost collapsed as the tension left his muscles. “You made it.”

“I’ll leave you here.” He hardly noticed the pat on his shoulder.

Sunglow held up an arm engulfed from wrist to shoulder in a cast. She also wore a heavy bandage, stained red with blood, on one thigh. “I was lucky.”

“Luckier than you deserved,” said Gypsy Blossom.

Dotson only knelt in the narrow space between her stretcher and the next and

seized her other hand. He could say nothing more for many minutes.

* * *

“Where’d they all go?”

Dotson Barbtail was once more on the bed of the truck, once more watching the valley and the humans. But now Sunglow was with him, perched on a high stool to take the strain off her leg, her arm in a sling. Gypsy Blossom paced behind them.

The sky was clear. There was no sign of the Racs who had been searching through the rubble. The smashing clang of steel on rock had ceased.

Humans stood on high points of the ruins, rifles in their arms. Half a dozen were clustered around a boxy, yellow-painted machine near the base of the Worldtree. Two more were on the flange near the Worldtree’s top, anchoring a triangular derrick from which dangled a pair of cables.

They had already pushed the bodies of First-Stop’s heroes over the edge.

“Yesterday. While you were gone,” said a Rac whose gray pelt was marked with

swirls of brownish green. He was pointing toward one of the starships, the one with Saladin painted on its side. “They herded them together beneath its tail. Then they fired the engines. Just a burp, really, but...” His voice cracked.

Dotson shuddered.

“They must have found whatever they were looking for,” said the other. “They

didn’t need them anymore.”

“What are we going to do?” Sunglow’s shoulders slumped, and she spoke in a thready whine. She no longer showed any sign that she doubted the humans were indeed the Enemy.

Dotson shook his head. He had no idea.

“We’ve got a tunnel open to the top,” said the other Rac. “We can escape.”

“There’s nowhere to go,” said Sunglow.

Gypsy Blossom stopped her pacing and leaned toward the opening at the end of

the Turnstone tunnel. “Outside,” she said, and her roots uncurled from the ruff around her shins. “There isn’t any dirt in here.” She pointed at the pile of rubble between them and the light of day. “That’s all, and it’s no good. It tastes of blood.”

“There’s light,” said Dotson.

“It’s not the same. Not right.”

“It has to do.”

“Couldn’t I go out after dark?”

“They’d see you.” Humans patrolled the valley at night now, watching for

Racs who might be gathering to attack, or merely to protest. Gunfire punctuated

the darkness, and in the morning there were more bodies. Some of the bodies were

those of wild Racs. “And then—“

“I’d hide!”

One of the humans at the top of the Worldtree grasped the cables hanging

from the derrick and swung off the flange. The derrick didn’t twitch. He swung back, leaned over the edge, and waved and yelled at those below. They grabbed their end of the cables and attached them to their machine.

“That’s a pulley at the top,” said Sunglow. “A cable loop. And that’s the motor.”

A small truck appeared from behind the Toledo, its bed stacked with orange canisters. It approached the Worldtree and the humans. It stopped, and the humans began to unload it. A few minutes later the first of the canisters had been attached to the cable and was rising into the air.

“That’s one of our trucks.”

“What are they doing?”

Dotson shook his head. He had no idea except for the certainty that the

humans could be doing nothing good. They were the Enemy.

* * *

The blackout curtains kept every hint of light contained. There were no reflections off the tunnel walls, no dim glow about the tunnel mouth, no hint that the bluffs hid within them a host of Racs.

Nor did Dotson and Sunglow and Gypsy Blossom carry any light as they groped toward the dim skyglow at the mouth of Turnstone tunnel, banged her cast on a truck fender, shushed each other urgently, crawled over the mound of rubble and through the narrow opening, and stared into the darkness that engulfed the valley. The only lights came from the viewports of the starships and the windows of those surviving buildings of Worldtree Center the humans had occupied. The sounds were a scrabble of claws on stone, a distant footstep or cough, a rattle of equipment.

“Over there,” whispered the bot. “A clump of honeysuckle. I’ll hide in the middle of it. I’ll be invisible.”

“We’re going with you,” said Sunglow.

“You shouldn’t!” Gypsy Blossom hissed. “That’s too much chance of getting caught.”

“Then we’ll all die together,” said Dotson.

Silence. Then, “You want me to say I’ll stay inside. The hell with you.”

Sunglow stifled a laugh.

“Shh.”

A single shot rang out perhaps a hundred meters off. A cry of pain.

“Now,” said Dotson. “While they’re all looking over there.”

They ran. He tripped once and stumbled, and then he was on soft dirt. The

scent of honeysuckle engulfed him. He remembered that other night when he had crept through the vines toward the Great Hall and a display case full of antique seeds. As then, blossoms tipped and spilled nectar on his fur. Sunglow hissed in disgust, revealing that she too was now wet and sticky.

“Here.” Gypsy Blossom stopped in the smallest of open spaces, stood tall and still, and let down her roots. “Ahhh,” she sighed.

Dotson wondered what it must feel like to have roots, to draw water and minerals from the soil, to feed on sunlight, to be half plant. But the closest he could come was to watch as the bot luxuriated in the sensations the human attack had stripped her of, smashing her pot before she was ready to step away from it on her own. She needed this, and he... He had let Sunglow go off on her own, and she had nearly died. He didn’t want to take the same chance of losing the bot, even if it meant his own death. It would be like losing a child.

He guessed that Sunglow must feel the same way, for she was with them, staying close, the cast on her arm bumping his side, the bandage on her leg glowing white in the dark.

“It’s talking to me!”

“What?”

“Shh!”

The bot obediently whispered. “The honeysuckle! Our roots connected, and it remembers. There’s history here, and—“

“It’s a Gypsy thing,” said Dotson.

“Yesss. It has eyes, you know. And ears. I can see the whole valley. I can hear the humans, the Enemy. And yes, they are the Enemy. They wear the cogwheel.

They are the Engineers. And—“

“Shh!” Sunglow’s hiss was desperate. “Someone’s coming!”

Silence. Distant footsteps, growing closer. A human voice growling, “I heard something over here.”

A second voice: “Another gyppin’ animal. The coons are gone, hiding in the deepest hole they’ve got.”

“Not all of ‘em.”

“All but one or two. They come lookin’ for their kids, and...” The slap of a bare hand on metal. “I’m not worried about them.”

When they had left again, the bot whispered, “There’s a warning here: Watch out for humans—“

“We know,” said Dotson.

“There’s more than that.”

“Tell us later. We can’t stay here.” He tugged at the bot’s hand. “We’ve got to go.”

“No! It’s hours yet till dawn.”

“We’ve got to tell the rest. That warning.”

“I’ll tell you. You go. There’s so much more for me to learn here.”

“Later.”

The answer was a shifting of weight as Gypsy Blossom freed her roots, an angry sigh. “I have to come back, though. It’s like a library. There’s so much to learn.”

“Later.”

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 17

* * *

“Is it safe out here?”

“Are you worried about the coons?” Marcus Aurelius Hrecker made a bitter noise.

“They haven’t surrendered. They put bombs in the cars and planes we use.

They mine the libraries we raid. They ambushed a squad this afternoon.”

“But there aren’t any in this valley. You passed on that order yourself. Don’t let ‘em get away to talk, or they might stir up some real resistance. The only ones left are in those cages.” As if, he thought, that made much difference. The coons could stand atop the bluffs and see the entire valley and everything the humans did within it.

“What about that?” Tamiko Inoue’s gesture indicated not the bluffs, the ruins at their feet and beyond their crests, or the forests still further off in which armies could hide, but the tower in the valley’s center, less than a kilometer away. It was almost invisible, no more than a black silhouette against the near-black of a night sky wrapped in clouds.

“I think it’s safe,” Hrecker added, but she had already turned away from him. Eric Silber was there, looking past her at him, one hand urging her to take one more step, one more, and then stop just on the verge of his hearing.

He had first seen them together that very morning. He had climbed out of his bunk and found hers already empty, already neatened. He did not see her until he had his breakfast on a tray. She looked up from the table she was sharing with Silber and nodded. But she made no move to join him or to invite her to join them. Not that he wanted to be anywhere near the other man.

When had he moved to the Bonami? Or had he? Was he only visiting?

He had had to pass three tables before he found a seat. But he had still been close enough to hear Silber say, "He's a traitor, you know."

Tamiko had sounded doubtful when she replied, "I know his heart's not really in it."

"It's worse than that. I swear, he's only waiting for a chance to sell us all out. He..."

Why was he like that? Hrecker was sure the other man had not seen that African violet back on Mars, and he didn't think his own hesitations and reluctances were so clear a window on his uncertain mind. All they said was that he was not a fanatic. He did not act from an automatic, unquestioning assumption of his and his people's correctness.

Tamiko didn't either, did she? Yet her bias was obviously closer to Silber's than to Hrecker's. That was why...

Hrecker shook his head and sipped deliberately at the glass of cloudy liquid in his hand. Gin and... Something new. Spicy, tart, smoky. Sweet, of course. He liked it.

He held up the glass. "What is this?"

"Gin and mossberry juice," said the crewman behind the drink table. It had

been set up a little nearer to the ship, where a single small spot could provide the light to read the labels on the bottles and pluck ice cubes from the dented metal chest in the table's center. It had been found in the ruins.

Why was he here if he was not like Silber? He had wanted to see First-Stop and the Racs. He had wanted to see the results of his labors on the starships' drives and even the particle beam weapons. He had wanted to be with Tamiko. All of those, and it had been far too easy to find himself here, assisting in deeds that would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life.

He finished his drink and began to pay attention to the others once more. Captain Quigg and Ali Catrone and the representatives of the other ships in the valley stood a little further out, just within the circle the ship had charred into the ground. They too were watching the tower.

Did they dream?

Not far away, not far enough by half in the black of the First-Stop night,

Eric Silber was saying to Tamiko Inoue, "Well?"

Well, what? Well, could he move in with her, or she with him?

To one side stood Meyer Smith, Bela B'Genda, and the Baron from the Saladin.

The Baron still wore a twitching robot pinned within the circle of his cogwheel

badge. He had a mug of beer in one hand, and he was saying to B'Genda, "Didn't

have the faintest, did he? Not till we showed up and I said, ‘Stuff it. Make it go boom.’”

Would that be enough to convince Tamiko that he was no traitor?

He didn’t really care at this point whether she threw him out of her quarters. Even for Silber, he told himself, though he knew he lied.

“It’s dark enough,” said Quigg. “You can start the fireworks anytime.”

Hrecker set his drink on the end of the table and fished the control box

from his shirt pocket. It was about the size and weight of a deck of cards, made of black plastic, and it looked like a calculator in all but two respects. It had a numberpad and a rectangular display, but it also had a small whip antenna and a bright red pushbutton centered in its upper rim. It was, he thought, just as much a sledgehammer as the tool he had used to destroy all those plaques.

Hrecker drew the antenna from its recess and punched in the code that unlocked the device’s transmitter function. He poised his thumb above the pushbutton. He looked at the captain.

Quigg nodded. “Go ahead.”

It was darker now, and even the little light that spilled over the drink

table was enough to spoil their night vision. But the fact that no one could possibly see a thing kept no one from facing the tower and craning their necks as if they could indeed make out its bulbous tip, the flange around it, the twin openings in its sides.

Hrecker’s thumb twitched.

An instant later those openings vomited flame. The tower sprang into view,

and the valley with its ruins, the starships, the human watchers. The tower’s bulb, the chamber that once had held a wealth of knowledge, cracked and cracked again, splitting, crazing, every sudden gap a line of fiery light. The sky lit red and yellow and orange.

The bulb was gone. In its stead was only an expanding fireball.

They could just have put the plaques back where they had come from, couldn’t

they? Except that there were too many to fit. Copies, and copies of copies.

Better to smash and burn and—

The blast reached them, less sound than a blow, staggering them, forcing them to clap their hands over their ears. Hrecker’s mouth opened, his face contorted, and when he looked at the others, they too were grimacing. He cried out, but he could not hear even his own pain, much less that of the others.

Someone fell, her shirt blooming dark and shiny with her blood. But when he leaned toward her, staring desperately, she was not Tamiko, not Silber. Just a stranger he did not know.

Something stung his cheek. When he raised his hand, it came away wet.

They were too close.

Or they had packed the chamber with much, much more than would do the job.

A chunk of rock the size of his head struck one end of the drink table.

Bottles, glasses, and chest of ice catapulted to oblivion.

Why couldn't he hear anything?

The bang, of course. The sheer hellish gyppin' noise of it had stunned his ears. Perhaps...

He stuck a finger in one ear. It came away dry except for a bit of wax.

At least his eardrums were intact.

The display of flame was fading. As the light diminished, he noticed Captain

Quigg staring at the Bonami. Its metal was streaked bright where bits of rock had struck it. There were dents. And there was an actual tear, damage worse than anything the coons had managed to do, and he had done it himself. He wished he could hide.

He bowed his head, and there, practically beside his foot, was a piece of rock that had not been there before he pressed the button. He reached for it, but even as he lifted it into the air he was swearing and jerking his hands away. It was still blistering hot from the blast that had hurled it into the air.

Yet he had time to notice its finest details. It had rings, striations, stairstepped edges, structure. Just as the coons had said, the tower had once been wood, a tree. The Gypsies had grown it and petrified it, and it had stood for all the years.

Until he had packed its tip full of high explosives.

"Great show!" A hand clapped his back, and he glimpsed the captain of the

Drake already turned toward Quigg. "Worth the trip from Earth." The words were just audible through the ringing in his ears.

* * *

The coons' sacred tower was still taller than any of the human ships, still higher than the valley's rim, but

where it once had bulged smoothly to form a stone-walled reliquary, it now was tipped by jagged teeth. Cracks extended downward for twenty meters, growing narrower and fewer until they disappeared, resisted and vanquished by the nature of the tower's substance.

Petrified wood, thought Hrecker. But not quite. Microscopes showed that the wood was still there, a mass of interwoven cellulose to strengthen and reinforce the mineral that had been crystallized in every cell and pore and crevice. Strong, resilient fibers in a sturdy matrix, like rebar in concrete, like fiberglass.

They had set him to work smashing plaques. When that was done, they had told him to destroy the tower. And when last night's pyrotechnic display proved to be no more than a glorious decapitation, they had said, "Great show, but we want it all down. Flat."

His fingers were slick with burn cream. He rubbed them together and told himself he was lucky the burns weren't worse. He had dropped that rock very quickly.

The trouble was, he added, the tower had been a tree once. It tapered, and at its base it was at least ten meters through.

"No problem," said the Baron. A bandage covered one ear to show where a piece of flying tree had hit him.

"That's what you said before." Bela B'Genda's voice snapped with frustration. One cheek was peppered with tiny scabs. "You said that charge would split it to the root."

"I've seen lightning hit a tree," said the Baron. "And that's just what happened."

"This thing's rock," said Smith. He alone seemed untouched by the previous night's shrapnel storm.

"So we need rock-cutting tools."

"They built with rock. There's got to be a quarry around here somewhere."

There was, and by noon a dozen pneumatic rock drills were boring into one

flank of the tower, roaring and hammering and spitting chips. Holes the size of Hrecker's fist grew beneath their bits. By evening, those holes were deep enough to take his fist halfway to the elbow.

The explosives came from the same quarry. The attempt of the night before had used almost all the humans' own supply.

Tamiko and Silber arrived as they were packing the last of the holes. "It's not going to hit anything, is it?"

Hrecker showed her the arc of the tower's circumference they had mined. Then he turned around and pointed. "It's like cutting trees. You notch them, and then they fall into the notch."

"What do you know about cutting trees?"

He grinned sheepishly. It had been many years since he had last seen a tree

on Earth, and even then he had hardly been a woodsman. "What I've read. And it'll fall right between

the Bolivar and the Toledo. A clean miss.”

“You hope.”

“You’d better be right,” said Silber. “General Lyapunov doesn’t want to lose a third ship.”

Tamiko gave the man an irritated glance. She was the one who talked to the General, not he.

“Cross your fingers, then.” He turned away from them. The others were standing back from the side of the tower. “Are we ready?”

Once everyone was a safe distance away, he pressed the button once more.

Smoke and flame spouted from the holes they had drilled. Dust and gravel

flew. Flakes of stone as tall as a man spalled from the tower’s surface. The tower itself neither trembled nor swayed.

The Engineers stared at the results of their labor in silence. Here the rings were more boldly defined. They formed not just stripes in the rock or stairsteps along the broken edges but boundaries along which the rock sometimes split in sheets.

Finally Hrecker said, “That’s just chipping away at it.”

The Baron said, “Try the particle beams.”

“They’re fine for sheet metal. Or flesh. But not this. Too massive. It would take forever.”

“Then we need a nuke.”

Bela B’Genda shook her head. “We should have drilled deeper.”

“Next time,” said Hrecker.

“But we’re out of explosives,” said Meyer Smith.

“Then we’ll find some more.”

“There are other quarries,” said Tamiko. “And mines. Construction sites.”

“If there’s anything left,” said Bela B’Genda.

“There was at the quarry,” said Hrecker.

“Or we can take their bombs apart.”

“Use one of our nukes and be done with it,” said the Baron.

Hrecker snorted and waved an arm toward the nearest ship. “That wouldn’t do us much good.”

“Do it last,” said the Baron. “Set it up, and then trigger it from orbit.

Just before we go home.”

And the valley would be useless for years to come. Hrecker shuddered, and he was pleased to note that Bela B’Genda did not seem to like the idea any better than he.

But Silber was nodding quite happily.

“Better to have the coons get a factory going again,” said Tamiko.

“I wouldn’t trust ‘em,” said the Baron.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Bela B’Genda. “We can keep ‘em under control.

But we flattened everything that looked anything like industrial.”

“It wouldn’t be that hard to set up something new,” said Smith.

“It might not be easy to persuade them to cooperate,” said Hrecker. “After what we’ve done already—“

“Easy doesn’t matter,” said Silber. “They dug those plaques out of the rubble eagerly enough after we shot a few.”

“And now the plaques are gone. The Gypsies might as well never have been here.”

Tamiko glanced at Silber as if she were thinking that he were right. Yet somehow Hrecker could not stop talking. “It’s a waste of time and effort. Sheer vandalism.”

Meyer Smith was nodding. “It would make more sense if we were rooting out the libraries. This?” He shrugged. “It’s just a piece of rock.”

“You’re both idiots,” said Tamiko. “We’ll get the libraries, but this is ten times as important as all the information the Gypsies left behind. It’s so important that if we had to choose, we should leave the plaques and destroy this.”

“It’s a symbol,” said the Baron. “Nuke it.”

Silber grinned. “We’re not in any rush, you know. And we’ve got the guns.”

“I still think it’s wasted effort.” Hrecker kicked at a flake of petrified wood. “All that high explosive, and all we get is that.”

“Ask the General,” suggested Bela B’Genda. “Send a memo.”

He nodded as Tamiko and Silber both laughed. “I’ll do that.”

“But you’d better drill some more holes while you’re waiting for the answer.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Hrecker nodded.

* * *

Hrecker rolled out of his bunk the next morning, stretched, and scratched. He was yawning when the door opened and Tamiko held two sheets of paper toward him.

“What’s this?” Hrecker was still in his shorts. She was dressed, combed, and apparently already fed.

“They were waiting for you.” She was not looking at him. Instead, she was crossing the narrow room to open the drawers and cupboards in which he kept his things. All of them.

He looked at the top sheet in his hand.

It was a room assignment form.

He sighed.

“They had a vacancy,” she said. She had found his duffle and was already putting his clothes in the bag. “Unless you’d rather go back to the Saladin.”

“What’s the other?” When she said nothing else, he looked for himself.

It was a comprint. Its heading identified its origin first as the Ajax and

second as General Lyapunov’s staff. Its message was simple: “We understand your feeling that destroying the tower is a wasteful diversion of resources from our true objectives. However, the tower is clearly the soul of this world. Removing it will make any resistance impossible and greatly retard the day when the coons will pose any threat to Earth. You and your demolition crew should waste no time in ensuring its fall.”

“At least they’re polite,” he said.

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CHAPTER 18

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Dotson Barbtail ran his fingers over the smooth surfaces of the heavy gun in his lap. The stubby barrel, the horizontal clip that curved like a crossbow's bow, the massive, stabilizing stock. Warm where a bit of sunlight struck metal or wood. It held sixty-four rounds, each one a high-velocity bundle of metal slivers that would come apart on impact. One was enough to kill, for if it penetrated the body-armor the humans wore, its fragments would shred and tear beyond repair.

Not that he was likely to see a human on the ground. They flew overhead in stolen jets and helicopters and landed only to burn and loot and then kill whatever they found alive.

He clicked the safety on, off, on, off.

Could he use it? He hadn't yet, but...

The slab of concrete beneath which he squatted was the largest remaining

piece of an apartment building. His water bottle sat on the stained and broken shell of what had been a VC set. A doll, a miniature Rac as blond as Sunglow but tailed, lay on a pile of half-burned clothing. He had put it there himself after spotting its tiny hand under a piece of wood and thinking of the toys he had once bought for a seedling bot.

He wrinkled his nose. The air was tainted with the musty sweetness of death. He thought the odor would still be there when spring and summer came round again, though by then it would seem so normal that no one would notice.

Sunglow had a gun just like his, as well as a sack of mines, and she was out there somewhere, she and five other Racs, visiting a neighborhood library the humans had not yet found and burned, though bombs had opened it to the elements. If they were lucky, they would find a copy of *Leaves of the Worldtree*. If they weren't, they would still save what they could, and they would leave the mines behind.

How did one salvage a civilization as it was being destroyed? Information was the key, of course. Libraries. Museums, too. But it was impossible to rescue every record, every textbook, every work of art. Every Remaker plaque, every replica or copy. Nor was there the time to search through the shelves and storerooms and select the most important, most valuable, most irreplaceable.

If they found a Leaves, they would take it. For the rest, they carried rolls of plastic sheeting. In the time they had, they would lug everything they could into the library's basement, or into the basement of a nearby building. Then they would wrap and cover it against the rain that would trickle through broken roofs and tumbled walls overhead. With luck, the books would still be useful after the humans left.

If they ever did.

Gypsy Blossom was closer by, just over there, half hidden in a clump of

honeysuckle that had survived intact the explosions and the fires.

His job was to protect her if any humans came by. To kill them all, and if he failed, to die with her and keep the secret of all the Racs hidden beneath their feet. It was no accident that they could not see from here the tunnel the Racs had opened.

Yet he wasn't worried. Gypsy Blossom had assured him that they could be discovered only from the air. The honeysuckle would tell her if any humans were approaching on the ground.

He shook his head. How could he believe that? But the bot did, and she herself was proof enough that the Gypsies could make plants with eyes and ears, or animals with roots.

And even if he was safe, what about the others? He heard distant shots, the boom of a mine, a missile, or a bomb. He clenched his fists around his gun, and he told himself that even if Rac bombs and human warheads made different sounds, he could not tell who was attacking whom. The humans had seized all the Rac planes and helicopters they had not destroyed. They were using Rac guns and Rac bombs, and... Dotson told himself it made sense. A starship had to be limited in what it could carry.

But it was like chopping off someone's arm so you could use it to beat them to death. Not fair. Not fair at all.

There were noises closer by as well. The creaks of shifting, settling rubble. The chirpings of small insects. The scraping noises made by vermin that did not care whether they found broken cans and ruptured freezers or bodies, so long as it was food. The buzzings of flies hovering above a narrow cleft in the rubble; the food was there.

Something hit the top of the slab above him. It banged and bounced, and sun-dried dust sifted onto his head.

He flinched and shuddered, bit back a whine of fear, and nearly pulled his trigger. Then he looked at the bot, but she did not seem to be alarmed. In fact, her eyes were closed. Had the honeysuckle told her this was nothing?

Footsteps, and he poised his rifle. He stared upward, scanned the edge of the slab, looking for shadows, legs, danger, targets. But... The sound was not that of the boots the humans wore. Nor was there enough weight behind each step for...

He was not surprised when a pair of wild Racs dropped off the edge of the slab, cocked their ringed tails high, and stared at him, panting lightly against the heat of the summer day. His own mouth was open, his breathing hard, his eyes wide. He felt like he was looking into a mirror that threw back a distorted, double image of himself, but he did not relax his grip on the gun until they had scurried out of sight to the left.

So they were coming out of the woods now. Were they curious about why so many of the buildings were now ruins? About what the explosions and fires had done? Or were they taking the opportunity to return to the lands their Remade descendants had seized and transformed and barred them from? They were intelligent enough, but was he imputing too much-- ?

“They made it.”

He jumped. Gypsy Blossom was beside him, and he had not seen her move.

“You were watching the animals. And I can be quiet.”

He snorted and showed his teeth in a Rac grin. “Sunglow, you mean.”

“Her whole squad. They’re on the way back already.”

“Those shots?”

“Another group. They’re all dead.”

He made a pained face and brushed dust from his fur. The humans were far too good at that. “I’m glad.” He reached for his water bottle and shook it. It was empty.

“Shall we go back?” She didn’t say a word about his comment, for she understood that he was glad not that Racs had died but that Sunglow had not.

* * *

From any distance at all, the roadway seemed to be entirely buried by rubble, just as it had been after the humans’ first attack. Yet there was a path that wound between overhanging sheets of floor and roof, shadowed by a single burned-out, windowless building. It was exposed only intermittently, when it struggled over mounds of broken masonry or when the buildings had failed to collapse in a way that offered any cover.

“Let’s wait up there.”

Inside the building, a stairway still reached the third floor. The walls that surrounded one corner were intact enough to shield observers. The unburned litter said they had.

“It’ll be a while.”

“I know.” He stared only briefly from the window that overlooked the

approach to the tunnel. Then he moved to the one that faced the valley and the truncated, snag-topped Worldtree.

The Enemy. There had been legends. And when Gypsy Blossom had discovered what waited for her in the honeysuckle, there had been a message: "Watch out for humans," it had passed from its roots through hers to her nervous system. "If they ever come here again, don't trust them. Don't mistake them for Gypsies. Don't tell them more than you must."

They had done that, hadn't they? And it had been his own lab, his own work, that had triggered the disaster. He should have kept his mouth shut, been less eager to impress them with what good little students the Racs had become, taken them to visit a hospital or a school or a mine.

Yet that would only have delayed the disaster. A few days. No more. Humans were humans.

"Gypsies travel with bots," the honeysuckle had told Gypsy Blossom. "If the humans come from Earth, if they don't have bots with them, they're Engineers, who hate and fear and destroy every hint of biological technology. They are the ones who slaughtered all the genetic engineers except for those refugees who became the Gypsies."

And now... He stared at the remains of the Worldtree. It was damaged, yes, but it still stood though Worldtree Center and Worldtree City lay in ruins all about it.

When the top of the Worldtree had exploded, many Racs had despaired. They had remembered their temple lessons and a prophecy that the world would end when the Worldtree fell.

But it still stood.

Even though the humans nibbled at its base with drills and blasts.

"Someone's coming."

He moved to the other window, but the Racs advancing toward the tunnel, guns

in hand, spread out and wary, pelts stained with mud and blood, were not the ones he wanted to see.

He did not show himself. Neither did Gypsy Blossom. Both were waiting, watching the Racs below disappear into shadows and a tunnel, safety and what comfort remained on a devastated world, eyeing the sky and a distant plane sketching interlocking circles like rings of condensation left on a tabletop by cold drinks. It was searching, scanning. Looking for Racs such as Sunglow's team, or for targets such as the library that team had left.

A line of smoke marked the launch of some small missile toward the plane. Its path never twitched, but its crew must have responded in some way Racs could not match, for the missile exploded when it was much too far from its target to do damage.

As soon as the plane's circling path aimed its nose roughly toward the origin of the missile, it fired something of its own. The explosion on the ground was more than large enough to destroy an entire squad.

"They weren't in that area," said the bot.

His hands did not loosen their grip on the gun he held. He clicked the

safety on and off again. If that plane flew overhead, the temptation to fire at it would be immense. Yet he would have to refrain. Not only would the rifle be impotent, but it would draw attention, reveal his position, perhaps unveil the tunnel, perhaps betray Sunglow as she approached.

“Where is she?” Hadn’t they had long enough to get from there to here?

“There’s honeysuckle down there.” The bot was pointing to what had been a house with a tiny yard. The viny growth that had once been confined to a hedge was already extending over the wreckage. “I could—“

“No. It’s too open.” The bot could put down her roots anywhere, commune with the honeysuckle anywhere that honeysuckle grew, and in a few more weeks the vines would be so thick and tall she could hide in the midst of any patch, wherever it grew. So far, however, it still showed the influence of the gardeners who had striven to keep it in check. They had gone where they had gone because the vines were thicker there, and walls still loomed over that patch. It was more sheltered, safer, less exposed to view. And besides, the plane was closer now. Any movement might betray them.

“I see.” Gypsy Blossom was nodding, leaning past the edge of an empty window frame, searching the blasted wasteland that had been a city. “Though it would be so easy... Did I tell you it was bots that made the honeysuckle?”

Of course she had, as soon as she found out, within a day of that first contact root to root. But the waiting silence demanded filling.

She continued softly: “Back when they were new and feared discovery would mean extermination, the nerve-bearing roots of all the separate vines stretched out and met and merged together to form a single nervous system that permeated Earth’s soil wherever honeysuckle grew. They used it as an extension of their own nervous systems, at first just to communicate. Then they gave it senses so they could see and hear and monitor events where no bots grew.

“That’s what I was doing today,” she added. “Watching Sunglow. But before they left this world, they made it something more, combining it with the computers they also grew, storing memory in its roots, setting it to wait for me.”

“That sounds conceited.” His voice was just as soft as hers, his position as watchful, his expression twice as tense with worry.

“Not just me. You were supposed to plant those seeds as soon as you found them, you know. Not enshrine them. Then you’d have had us for helpers. You’d have had access to the information stored in the honeysuckle.”

“Isn’t it the same?”

She nodded. “Pretty much. More detailed in some areas, I think. More history.”

Would the Racs have been more advanced with the bot assistance? Would they have been able to ward off the Engineers’ first blow? Might they even have been gone already, departed in pursuit of their gods?

“What-- ?” But the circling plane was now further off, and others were as aware of that as he. There were noises not far away, a scratch of claws on rock, a metallic click as something bumped a rifle barrel or magazine, and a small group of Racs, including one familiar form, dusty but golden.

“That’s her.”

“Then let’s go,” he said.

* * *

“Most of it had already burned.” Sunglow, Dotson, and Gypsy Blossom were deep inside the bluff, in a cul-de-sac so small it had never been used for more than rubbish disposal. A sheet of plastic, its underside beaded with moisture, covered the thick sponge of decayed paper, wood, and leather and less identifiable wastes that was the floor. The walls were still untouched ropes and sheets of calcite. The only light was the small lantern that sat on a stone to one side.

She had already made her official report. Now it was the turn of her mate, the bot, and the refugees who crowded the storeroom outside. The privacy of the cul-de-sac had been their neighbors’ idea of doing honor to the bot.

“Just one wing was left pretty much intact.” She was sitting near the cul-de-sac’s narrow entrance, facing outward. The bandaged leg extended straight ahead of her. The cast on her injured arm had been replaced with one that held her elbow bent, her hand braced in front of her belly as if to hold a gun. She had asked for that deliberately.

Dotson squatted beside her, combing his claws gently through the pelt of her back and side, dropping bits of unidentified debris on the plastic-covered floor. When he came to the edge of her cast, he smoothed the ruffed-up fur.

“But we were lucky,” she added. “The reference room was there, and the weather had only gotten to the periodicals shelves.”

“No Leaves,” said Gypsy Blossom.

“No Leaves.” Sunglow shook her head.

There was a disappointed murmur from the storeroom, where their neighbors

also squatted in pairs, picking through each others’ pelts, grooming and comforting. Hrecker noticed loose skin jerking beneath the fingers, a sign of short rations and lost weight. He thought it would get worse, perhaps even until the distinctive Rac paunch disappeared entirely.

“But there was a Book of the Founder, an encyclopedia, a few more good ones.

They’re all safe now.”

“For how long?” someone whispered.

“Long enough,” said Gypsy Blossom. “You know about the honeysuckle. I can

hear whatever they say outside their ships, as long as they are near open ground. Even in what’s left of Worldtree Center.”

“I’ve seen the honeysuckle growing there,” said another voice.

The bot nodded. “Their commanders don’t want to destroy us or our world.

Just all the influence of the Gypsies, our Remakers. Just our civilization, our technology, our schools, our libraries.”

Sunglow was staring at the ceiling as if she could see beyond it to the

ruins outside their shelter. “That’s why we—“

“You’re a tailless Farshorn.” A brown Rac marked with darker swirls stood up. His voice was nasty, and he had the heavy shoulders of someone who worked with...

“Shut up, Potwheel!” someone hissed.

“They’re wrecking Farshore too,” said Dotson.

“How do we know?”

“The first reports.”

“But since then... I’ll bet they’re allies now.” Several voices indicated

agreement. Most did not, though their murmur grew uneasily higher in pitch.

Dotson scowled and stood up. When he spoke, his voice was almost shrill with anger. “We do have word. There are still radios, and though the humans destroy the transmitters as soon as they dare to broadcast, we do hear a little. Farshore’s cities are also rubble. Their libraries are also in flames.”

“Lies,” insisted Potwheel.

“No more than the similar reports from elsewhere in our own land. Cities and

libraries and universities. The Worldtree itself. We are all under attack, all victims, all allies in this war. There are no tailed and tailless anymore. And we don’t need your sort of attitude.”

His audience’s tone was now a brightly gleaming knife-edge of anger. Potwheel looked around the storeroom, realized that he and his friends were a distinct minority, and sat down.

Dotson was sure he would not change his mind. When the humans were gone, when the Racs had rebuilt their civilization as best they could atop the ruins, he would still be there. Whatever unity the crisis forged between tailed and tailless would not last. Certainly it would not meld the two groups like two lumps of clay kneaded and spun and shaped and fired into mugs or bowls.

* * *

Later that night, Dotson and Sunglow both accompanied Gypsy Blossom to the mouth of the Foldstone tunnel. The valley's honeysuckle grew closest to the bluffs here, and one clump was high and thick enough to feel safe within.

The bot wore a light headset, and a wire trailed from her hiding place to the tunnel, where Racs listened to every word she murmured.

"There's no one near the Lakeview tunnel."

More wires strung through the tunnels carried orders: A squad of Racs left

the tunnel she had mentioned. They would ambush humans if they could, lay mines in a well-traveled path, or...

"There's a gap in the line across the pass."

Or they would sneak out of the valley to mine paths nearer the landing

field. They would leave, serving as couriers to other cities, other centers of resistance. They would guide incoming couriers back to the tunnels to reinforce the picture of disaster that sporadic radio reports could not make convincing.

The sound of gunfire reminded them all that she was only one, she could not see everywhere at once, and by the time a Rac squad reached a spot she had said was free of guards, it might be safe no longer.

And there was the hiss and crack of a particle beam striking through atmosphere. Fortunately that was rare at night, for radar could not easily pick out a Rac's gun and other gear against ground echo, while infrared detectors could not tell the difference between Racs and their ancestors. And, of course, in air the beams had far less range and potency.

"Watch out for... Something new." She had seen a hundred hand-sized machines scuttling from one of the humans' starships. Tiny robots programmed to patrol the valley. Mobile sensors to spot the Racs and call in fire. She laughed very softly. "They're everywhere, but not as everywhere as me. They're hard to spot at night, but no one suspects the honeysuckle even if they do notice. I can still tell you how to get past them, but if they release many more... I wish they'd given the honeysuckle hands or tentacles." Her own hands mimed grabbing, plucking, twisting.

Dotson grimaced as he watched her. Sunglow's claws dug gently into his wrist. There was something the bot had said earlier. Something about the seeds...

"What can you see in the Center?" he asked. "The Great Hall?"

"Yes, of course. The honeysuckle is touching the floor tiles now."

“Can you see that display case? The one with the seeds?”

“No. Where was it?”

He told her.

“There it is. But it’s broken.”

Its glass was smashed. Only one of the four legs upon which it had stood was intact.

“Didn’t you say there was a casket?”

That was missing. But there was a scatter of dark lumps upon the floor.

“The seeds,” said Sunglow.

Dotson nodded. “Can we get in there?”

The bot said nothing for a long moment. When she broke the silence at last, it was to whisper urgently, “We have to!”

“But can we?”

“They have blind spots even here,” said Gypsy Blossom. “There aren’t many of those machines this far from the ships.”

“Can they still sprout?”

“Hers did.”

“They designed them to last,” said the bot. “A thousand years. More. As long as it took you to find them and plant them. Then they would grow and multiply.”

“But we’ve only got you,” said Sunglow.

“It’s not too late.”

“Not if the war drags on,” said Dotson. “It takes months to grow a bot, and more months to teach it.”

“Not now,” said Gypsy Blossom. “Root-to-root is very fast.”

“But would they be safer as seeds?” asked Sunglow. “The humans haven’t even noticed them yet.”

“They’ll be safer in the caves,” said Dotson. “Under electric lights.”

* * *

Many Racs, both young and old, looked stricken by the destruction of the world they had known all their lives. Their pelts were rough for lack of grooming. Loose hairs rubbed off on walls and doorframes and seat backs. Their eyes were half closed, and the hairs of their brow ridges drooped. Their bellies already seemed less swollen than any could recall having seen before, though surely there had been famines in the past. Their voices shook and struggled not to keen.

Senior Hightail seemed even more distressed. His pelt’s layer of frosty white had soaked deeper. Half his whiskers were broken. His eyes watered constantly.

But his voice was as strong as ever when he said, “No!”

“We have to.” As earnestly and respectfully as he could manage, Dotson

Barbtail scratched the side of his muzzle once more. He looked at the Rac beside his one-time supervisor. Scholar Starsight, as unkempt as any other, trembling, saying nothing at all. He had helped Dotson and Sunglow show Marcus Hrecker and Tamiko Inoue this world. He had disappeared after Tamiko had executed Johnny Gatling.

Dotson had not even thought of him before this hour. He told himself that if he had, he would have assumed he was dead, along with so many other priests and scholars and other Rac elders who had been in Worldtree Center when the humans first attacked.

His supervisor had survived, though he looked like he wished he had not. Now he was part of what government the Racs still had.

“The seeds are there,” Dotson said. “They’re lying in the open, waiting for us. If we don’t go get them, some human will see them and recognize them for what they are. Or he’ll step on them. A wall will fall on them. A bomb will destroy them. And they’ll be lost.”

“My kin,” said Gypsy Blossom. Did her petals really smell more pungently floral for a moment? “We can’t leave them there.”

“They’ll help us,” said Sunglow.

“Not right away, of course.” Dotson had to be honest. “It takes a while to grow them up.”

“It’s a suicide mission,” said Senior Hightail. “I won’t allow it. No one else will either. We’ll tell the tunnel guards not to let you out.”

“We can do it,” said Dotson. “We have to. Our people move under the very

noses of the humans. They set mines and lay ambushes. They—“

“Not without me, they don’t,” said the bot. “The honeysuckle tells me where it’s safe, and—“

“And she’ll tell us.”

“You’re not going without me,” said Sunglow. She slapped her cast with an open hand. “I can manage.”

Scholar Starsight, still speechless, was nodding.

Dotson clamped his mouth shut for a tense moment. He wished she would stay safe in the caverns. Yet he knew she surely wished the same of him.

Senior Hightail was watching them both as if he knew what they were thinking. Once he looked aside at his nodding companion.

Dotson had to struggle with himself to say the words: “This is more important than either of us. Than anyone. It has to be done.”

“We don’t know how long the humans will stay,” said Gypsy Blossom. “If it’s very long, those seeds could be your only hope of survival. They’ll be able to use the honeysuckle just like me. They’ll be spies and guides.”

“And the loss of the plaques won’t matter,” said Dotson. “The data are all there in the honeysuckle.”

Now, at last, Senior Hightail was nodding. He understood.

He sighed and blinked and turned away with water pooling in the corners of his eyes. “I suppose you’re right. But...”

“I’m coming with you,” said Scholar Starsight.

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 19

* * *

The air boomed. The room shook. Dust sifted from the cracks of the stonework overhead, smelling of ancient, bone-dry vermin turds.

“The Baron’s right,” said Bela B’Genda. “We aren’t going to get anywhere without a nuke.”

“No,” said Marcus Aurelius Hrecker, though his mouth was twisted sour. He turned, scanning the nearly empty room. It was half of one of the old buildings that had survived the destruction of Worldtree Center. Just beyond the low door, a pair of insectile robots squatted on a fragment of masonry. Each waved a pair of slender antennae in the air, reporting whatever it saw and heard to a monitor at some Security console.

“Not very gyppin’ fast.” Eric Silber was watching Hrecker as he did every day now, his eyes half closed, his lips slightly curved. A stranger might have thought he looked content, relaxed, even happy. Hrecker thought his expression smug, smirking, superior. He had Hrecker’s woman, after all.

“Tough stuff,” said Bela B’Genda. “Cellulose-reinforced rock.”

“But we are getting there,” said Hrecker.

Unfortunately, one small carton was all that remained of the high explosives

the humans had brought with them. It sat on a stone shelf beside an empty wooden crate that had come from a quarry not far from the valley. The crate was stencilled with the coons’ danger symbol, which looked something like a bright red numeral seven. It signified a cliff over which one should not walk.

There had been other crates with that same symbol, all of them full of cylinders wrapped in waxy paper. All of them were gone now, packed into the holes they had drilled into the flank of the tower that once had been a tree, converted into noisy blizzards of chips and dust.

The cylinders were not dynamite but something that served the same purpose and did it just as well as what the Engineers had brought with them from Earth.

It was a shame, thought Marcus Aurelius Hrecker, that the coons hadn’t come up with something better. Maybe, if they had, the dent in the side of the tower would be a little bigger, a little more impressive, a little closer to toppling the massive thing.

But it wasn’t. And the building they had been using as a storeroom was empty. Empty of everything except that one yellow carton, and that was not enough to bother using.

“We’ve found a mining area,” said Silber. “Not a pit, but a mountainside full of adits. Tamiko said to tell you.”

Meyer Smith appeared in the room's doorway and stepped quickly to Bela B'Genda's side. They touched each other very briefly as he said, "A few more chips. Another foot. That's all."

Hrecker tried hard to bury the pain of the dual reminders of what he had lost by asking himself when Bela had shifted her attachment from the Baron to their chief.

"An overflight spotted a central equipment area," Silber went on. "One building had a big seven on the door."

Smith scowled. "The last time we raided one of those, they blew it up in our faces."

"We thought of that for you. The chopper will be ready at eleven." Silber laughed. "Tonight. Beside the Saladin."

They waited till he was gone before they reacted. Then Hrecker swore. "A filthy waste of time."

"There's always the nuke," said Bela B'Genda.

"We'd have to wait till we were leaving. So we wouldn't have anything else

to do. They'd set us to burning libraries. Hunting coons. Eric would like that."

Smith ostentatiously leaned toward the door, pretending to check for eavesdroppers though all three knew that if Silber was lingering outside the room, there was nothing they could do.

"I'd rather keep at it like this." Hrecker felt disgusted with himself, with the Engineers, with everything they were doing on First-Stop. "It may be a crucial symbol to the coons, but it's only a symbol, after all."

Smith was nodding.

* * *

An alarm was hooting.

Hrecker twisted to keep the rifle slung from his shoulder out of his way.

His body-armor vest thumped against the side of the helicopter's hatch. Then he shoved the last box of ammunition under the nearest seat and straightened. He remembered only at the last moment that he should not stand fully erect. This coon copter was low and long and narrow, a waspish affair with double rotors and a single line of seats, one behind the other. The landing gear—heavily sprung legs that could flex or straighten on command—added greatly to the insectile impression. Stubby wings were there more as supports for missile racks and cannons than as airfoils. To his right, a freshly painted cogwheel gleamed against the metal of the copter.

Meyer Smith swore and said, "We can't go yet. The Drake's on its way down."

The alarm stopped.

The sky began to rumble.

“It’s in air,” said Smith. “I can feel it.”

Hrecker pointed at a cluster of robots scurrying for cover in the cleft beneath a chunk of fallen wall.

“Greenshit,” said Bela B’Genda. “Let’s get out of here.”

Hrecker looked up at the ship. “The lock’s already sealed.”

They did not dare try to fly the copter to some safer place, for the rocket

blast of a landing starship would stir the valley’s air with impossible turbulence. Nor could they simply stand and wait for quiet to return. Unprotected ears could be deafened. And if a ship wandered even slightly from its descent path...

They wasted no time in discussion. They turned and ran straight toward the ruins around the coons’ Worldtree tower. Five minutes later, they were huddled in what had been a basement corridor. The guns in their hands and against their backs were trembling in sympathy with the shaking ground and air. Sweat pooled beneath Hrecker’s body armor. The hole that had led them to their shelter was flooding with bright light. More robots were visible now, clinging like lizards to the walls and ceiling of their burrow.

“He’d better keep his distance,” said Hrecker. He had to shout. “That chopper...”

“Don’t worry.” Bela B’Genda took his arm. “You want your old bunk back? The Baron needs taking down a peg.”

The Baron laughed. “They think only captains should have a whole room to themselves!”

“I’ve got a roommate already.”

“But not the one you had.”

“It’s easy to come back. You don’t even need to suit up now.”

Hrecker was tempted. But somehow he did not think that this was the moment to make the decision. He still hoped...

The sound outside was now nearly deafening. “He sounds right on top of us,” he screamed.

The Baron shook his head and shouted back, “Right where he oughta be.”

“Where’s he been?” When he realized he could no longer hear his own voice at all, he gestured.

The Baron gestured back, pointing skyward, drawing stars on his shoulders, indicating bars and confinement, and he understood. The ship had been taking the coons they had caged to meet the General. Or at least the General's ship, the Ajax, which would carry them to Earth.

The sound cut off. The entrance to their shelter went black once more.

"He's down."

"Let's go."

"Give the dust a chance to settle."

Hrecker wanted to check the helicopter. But he knew that Meyer Smith was

right. It would be a little while before the air had cleared enough to breathe comfortably. And the copter would surely be okay. The Drake would have landed in the same charred circle it had made when it first came to the valley, and there was another ship—or was it two?—between that spot and the Saladin.

When they emerged from the ruins, a single spotlight was scanning the ground around the Drake, searching for signs of fire. But the ship had landed nearly in the center of the circle it had left. There was smoke near one edge. Elsewhere there was nothing, not even steam, for the ship had baked the ground quite dry when it took off earlier that day.

"The copter looks okay."

"Let's go, then."

* * *

They were nearly back to the copter when something rustled in the honeysuckle beside the path they were following.

"Down!" barked Meyer Smith.

All four obeyed. The Baron was firing into the vegetation even before he hit the ground.

Someone was shooting back.

Hrecker tugged his own gun into position and pulled the trigger. When

nothing happened, he remembered the safety. An instant later, he was contributing his share to the din.

Beside him, Bela B'Genda made a grunting, sighing noise.

Was she dead?

“Back up! Back to the ruins! We’re getting reinforcements!”

He began to snake his body backward along the path, into grass, among honeysuckle stems, still firing.

Bela lay where she had fallen.

He stopped. Was she dead? If she wasn’t, how could they leave her behind?

He said nothing.

He simply set down his rifle, raised himself to a crouch, and scuttled toward the body.

He heard someone yelling, “Hrecker!” just before he stopped hearing anything at all.

* * *

He could not have stayed unconscious long.

He woke when someone yanked his hands from under his chest and he lurched.

Pain stabbed through his skull. His shoulders protested when his arms were pulled behind his back.

“Unhh,” he grunted. The left eye opened. The other struggled to pry open the slightest of gaps, and then the sticky goo that sealed it tore apart. His blood. Still wet. Clotting. Not dry.

Why couldn’t he see anything?

Of course. It was night, wasn’t it? It was dark out. The only light the

dimly starlit sky, the wash of starship spotlights directed elsewhere. That was dirt beneath his nose. It was shiny because his own blood covered it.

They were lashing his wrists together. Tight. Too tight. He tried to complain, but the words he could manage were only grunts, and when they kicked him in the ear with a bare foot, he wisely stopped trying to speak.

A bare foot? Then they were coons, weren’t they? They had to be. People wore shoes.

Why were they tying him up? Coons didn’t take prisoners. People didn’t either, not once they needed no more slave laborers or caged samples.

A foot struck him, two feet, hip and shoulder, and he rolled. He closed his eyes as if that could diminish

the hammering in his skull.

He opened them again, and there was a coon standing over him.

He knew that coon. He knew he did, even though it was too dark to see the distinctive markings of his pelt. There was a shape to the head and muzzle and ears. There was...

He managed to squeeze the name from his reluctant throat: "Dotson?"

Dotson Barbtail turned his back. Other coons hoisted Hrecker into the air and threw him over a shoulder. Before he passed out once more, he glimpsed several furry bodies on the ground.

* * *

When he came to again, his right eye refused to open. The lid felt grainy.

He remembered blood and knew that it had dried. There was pressure on his head.

A bandage?

Someone stepped in front of his left eye.

He blinked. His head hurt, and there were haloes of light around everything

he saw. He thought that meant he had a concussion. How bad was it?

There was an arched stone roof overhead. Solid rock cracked in natural, jagged, wandering patterns. But not a cave. Too regular for that. A tunnel, then.

He blinked again. "Hine, uh buff."

The coon nodded.

"Do'sn?"

He nodded again, and Hrecker felt a flood of relief wash through him.

"You're a prisoner of war." The voice was as tight as a violin string.

He tried to smile. If anything, the relief felt even stronger now.

Behind him, a thin and acrid voice said, "He's barely conscious."

He shook his head. "Nnn—D-i-nn wann—" He stopped to swallow and take a

deep breath and try again. “D-i-n want, blup th’ tower. Don’ haff to, ‘ny muh.”

He was out of it now, out of the war, and in his mind he saw a coffee mug filled with thick fuzzy leaves and purple blossoms. It felt like a benediction.

He was no longer an Engineer, he realized. He was a prisoner of war.

He no longer had to destroy what he actually admired.

This time he did smile.

“He’s delirious,” said the voice behind Hrecker.

“Wh...” He struggled with the words. “Whuh Sung’ow?”

“Your people have her,” said Dotson Barbtail. Now his voice was almost shrill. “She may be dead.”

“It’s daytime now,” said the other coon. “We can see them building a cage.

They must have prisoners.”

“I hope so.” But Dotson’s voice was no less bleak. “Maybe we can trade you.”

He tried to shake his head, but suddenly the pain was too much. “No,” he wanted to say. “Peez, no. Kee’ me.” But all he could do was close his eyes.

Dimly he heard the swack of something long and thin striking fur-covered flesh. The voice behind him, so thin, so bitter, said, “Interrogation.”

* * *

Later, alone in his segment of tunnel except for a row of bandaged coons who rarely budged, he tried to imagine how Sunglow would be treated as a prisoner of war.

Would they put her in that cage they were building?

Would Tamiko recognize her? The color of her pelt and the tail she didn’t

have would help.

Was there anything else? Was her lower lip slightly fuller than that of other coons? He tried to picture her in his mind but failed. A coon was a coon to human eyes. Only another coon would register a tiny bald spot on a left brow, result of a childhood injury. Or an extra cluster of whiskers on the right.

Tamiko would not. Even if she chose to look at the prisoners.

He supposed she would do that. She would hear he was missing. She would be

distraught. She would visit the cage because that would be the closest she could come to him. The coon prisoners of the humans would be proxies for the human prisoners of the coons.

He laughed at his idiocy.

Human prisoner. He had seen no others.

She had dropped him. She was with Silber now. She wouldn't care about him.

But maybe... Would General Lyapunov tell her to see who they had? To see if they had any coon important enough to trade for him?

Not that he was that important.

And he hadn't seen any other prisoners.

Maybe the General wouldn't bother.

Then why build a cage? Why not just shoot the coons they had and be done with them?

Because they would want to interrogate them. Find out what they had been up to in the valley last night. Where they had been going. What the coons were planning.

Would she also ask what the coons might be doing to Hrecker?

When he rolled his head from side to side in slow negation, the lump of his

bandage pressed on his head wound. The pain made him gasp.

No. Of course not. She was done with him. And there was always a price for victory, even to the righteous. This time, he was part of that price.

On the other hand, he did not feel like a price. He felt more like he had received a refund on his destiny. Or a transfer to another line.

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 20

* * *

When they pushed through the blackout curtains at the end of the Turnstone tunnel, Dotson Barbtail showed his teeth and snorted. The truck on which he had stood to watch Sunglow's near death so few days before was still there, intact, undamaged, and utterly useless. It could be driven within the tunnels and caverns, but what for? It was meant for use outside, where its exhaust could dissipate harmlessly. Yet no tunnel was open enough for more than Racs on foot to pass. Certainly no tunnel opened on a world or time without human foes, where one could move without fear of particle beams or guns or missiles.

The gap above the pile of rubble was filled with night. They could see only stars and the lighted ports of the human starships. The buildings in what was left of Worldtree Center were black.

"It's dark enough." Gypsy Blossom leaned forward, grasped the rubble with her one good hand, and began to crawl toward the outside. "Let's go."

"Wait!" The Rac who seized her ankle had once run a restaurant called the Saucepot. He had gone by the same name. Now the harness that crossed his paunch sagged with clips of ammunition and grenades. The left side of his face and neck had been shaved; a livid, puffy seam crossed the bare area, the stitches still in place, black against the skin. "Can't you hear that?"

"What?"

He gestured, and every Rac in the tunnel fell silent. Dotson lay one hand

against the side of the tunnel. The rock vibrated. The air throbbed.

"Oh, no." His guts felt loosened. "More ships? More humans?"

No one answered him, and he began to tremble with the air and rock around

him. Was the destruction of all the Racs had built about to intensify? The humans were foes of the Gypsies, their Remakers, but they were destroying everything, even what the Racs had accomplished on their own, before they had climbed the Worldtree. Would anything be left?

Not, he thought as his and the world's trembling grew ever worse, if those humans could not be stopped. If they ever left, the Racs would have an empty world. They would have to rebuild everything from the barest of beginnings.

Yet that might not take long. The survivors held a great deal of what the humans were attacking in

libraries in their heads. There was, Gypsy Blossom assured them all, a memory in the honeysuckle that she and the other bots they would soon be growing from Remaker seeds could read. If they ever met the humans a second time, they would not be crippled so easily again. Indeed, he hoped, the outcome would be quite the opposite.

If only Kitewing had planted those seeds when he first found them!

Or if the priests had not chosen to treat them as holy relics.

The human starship, far too huge to be called a thundertree like those the

Racs had just begun to use, was now near the ground. The glare of its exhaust lit the valley like a noontime sun and flooded the tunnel. Dotson clutched the side of the truck's flat bed with both hands.

Someone finally screamed an answer, audible only because the mass of rock around them muffled the deafening roar outside. "They sent one up this morning. This must be it, come back to its roost."

Silence. Silence that left their ears ringing, and dark that dazzled with afterimages. The ship was down.

"They're just as stunned," said Sunglow. "And their attention is all on the ship. If we hurry..."

Dotson led the way over the rubble mound and out of the tunnel. In a straggling line, they dashed across the open ground outside toward the nearest honeysuckle clump. He could hear the thumps of bare feet against bits of wreckage, hissing intakes of breath, muttered exclamations. He hissed himself when blossoms poured cold, sticky liquid down his back and side. But no one cried out in pain or swore aloud.

Gypsy Blossom was beside him when he reached the greenery. As soon as they reached the bare spot where she had stood once before, they stopped. She unfurled her ruffs of roots and probed the soil. "No guards," she said. "They had to take shelter from the ship too."

"The robots?" asked Scholar Starsight.

"They stay out of the honeysuckle." She pointed at a darker lump beside a

stem. Dotson knelt and picked it up and let his fingers explore its segmented shell and jointed legs. It was sticky.

"Nectar," said the bot. "I poured a blossom over this one the other day. There were sparks and now they avoid the vines. So we can stay out of their way." She paused, and there was just enough light for him to see the tip of her tongue between her lips. "But there's someone in the ruins. In a hole. They must have been caught outside. We'll have to wait."

"We can get closer."

As in the ruined city above the bluffs, the valley's honeysuckle still

showed the influence of pruning shears and other restraints. Yet its powers of growth were asserting themselves. It stood higher than it ever had before, and each clump was putting out tendrils of vine and leaf and nectar-laden blossom as if it wished to merge with its neighbors and cover all the valley. Its cloying fragrance filled the night air.

But there still remained a great many open spaces—the rubble-strewn road that had encircled the valley, the flattened remnants of what had been homes and other buildings, gravel paths, and patches of mossy lawn.

The Racs had to move from cover to cover, pausing only when honeysuckle vines surrounded them. At each such moment, Gypsy Blossom put down her roots again to consult their shelter's senses.

The newly landed ship turned on a spotlight and swept the perimeter of its landing zone. Human guards began to emerge from the other ships and resume their patrols of the valley. The robots moved about.

The bot deftly guided them around each hazard.

They passed a ship beside which sat a Rac helicopter, long and narrow. They

crossed another path to slip among the honeysuckle stems, and footsteps made them freeze.

The night was no less dark than it had been, but Dotson could see that the pelts of his companions were as matted with spilled nectar as his own. The bot, on the other hand, seemed untouched.

Four humans were approaching on the path. He could see that they were armed.

Three men, one woman.

Someone shifted position. A vine branch moved. A blossom spilled. A twig snapped.

“Down!”

Dotson obeyed the shouted command as promptly as the humans for whom it had

been meant. Bullets whipped through the vegetation over his head. The Racs beside him fired back.

Grunts and cries of pain signalled that not every bullet was going overhead.

“Run! Go back!” That was Gypsy Blossom's voice, as shrill as a panicked Rac's.

The humans had stopped firing. Were they all dead? Or were they only falling back to await reinforcements?

The Racs staggered into view, trampling the remnants of the honeysuckle vines. There were three bodies on the ground. Someone was squatting over Scholar Starsight, feeling his throat. “Dead.”

Saucepot had survived the encounter so far. Now his voice was saying, “We got one.”

“Let's go.” But Dotson had taken no more than three steps before he stumbled on a body. Covered with cloth, said his toes, not fur. Human, then.

It groaned.

“Grab this one,” he said, and then he stood aside while others bound the man's hands and rolled him over.

“What for?” asked Saucepot. “They’re the Enemy. We should kill them all.”

When he kicked the bloody head, one eye blinked and opened and stared at Dotson.

The mouth worked and croaked his name.

He recognized the man. Hrecker. Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. What was he doing here?

He refused to ask. He turned his back. But then he said, “Bring him.”

It was not until the remains of the Rac squad were once more safe within the tunnel, their eyes adjusting to the lights, that he realized neither Sunglow nor Gypsy Blossom was with them.

* * *

Where were they? Dotson slapped his hand against the smooth stone of the cul-de-sac that had been their quarters, all three of them.

Was this small space now his alone?

Were they dead or captive?

He muttered shrilly to himself. He pounded the walls. He kicked their meager

possessions and paced and spun and swore in the light of the lantern.

A brown Rac appeared in the opening to the larger storeroom outside the cul-de-sac. “Will you quiet down and go to sleep? You’re keeping us awake.”

Dotson froze and glared and hunched his shoulders. He could feel his back hair raising, bristling with aggression. He could not attack the humans. He could not rescue his mate or the bot. But... “You’re Potwheel.”

“Right.” The other curled a lip and exposed teeth as if to say, “So what?”

“You insulted her.”

Now the other was bristling too. Both males began to sing deep in their

throats. Dotson took in the bulge of muscle in the potter’s shoulders and knew that he had no chance of victory. He would be immobilized as soon as those hands touched him, those arms wrapped around him, those teeth tore into his ear or throat or shoulder. Yet he stepped forward anyway.

But before Potwheel could do more than lean toward the fight, an arm tugged him backward. “Get out

of here, idiot.”

Potwheel obeyed. Dotson did not know the ancient female who faced him now.

“You’re an idiot, too. You think you’re the only one who’s lost people?”

He hung his head. The other could not possibly be a physical threat to any adult male, but her scorn was a lash.

“Get out there in the tunnels,” she said. “Walk it off. Maybe by morning you’ll know what to do.

“Where’s the bot?” cried a scratchy voice behind her.

She jerked her head. “Better you should worry about her. She’s the only one we’ve got. Now, git.”

He too obeyed, though he had no hope. If Sunglow was dead, there was nothing he could do. If she was a prisoner, she would surely soon be dead.

Gypsy Blossom was gone as well, and with her much of their hope of ever restoring what the humans were destroying.

It was all his fault. He had led them into a trap.

Why had they let him do that? What had made his fellow Racs think he was a

leader? There were so many who were better qualified. They had the age. They had the experience, gained in skirmishes with the Farshorns.

But none of them had stolen a bot seed and raised a bot and worn the aura of the Remakers.

And what would the humans do when they realized what that corpse or prisoner was?

He could not sit still. The hormones that had flooded his system in preparation for battle left him restless. So did sheer anxiety.

He walked endlessly, until he blinked and yawned and staggered. He tried to rest, but hormones and worry drove him to his feet once more, and again. Shortly after dawn filled the valley with light, he reached the tunnel mouth. There were others there before him, holding powerful binoculars to their faces. One heard his steps, looked, and held out his binoculars. He did not speak.

Dotson stepped up onto the truckbed and accepted the offer. The lenses brought the ruins of Worldtree Center leaping into view, and the wall of the Great Hall, a bare floor, a grid of steel rods being welded into a large cage by human workers. Nearby, guards watched a dozen huddled prisoners.

“They flew most of them in this morning.”

One of the prisoners was bedraggled and dirty, but her pelt was a

distinctive gold. She had no tail. Gray fabric dangled from her crooked arm; where it had been her cast shone white. The similar camouflage wrapped around the bandage on her thigh was intact.

Every time she goes anywhere near those humans, he thought. I should cage her myself the next time she wants to do that.

“She’s alive,” he breathed. Then he yawned, and he felt for the first time that night as if he might really be able to sleep.

“Looks like she’ll stay that way too.” The other Rac was holding out his hand for his binoculars. “For a while. There’s not much we can do.”

“But she is alive.”

* * *

“Why are you doing this to us?” The voice was taut as wire. It sounded like burning hair smelled. It grated on the nerves.

It belonged to the military interrogation officer who had been with Dotson when their prisoner first woke up and claimed that he had not wanted to destroy the Worldtree, that he did not want to be traded for Sunglow, that he wanted to stay with the Racs. He had not believed then. He did not now.

The back of a delivery van had been converted into an interrogation room. A steel grid stretched across its center. Shackled to its bars was Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. He was naked, and his bare skin glistened repulsively. Behind him, behind the grid, stood a female Rac with a look of agony in her eyes. A bright light hung from the ceiling, angled to strike the human’s face full on.

“Why?” The interrogator held a wooden baton in one hand. He sat on a tall stool to Hrecker’s right. Dotson occupied the padded driver’s seat, swiveled to face the back of the van.

Hrecker licked his lips. “I’m not. I didn’t want this.”

“But you’re here. And she—” He lifted his muzzle to indicate the female

behind the prisoner. “She lost her parents, her mate, her children, her home.”

The female reached through the grid and carefully stabbed one finger into the center of the bandage that covered Hrecker’s head wound. He gasped and whitened.

She smiled. A reedy chuckle escaped her throat.

The interrogator reached out with his baton and lifted Hrecker’s limp penis.

He jabbed at his scrotum. “Want to keep that?”

The female chuckled again. Her claws dimpled Hrecker’s hip.

“Tell us.”

“They hate the Gypsies.”

“We’re not Gypsies.”

“But they made you, didn’t they?” He gasped again. The female’s claws were at his genitals now.

The interrogator tapped her wrist with his baton. “Not yet,” he said.

“They only remade us, Mark,” interrupted Dotson.

“That’s enough,” said Hrecker. “The Engineers are holy because they don’t change genes. They build machines.”

“So do we.”

“But you’re trying. Were trying. You showed us, in your lab.”

“I was still a long, long way from success.”

The interrogator poked him in the gut. He coughed painfully. “How do we destroy them?”

“You can’t. You don’t have the guns.”

“What about Sunglow?” When the human shook his head, confused, Dotson described the cage he had seen being built. “How can we get her back?”

“They probably hope you’ll try.”

The interrogator nodded as if that was a tactic he knew.

“I’d like to help—“

A chuckle from the shadows behind his head, one furry hand poking and pricking down his side, another lifting the edge of the bandage on his head.

“Tell us how to get into one of those ships.”

“You’d need explosives.”

The female was tugging the bandage from his head. The adhesive let go of his skin with ripping sounds. The smell of antiseptic flooded the van. When his wound was exposed, she

began to pluck at the stitches that held it closed.

“Stop her,” said Dotson.

But it was too late. Hrecker’s eyes were shut, tears leaking from their corners, and his body was slumping on the grid.

“Enough.”

“You don’t believe him, do you?”

“I think I do,” said Dotson. “I got acquainted with him before the attack.

Sunglow too. And he seemed saner than the others.”

“You know we can’t let him free among us.”

“You can’t keep him tied up all the time, either.”

The female behind the grid looked disappointed.

“We have cells. They used them in the old days.”

* * *

As soon as Dotson Barbtail saw the cell, he understood why a truck had been used for the interrogation room. The only light came through a narrow space above the thick-planked door, there was no sign of an electrical outlet or light fixture, and there was barely room enough for one adult Rac or human to lie down on the floor.

Hrecker was awake when the electric cart stopped in the corridor and the driver got off to open the cell door. He raised one hand to touch the bandage that had been replaced while he was out. Then he said, “You don’t trust me, do you?”

“I think I do, Mark,” said Dotson. He hoped his use of the other’s name would prove reassuring. “But...”

“Yeah. I know.” He peered into the dimness past the cell’s massive door.

“Home, sweet home.”

Dotson helped him to his feet and gripped his shoulder while he took two tottering steps into the doorway. “One of the first things you said was, ‘Kee’ me.’ Why should we?”

Hrecker braced one hand on the frame. “Because you’re the good guys. Because I never really wanted... Because I hate the thought of what we’ve done.” He swung his gaze from one end of the cell to

the other and shddered beneath Dotson's hand. "Not even any straw. I'll need a bucket, at least."

"Later," said the cart's driver. "We'll bring what you need." Then, abruptly, he turned to face down the corridor the way they had come. A voice was echoing. "What's that?"

The echo repeated, and this time it was barely understandable: "Dotson!"

"Here!" he yelled just as a figure appeared around a corner in the distance.

"They told me you were in the dungeon."

"Gypsy Blossom!"

"Did our side get some prisoners too?"

He thumped the bot on one arm as soon as she was within reach. "What happened to you? Where were you? Why didn't you...?"

"Who's that?"

"That's Mark. I told you about him."

"That's a bot!" cried Hrecker.

"Nothing else," said Gypsy Blossom.

"I've only seen pictures. But that means the Gypsies are around!" He sounded fascinated, not frightened or alarmed.

"Uh-uh," said the bot. "Only their seeds."

"Where'd you go?" insisted Dotson. "And what's..." He reached for the small sack the bot held in one hand, but she grinned and moved it out of his reach.

More voices down the hall distracted his attention. More Racs appeared around the corner, and Gypsy Blossom laughed. "I wouldn't stop for them. I wouldn't tell them anything. You first!"

"Then..."

She held the sack away and laughed again.

Senior Hightail was the first of the newcomers to reach them. "Is that...?"

He was pointing at the sack and panting. "Did you...?"

The bot was nodding. "I hid after the fight. I buried myself in that honeysuckle thicket, and I stayed right there all day. I didn't dare move, even when the vines showed me Sunglow being hauled off."

"She's in a cage now."

“She’ll be all right,” said Hrecker, though he did not seem to believe his own words.

Someone snorted.

“I know,” said the bot. “But I couldn’t do a thing. I just waited, and the next night I managed to reach the ruins.”

“You found them.”

“Right.” This time Gypsy Blossom let Dotson take the sack from her hand.

He knelt and poured the contents of the sack onto the floor.

“They look like acorns or hickory nuts,” said Hrecker.

“Careful!”

“Wh-- ?” Dotson’s fingers flew over the scattered seeds. As soon as he

touched the clay imitation he had substituted for Gypsy Blossom’s seed, he set another to rolling as a distraction. He then palmed the fake, praying no one would notice, and tucked it into a harness pouch without a word.

But then Senior Hightail was on his knees as well and pointing at two that showed dark cracks and pale, creamy tendrils peeking out. “Ahh,” they said together, and each Rac picked one up with a reverent touch.

“They’re already sprouting,” said the bot tenderly. “Mission accomplished.”

“What are they?” asked Hrecker.

“Bot seeds,” said Dotson. “The Gypsies left them with the plaques. We were supposed to plant them long ago. For allies, helpers.”

“We need soil,” said Senior Hightail. “Immediately!”

“We can grow them here,” said Dotson. “In the caves, under lights.”

“Not all of them,” said Gypsy Blossom. “What if the humans discover us?”

“Then elsewhere,” said Senior Hightail. “As far from here as possible.

Someplace in the forests to the south. We’ll send them with runners right away.”

There was silence as he and Dotson divided the seeds into two piles. The two seeds that were already sprouting were in the same pile. “Plant these here,” said Dotson. “We can’t take any chances on their

drying out.”

“How long?” asked Hrecker. “How long does it take a bot to grow up and become an ally? How long did it take you to raise that one?” He nodded at Gypsy Blossom.

Dotson Barbtail had no chance to answer before Gypsy Blossom said, “It will go faster with these. We know about the honeysuckle, and I can use that to teach them.”

“The honeysuckle?” Hrecker had known about bots. He had known they were part plant and grew from seed. But now he looked confused.

No one tried to help.

Dotson said, “We have to fight you off ourselves for now, if we can. But if the war drags on long enough, or if you come back later, we’ll have help.”

“They won’t fight you forever,” said Hrecker. “They have enough nukes to obliterate this valley and every city on the planet. And they’ll use them if they have to.”

Silence greeted that statement.

Finally, Gypsy Blossom said, “Then we should stop all resistance. Surrender totally. Pretend to be defeated utterly. Let them have the libraries and universities and factories and plaques.”

Hrecker nodded.

Senior Hightail said simply, “No.”

The other Racs all nodded. There could be no question of surrender to the Engineers. They would continue to resist, though it cost them everything.

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 21

* * *

The room-sized cage was a ragged, jagged thing. Its crooked, corroded bars had been salvaged from the ruins. Fragments of concrete still clung to them everywhere except where the humans had welded metal to metal. Yet despite its jury-rigged appearance, it was sturdy enough to keep what it held, too sturdy to let hope of freedom stay.

Most of the prisoners squatted in the center of the cage, as far from the bars as possible. About half of them had tails. All had been stripped of the harnesses and pouches that were their clothing, and most refused to look at the humans. Few made even the slightest attempt to groom themselves or each other. Their heads were bent, their eyes on the rock and their own scattered turds beneath their feet, their spirits quenched.

The only exception was Sunglow. She was just as naked as the others except for her cast and bandage, but she stood erect, fur bristling, one clawed hand wrapped around the rusty iron bars, and glared at Tamiko Inoue and Eric Silber and Meyer Smith and the Baron. She ignored the pair of guards on the other side of the cage.

Smith and the Baron looked uncomfortable, as if they both felt responsible for Bela B'Genda's death, they both mourned, and neither knew what to say to the other. Silber wore a slight grin, a smirk, supercilious and arrogant, that said of course the beasts were in the cage. How else could it be?

Tamiko's red-rimmed eyes gave her an advantage. Her glare was even fiercer than Sunglow's. "One dead," she growled, and both Smith and the Baron grimaced at the reminder.

"You killed more of us." Sunglow's voice was shrill. How could they dare to take offense at the few her people had claimed in recompense? "Thousands of us. Tens of thousands."

Silber waved a hand dismissively and grated, "You're not human beings."

"Where is he?" asked Tamiko.

Sunglow added nothing at all to her glare.

"Never mind," said Silber. He wrapped one arm around her shoulders as if he

wished he could comfort her. "He doesn't matter anymore. And besides, he's dead." Then he looked at the other men. "She didn't sleep well last night, you know."

She jerked away from his arm and rounded on him. "His body wasn't there," she hissed. "And this time don't you dare tell me they wanted a sample to dissect! Every human they have ever killed has been left right where he fell."

He made a placating gesture. She slapped his hand away. "Yes, we split. We disagreed on too much basic stuff. But don't think you're as good as him."

The other men looked away. Sunglow blinked and showed her teeth.

“Look at her!” cried Silber. “She wants to tear our throats out!”

“That’s a coon’s smile,” said Tamiko. “She’s laughing at us.”

“I’m sure he’s alive,” said the coon. “And he’ll stay that way as long as...”

“As long as that Barbtail fellow knows you’re okay?”

“No.” Sunglow shook her head. “He doesn’t make such decisions. He’s no chief.”

“All of you, then? If we leave you here where they can see you? That’s why we put this cage outdoors.”

“Lyapunov wants them upstairs.” Silber sounded pleased. Dotson Barbtail would then not know his mate was safe. Hrecker would die. And he would have no more competition, close or distant, past or present, for Tamiko’s affections.

The moments stretched while Tamiko did not answer.

“Well?”

Still staring at Sunglow, she pointed toward the other prisoners. “Pick one,” she said. “Tell him to tell Dotson you’re okay.”

“He knows that already. He can see.”

“I’ll try to keep you that way when he can’t.”

“But if we ever—“ Silber began.

“Shut up.”

“You can’t trust them.”

“More than some humans,” said Meyer Smith.

“How do you know he’s even alive?” asked Silber.

“I hope he is, and that will have to do.”

“You’re upset,” he said. “Tired. Overtired. You need to go back to bed.”

When he reached for her shoulder once more, she slapped him away. “Not with you!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you can get your stuff out of my quarters. Now!”

Both Meyer Smith and the Baron, despite their own loss, seemed embarrassed.

They turned away.

Sunglow would have been just as embarrassed if she had seen Racs acting like that in public. Now, however, she grinned and showed her teeth and almost laughed out loud.

Eric Silber looked both astonished and annoyed.

Tamiko Inoue glared at him as fiercely as she had confronted Sunglow in her cage, and at last the tears began to flow.

Sunglow contained her laughter. If she taunted them, she thought, she would surely die. That one, the one Tamiko hated, would shoot her just to vent the anger that filled him. Then he would kill the rest, and none would escape. Silently, she backed away from the bars and laid one hand on the head of a prisoner whose back was bare skin, still black with char near one hip, brilliant red everywhere else, crusted with dried serum and pus.

He looked up at her. “I heard.”

“You need to be in a hospital.”

“There aren’t any anymore.”

“We’ve still got doctors.” She lifted her elbow to draw his eyes to her cast. “You know where to go?”

He nodded.

By the time he had struggled to his feet and reached the cage’s narrow door,

Tamiko was there as well, waiting for him, a key in her hand. Two guards stood behind her, weapons aimed at the injured coon.

“What’s your name?”

“I used to...” He stopped to gasp for breath. His pain was obvious. “Big white spot. Starback.”

“It’ll grow in again.”

He shook his head. Silber barked a laugh. “Ha! You’re Scarback now.”

Tamiko opened the door. “Tell him.”

“He will,” said Sunglow, and then both women watched the injured coon hobble toward the pass between the valley and the landing field.

No one saw Sunglow’s satisfied nod, but the Baron said, “He’ll wait till he’s out of sight before he changes direction. That’s what I’d do.”

* * *

Tamiko watched the prisoners march from the cage to the waiting Drake. Their wrists were separated by short lengths of pipe from whose ends emerged loops of wire. The prisoners themselves were linked by a chain that ran over each one’s left shoulder, between the arms, and under the pipe. A guard held each end of the chain.

The cage was empty now. Useless. A waste of metal and time and energy. The chains would have served just as well for the brief time the prisoners had had to be held.

But General Lyapunov had ordered her to bring them up to the Ajax.

She had been reporting on the nighttime skirmish. “We captured one,” she had said. “And funny thing, she and her mate were our guides those first few days.”

“We can’t play favorites,” the General had said. His iron-gray hair was a brush above a high forehead, dark eyes, a flattened nose, and thin lips that she had rarely seen parted for a laugh or smile. “Or make pets of them.”

“Of course not. But...”

“Don’t waste my time. But what?”

“He’s one of the tailed coons. She’s not. And there’s a lot of tension between those groups.”

“Explain.”

“If you have a tail, you get mostly menial jobs. The others think you’re dumb, your morals are suspect. The tailed coons’ countries on the other continent—they call it Farshore—are less advanced.”

The General had looked thoughtful for a long moment. Finally he had said, “Bring them up here.”

What did he think he could do with them? She had thought he already had all the zoo specimens he needed. Did he think he could exploit the coons’ differences? Get them to war against each other and

thereby simplify his job?

* * *

“Yes,” he was saying now. “We might be able to do just that.”

“I don’t think so, sir. They’re united now. They have a common enemy.”

“Of course they do.” He reached across his desk and pressed a row of

pressure pads. Four veedo screens came to life on the wall to his left. They showed a single room that had been stripped of all its furnishings. In it sat or sprawled or paced the prisoners. They had already tried all the doors set into the room’s walls, and several stood open, revealing empty cupboards. “But the conflicts do remain.” He pointed at one cluster of coons with tails, another of coons without.

General Lyapunov touched another pressure pad, and a speaker came to life.

They could hear the coons, their voices pitched about the same as humans.

“They’re nervous,” said Tamiko. She was standing stiffly erect by the room’s doorway, thankful for the spin that gave the Ajax an illusion of gravity. “Scared and mad and worried. If they were as calm as they look, they’d sound like bears or something.”

The General shushed her with a gesture. “Listen.”

“They’re going to eat us,” one was saying.

Someone snorted. “Then they’d’ve dressed us out already.”

“That’s Sunglow,” said Tamiko.

“They want to hear the main course scream. I scream, you scream—“ “Shut up.”

“Torture us.”

“Put us in a zoo.”

“We got the tailless ones from Farshore,” said Tamiko. “The tailed coons are

local. But you wouldn’t know they’re enemies, would you? They sound like old friends. Classmates. Neighbors. Their enemy is us now, not each other.”

The General grunted.

“A museum,” said one of the tailed coons.

“They already had enough for that,” said Sunglow.

“Dissection, then.”

“They aren’t about to let us go when they’re done with us.”

“Not their style.”

One of the screens showed the room’s door swinging open. Through it stumbled

a slim coon whose fur was almost white. As soon as the door slammed shut behind her, she slumped against the wall.

“What happened?”

“What did they do to you?”

“What...”

She shook her head. “Just... questions. And wires.” She pointed weakly at her tongue, her crotch. Her tail jerked convulsively.

The General was not smiling, but his lips were parted. When he noticed Tamiko’s stare, he said, “Interrogation.”

“Did you learn anything?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t seen the report yet. And I won’t until they’ve processed the rest. But no, I don’t expect to learn a thing.”

“Then why... ?”

“Do the electrodes bother you?” When she nodded jerkily, he went on. “Then why don’t you take over the job? You’ve got one advantage. That one knows you.”

He was pointing at Sunglow.

“What do you want to know, sir?”

“Where are they hiding their guerrillas? They can’t stop us. They can’t even slow us down much. But they’ve killed too many of us. I want to step on them.”

* * *

“Are you going to use the wires on me too?” The coon’s voice was almost shrill.

Tamiko shook her head and made a face. “I’m not a professional interrogator.

I don’t want to be. But the General told me to talk to you.”

Sunglow did not answer as the guard shoved her onto the seat of a wooden bench whose carvings said it had come from Farshore. A heavy strap anchored it to the wall so that in zero gee it would not float free.

“You can take off the cuffs,” said Tamiko, but the guard shook his head. “One hand,” she added. The coon’s posture, the arm in the cast crooked across her front, the other elbow thrust backward and to the side, the shoulder hunched, all to bring her wrists close enough to chain. “Fasten it to the leg of the bench.”

The guard hesitated, but then he seemed to see that this would serve the purpose of preventing escape just as well. He obeyed.

When he was gone, Tamiko said, “I’m glad you survived. But what were you doing in the valley that night? What were you after?”

Sunglow did not say a word.

“Not that it really matters. We’re winning, of course. But your people keep shooting at us. They set traps and ambushes. We have to stop them.”

There was only silence in reply.

“We have to stop them, you know.” After a moment’s pause, Tamiko said, “We

know where your people hide. In the jungle. But what about the coons who lived in and around the valley? We didn’t kill them all. I hope we didn’t.”

Did the coon lift her eyes in wary doubt?

“It’s true.”

“Then why... ?”

“We have to. We’re giving you back your natural lives. Restoring your culture to something more like what it should be, what it would be if the Gypsies hadn’t interfered.”

“You want to kill us all.”

Tamiko shook her head, but instead of saying, “No,” she changed the subject.

“You and Dotson surprised me, you know.”

There was no answer.

“You’re of different types, different races, tailed and tailless. Yet you’re

lovers, mates.” The human leaned over her metal desk and stared intently at the coon. “They exploit you. They hold you down. They refuse to admit that you’re as good as them.”

There was still no answer, but was that a hint of agreement in the coon’s eyes?

“Doesn’t that bother you? Of course it does. That’s why you coons have wars.”

“They won’t share the Worldtree with other Racs.” She emphasized the last word.

Tamiko did not miss the hint that the coons did not like that label, but she refused to change her usage. It was humans, not beasts, who named the universe and all it held. And besides, she told herself silently, the coons were in no position either to make demands or to express preferences. Soon their Worldtree would not be there to share, not even with other coons. “We could change that, you know. If your people helped us.”

Sunglow glared at her, and her claws clutched at the arm of the bench.

“You tailless coons used to be in charge, didn’t you? We could put you back on top.”

* * *

“I thought we were starting to be friends. Mark and I, you and Dotson. You were showing us your world, and we were liking you. You seemed to be liking us.”

“Not that much,” said Sunglow. She was on the bench once more, but this time the pipe-and-wire handcuffs rested on Tamiko’s desk.

The human woman seemed to be coming to trust her. She promised herself she would say or do nothing that might weaken that trust, for without it she could have no hope at all. With it...

“And then we had to go and spoil it, hmm? We could use some help.”

“Doing what?”

“Finding the rest of those Gypsy plaques. Getting their alien knowledge out of your books and libraries.”

Sunglow looked away from the human woman. What she wanted deserved no answer at all. No Rac could possibly give such help.

“Would you rather just fight the tailed coons? That would do.”

“I wondered once,” said Sunglow, “if you were Gypsies, or anything at all

like them. Would you give us back what the tailed ones took away from us?”

She fell silent, lifted her arms and forced them down again, looked at her feet, looked at Tamiko across the metal desk from the quaint wooden bench. Finally, she added, “But no. You want to take the same thing. You just want to take it from us both.”

Tamiko’s brief laugh sounded strained. “At least we’re fair.”

“Yes.” Sunglow sighed. “There’s that.”

“Will you tell me now where they’re hiding? The General’s getting impatient.”

* * *

“The General said I should tell you that we’re pulling out of Farshore.”

Sunglow gave her a long, appraising look. “You mean our libraries and universities are gone now.”

“Oh, no. In fact, we’re quite sure your people still have copies of the plaques, or at least of books based on them. But we want to show you we mean what we say. Help us defeat the tailed coons, and when we go this world will all be yours.”

Sunglow’s expression was thoughtful. “How can we trust you?”

Tamiko shrugged. “That’s his point. He wants to convince you. He wants to show you that we can do your people good, that we can be allies against a common enemy.”

Sunglow said nothing in reply. She did not even look at Tamiko but instead stared, her eyes half closed, at the wall above the human’s head. It was a ploy, she told herself. Of course it was. She did not believe them for a moment. But she knew she had to act as if they had finally penetrated the doubt and fear and mistrust, as if she were thinking it over, finally taking the Engineers’ offer seriously.

Tamiko leaned forward. She wished she could read the coon’s mind as she slumped in the grip of the belt that held her in the wooden bench. As it was she could only watch Sunglow sigh and blink and look back at her quite as if she had finally given up her intransigence. “What do I have to do?”

Tamiko grinned, giddy with relief. “Just say you’ll work with us. Then we’ll take you down to Farshore. You can speak with them. Get them to attack. Just—” She paused. “I’d like to get Mark back first. Can you tell me where he’s likely to be?”

Sunglow only shook her head.

* * *

“They tried shooting at us yesterday,” said Tamiko. They were standing before an observation port. An airlock was a few steps away, and a guard hovered there, watching the prisoner. The planet that filled their view outside, all brown land, blue sea, white swirls of cloud, seemed no farther off. “Such a lovely world, so much like Earth.”

Sunglow rapped the inner hull with her knuckles. The sound was all it took to say the ship’s metal was too thick for small-arms fire. “What with?”

“Rifles and machine guns. They were hiding in the ruins, shooting through narrow holes. They must have thought it would be impossible for us to hit them. But we used the particle beams.”

“They knew about those.”

“Then why... ?” Tamiko shook her head. “They didn’t have a chance.”

“They won’t quit until you’re gone.”

“Or they’re dead.” Now the human woman’s face said she admired the coons’

persistence even though—or perhaps because—it was such folly, doomed by the superiority of the humans and their weapons as well as by the damage done by the ferocity of the humans’ initial attack.

* * *

Tamiko stood in the doorway to the prisoners’ room and summoned Sunglow with a peremptory wave of her arm. Her face looked troubled. Two guards flanked her, their weapons ready to deal with any attempt at resistance.

As soon as the door closed behind Sunglow, Tamiko said, “Do you know what they did last night?”

Sunglow opened her mouth to say, “No, of course not, prisoners don’t get newscasts or newspapers,” but the human woman gave her no chance to speak. “Last night,” she said, “they set a bomb off right under the Bolivar. They didn’t destroy it, but...”

A guard opened the door to Tamiko’s small office. Sunglow sat down on the Farshorn bench without waiting for orders. Tamiko opened a cupboard in the room’s metal wall and revealed a screen. She touched buttons, and there was the image of a human starship tilting far from the vertical, threatening to topple, and a line of humans carrying boxes and duffle bags toward other ships.

“It’ll never fly again.”

“Then you’ll have to leave it behind when you go.” Sunglow showed her teeth,

grinning to show the pleasure the scene on the screen gave her. Her people were far from conquered, and if they could strike many more blows like this one...

“The General thought of that. That they plan to analyze the wreckage. But...” The last of the humans had left the ship. The line marched on, faster now, almost running, and a light appeared within the ship, glowing bright in the viewports and the still-open entrance lock.

The light grew quickly brighter, incandescent. Smoke gushed from the lock.

The metal of the ship itself began to glow and soften and run like wax.

The ship slumped in upon itself and collapsed to the ground. Molten metal ran across the charred landing circle to burst purple moss and green honeysuckle into flame.

“The drive,” said Tamiko. She sounded very satisfied. “The captain put it on maximum thrust but supplied no reaction mass.”

Sunglow said nothing. She slumped, dejected, silent, wordless.

“You can’t win.”

They were not doomed, the Rac told herself. The humans wanted to crush them,

to drive them all the way back to using stone-tipped spears and living in caves and lean-to huts, to deprive them of all the help the Gypsies had left for them. They wanted to be sure that the only way First-Stop’s natives ever reached space or visited Earth was as cattle on the way to Earthly zoos.

Yet they could not remove the Gypsy attitude toward learning or the Racs’ craving to find their gods. And to that they added the motivations of hatred and blood-feud.

The Engineers’ very efforts to destroy the Rac civilization could only hasten the recovery and the leap into space. No matter how thorough the destruction, so long as Racs still lived the Engineers themselves were doomed. It could only be a matter of time.

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 22

* * *

“Kill him.”

The tunnel was blocked by a mass of Racs whose shrunken bellies testified to

the shortness of the rations in the caves. But hunger was not their complaint. Their eyes were hot with rage and hatred, their fur bristled around their shoulders, and their hands were splayed to show their claws. Their voices were gruff, snarling, joyous in anticipation of human blood, though there was a bright thread of anxiety behind the joy.

“The Enemy.”

“Kill him!”

“He will tell them where to find us.”

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker and Dotson Barbtail could go no further. The crowd

offered no way to pass, and now it was surrounding them, preventing retreat.

They were at its mercy.

“Tell them what we plan,” someone said.

“A spy.”

“Prowling among us.”

“Choosing victims.”

“Kill him!”

“No,” said Dotson Barbtail quietly. He glanced at Hrecker. His pupils were

so widely dilated that his irises did not show. Beads of water stood out on his forehead and soaked into the edge of his head bandage. His hands, raised before his chest, were trembling. He understood the temper of the mob.

“He’s our prisoner,” Dotson added.

“Then keep him in his cell.”

“Kill him!”

“He’s a spy.”

“He doesn’t want to go back, you know.” Dotson deliberately lowered the pitch of his voice to sound as reasonable as he knew how. “He doesn’t like what his people are doing. He doesn’t want to help them.”

“Kill him!”

“Not all humans are our foe. The Gypsies were humans too.”

“Not all of them.”

“But many of them,” insisted Dotson. “And just as they had enemies among them, so do those humans in the valley.” He pointed down the tunnel.

But the valley was not visible. Instead, a trio of large Racs was approaching the rear of the mob. Their erect posture and gleaming harnesses identified them as members of the military; their medallions said they were infantry officers. Only one was tailless.

The noise subsided as they approached. Racs stepped back against the side of the tunnel.

The soldiers glared at Hrecker, but they neither stopped nor spoke. When they were past, the mob once more blocked the passage. A small female pushed forward from the side of the tunnel. “Are you their enemy?”

The silence stretched, and even Dotson watched the human shake his head and blink before he finally said, “I don’t know. But I am not yours. Not anymore.”

The Rac in front of them, a burly male in the scarred harness of a physical laborer, whined deep in his throat and shifted to one side. A few minutes later, Dotson and Hrecker were pushing the blackout curtains out of their way.

“They wanted to kill me,” said Hrecker. “To get even. I’m not surprised.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“Except that you could talk them out of it. Humans aren’t so biddable.”

“You did it just as much as I.”

The human made a strangled noise, but he said nothing in reply. Dotson

pushed the heavy blackout curtains aside, and there was daylight. The Worldtree still stood outside the tunnel, surrounded by three of the humans’ starships. Where a fourth should have been there was a sheet of silvery metal hummocked by those portions of the ship that had not melted.

Dotson tipped his head in that direction. A bulldozer was piling rubble to block every path on which a

vehicle might approach. “We won’t do that again. Gypsy Blossom says they’ve pulled in their patrol robots, too. There’s no way to get past them.”

“Why didn’t you do them all at once?”

“We only had enough explosives to fill the back of one small van.”

“The driver?”

“A volunteer.” Dotson paused. How much could he really trust this human

being? “We’re bringing in more. Small trucks, driving at night, no lights. They stop in the forest. From there we carry it by hand.”

“I’d think they’d spot the trucks, at least. They’re hot, and infrared is easy to see from orbit.”

“They do. But not all of them.” Dotson scanned the valley from the frozen silver puddle past piles of rubble and standing starships and jagged Worldtree. The moss was growing despite the lateness of the summer and the approach of autumn, lapping purple foliage and white berries over the edges of the scars the humans had inflicted. The honeysuckle, all green and cloying scent and sticky nectar, was advancing even faster. Gypsy Blossom was out there somewhere, communing with the databases in the roots while watching the humans and their little robots and their ships.

“What are they doing with Sun glow up there?” he asked.

Hrecker shrugged. “Asking questions.”

That much was obvious. They would hope she could help them forestall plans and root out hiding places. “But how?”

The human hesitated. “They’re not as gentle as you were with me.”

“Is that what happened to Scarback?” The messenger Sun glow had chosen had accepted his new name.

Hrecker hesitated. “We’re—they’re!-- not that bad.” Then he told Dotson some of the techniques his fellows could and did use to coax answers from unwilling subjects.

A long moment later, Dotson said, “Tamiko said she wouldn’t let that happen.

She’d be safe as long as—“

“Safe from death, maybe. But not pain.” He laid one hand flat against the bandage on his head and winced. “Not necessarily.”

Dotson ignored the hint that the human could use a painkiller. If he was suffering, well, he deserved it. All the humans did.

He tipped his head back and looked upward, in the direction of the sky he dared not step outside to see

in daylight. “We can’t do a thing. There isn’t a single thundertree left. Except for missiles, and they won’t do.”

“Give her up.” Hrecker sighed as if he had not really expected sympathy.

“That’s all you can do. It’s all I could do.”

“Tamiko?”

A nod. “Another man. Our own differences.”

“But no one took her. Stole her.”

Hrecker nodded once more, though his face looked pained. “Not that way.”

* * *

Gypsy Blossom did not return from the honeysuckle until after dark. By then Hrecker had been out of his cell for most of a day and the Racs in the tunnels hidden within the bluffs had stopped bristling and singing threats of mayhem at the sight of his human form. He was not yet accepted, for Racs would bend their paths to pass as far from him as they could, but Dotson thought that that might come.

Whether he could ever be more than a pet—no stranger than the bot but far more dangerous and untrusted—he did not know.

“He’s loose,” she said when she saw the human waiting just inside the tunnel entrance with her friend.

“Why not?” asked Hrecker. He gave her a human smile. “I’m not your enemy.”

Dotson gestured toward the chambers deeper in the bluffs, where food was stored and served. “Hungry?”

The bot shook her head. “The sun was bright.”

Hrecker leaned toward her, studying the small, scalelike leaves that covered her skin.

“Learn anything?” asked Dotson.

“Nothing new. They’re still out there. Every time they find a library now, though, they just bomb it. Then they drop a firebomb in the middle.”

“You’ve been shooting too many of us.” Hrecker coughed. “Of them, rather.”

“You did come with them.”

He nodded. “But they don’t have an endless supply of troops.”

“That’s our only advantage.” But Dotson did not seem to have his mind on

what he was saying. He was tilting one ear toward the tunnel’s mouth, listening. The others noticed, and all three stepped forward in time to see three Rac warplanes, flame shooting from their jets, tiny red lights glowing on their wingtips, scream over the bluff’s edge to the left, flying low and fast and intent on targets. They were not jets stolen by the human invaders and turned against First-Stop’s natives, but the planet’s own war materiel in the hands of its proper owners.

Two more appeared above the landing field in the distance, and all five were releasing missiles, firing their cannons, and arcing into tight turns around the snag-edged top of the Worldtree.

They never made a second pass. The human ships fired their particle beams and launched their own defending missiles. First one fighter disintegrated in the air, and then another, another, another. The fifth was climbing, clawing desperately at the air as it struggled to top the bluffs and escape, when it exploded. Smaller explosions marked the deaths of the warplanes’ missiles.

The explosions that peeled hull plates from the Cascade on the landing field and the Toledo in the valley were anticlimax.

“That’s half their ships,” said Dotson.

“And the last of ours,” said a thready voice behind them. When Dotson

turned, he saw the tailless soldier who had passed them in the tunnel earlier in the day. He was scratching the side of his muzzle in greeting. “Call me Edge-of-Tears, though my mother named me Tailcraver when I was small.”

Dotson returned the greeting gesture. “Then we have no hope?”

“You never did,” said Hrecker. “You can’t touch the Ajax, and even if you

destroyed all the rest, that one would return to Earth and bring back more forces, more ships. Or it would just use the bombs it carries.”

“All our fighters are gone,” said the soldier. “Shot down in the air like those. Or destroyed on the ground. Or seized and used against us. Our ships are sunk. Our missile siloes have been destroyed. We have nothing left but rifles and mines.”

The others said nothing to break his silence. There was nothing they could say. All they could do was watch floodlights come on around the human ships, the human crews evacuate the Cascade and Toledo and set up tents among the ruins of Worldtree Center, and then the ships glow from overloaded drives and melt.

The lights finally turned off two hours later. The only sign of what had happened was a hot breeze, a scent of scorched earth and burned vegetation, and a fading, sullen glow of molten metal in which no more than a rim of viewport, a line of rivets, a curve of hull plate was recognizable. Gypsy Blossom said, “There must be more.”

Dotson Barbtail shifted on his feet. "What do you mean?"

The bot looked at Edge-of-Tears. "Both Racs and humans plan ahead," she

said. "They think of catastrophes that might interfere with their best-laid plans, and they do whatever they can to compensate. There must be other weapons hidden away somewhere."

"I don't know of any," said the soldier. He touched a medallion attached to the strap that crossed his right breast. "But I'm young. I am an officer, but not a high one. Not high enough to know of such things if they indeed exist."

"Ask about them," said the bot. "The generals who were assigned to use the contingency reserves might all be dead, but surely there must be someone who remembers. Or a map buried in some pile of papers."

The soldier nodded. Dotson said, "And what is the humans' contingency plan?"

"The Ajax," said Hrecker, and the others nodded.

"The honeysuckle," said Gypsy Blossom. "The Gypsies left it just in case

something happened to the Worldtree. Biological memories are less constant than ones engraved in ceramic plaques, but they are continually regenerated. That is their advantage. They might lose detail, but they can remain as long as life remains within this valley or on this world. As long as the honeysuckle survives."

Now Edge-of-Tears was shaking his head. "I'd heard of you," he said. "But not of that."

"Yes." She indicated Dotson with a hand and added, "He was the only one with sense enough to..."

"Not sense," said Dotson. "I was dumb and greedy."

"And the only one who did what was intended. You were supposed to plant me

and my sisters long ago." Very briefly, she unfurled her roots. Edge-of-Tears looked, and his eyes widened. "We're your access to the honeysuckle."

"What's there?"

"So much," she said. "So much. I've spent hours sorting through it all, and

there are immense amounts I haven't even touched. Some I never will. But let me see..."

Over the next hour she told them all what she had learned as she let her nervous system merge with that of the honeysuckle net, of the vast extensions it gave her senses, of the reverberating halls of memory that opened before her, their walls honeycombed by doorways leading her mind into categories of knowledge she had barely suspected existed.

Once, she told them, the honeysuckle had been a simple vine or shrub. Some varieties had grown wild in almost every clime. Others had been decorative, ornamental. All had had thin-stemmed flowers containing sweet nectar.

The earliest bots had modified the plant. First they had made its blossoms larger and added to their nectar a euphoric drug. They had given it a gene-implanting viral vector. They had given it the ability to carry messages from one Rac to another, and then to use primitive sound and light sensors to spy upon a world in which the Engineers forced them to struggle to survive.

At the same time, they had been developing biological computers whose specialized leaves could serve as keyboards and screens. Brainlike tissue stored databanks in nodules among the roots. And not long before the Gypsies left First-Stop, they had given the memory-bank genes to the honeysuckle and loaded the resulting nodules with duplicates of everything on the Worldtree's plaques.

"It was an afterthought," said Gypsy Blossom. "But once they had thought it, its value was obvious. They had to modify the honeysuckle and fill its memory banks. I think they did that simply by copying the memories in bot brains, which is why there's so much there besides the plaques. I've seen..."

She described the first gropings toward the technology of genetic engineering, the creation of plants with animal genes that made tubers taste like meat, of plants whose sap one could not tell from milk, of animals that could serve as trucks and tanks and airplanes.

She grinned when Dotson's eagerness to know more almost made him interrupt her. "But," she said then, "there were people who feared the changes this new technology brought. Indeed, they feared any change. They craved stasis, the traditional, the comfort of the familiar, and when the old mechanical technologies were supplanted, they became the Engineers. At first they were a minority that did no more than call for a return to the old ways. Then they began to attack the products of genetic engineering and even the genetic engineers themselves. Their numbers grew as change spread in their society and the jobs of farmers and factory workers vanished. More people sympathized with them. And then..."

"I see," said Dotson Barbtail. "It could happen with us, could it?"

"It could," said Hrecker. "You have differences among you too."

Dotson thought of the chief division in the Rac religion. One group believed

that once the Racs had learned enough, the Remakers would return to reward the faithful. The other said it was up to the Racs to pursue and find their gods. Learning was an endless task.

Could the complacent ones become Engineers? He didn't think the others could, but... They wouldn't be quite the same, but certainly the potential for intolerance and oppression was there. He nodded his head.

"The differences weren't absolute," said Gypsy Blossom. "The Gypsies used the old mechanical technology too. They had to, if they wanted to survive or travel in space once they fled the Earth. And the Engineers relied on biological technology for food and fuel."

"They still do, partly," said Hrecker.

"How did they get away?" asked Edge-of-Tears.

There was a space program, she told them. Space stations and thundertrees

and jets that could reach space itself. Some of the genetic engineers made it into space, where they

found sympathizers. Then they threw rocks—artificial meteors—at the planet to keep the Engineers from interfering as they rescued more.

“It’s too bad we can’t do that,” said Edge-of-Tears. “But we don’t have the high ground.”

“They do,” said Dotson. “So why aren’t they...”

“They would,” said Hrecker. “If they had the equipment to fetch the rocks.

Or if you had a moon they could mine.”

Silence fell. All four—a human, a bot, and two Racs, two jumped-up animals—watched the valley. The glow of overheated metal was gone now. The only light was starlight. The Worldtree, the human starships, and the bluffs were black against the skyglow.

Eventually, Dotson said thoughtfully, “We have some high ground ourselves.

Perhaps it’s even high enough.”

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 23

* * *

The expressions of the General’s aides and remaining captains were as grim as the General’s own, though where his gray brush of hair and dark eyes made him seem sternly, militarily determined, their faces seemed variously harried, depressed, discouraged, glum, grim, and desperate.

“We should pull out now,” said one. “I know we’re not quite done, but the coons’ll be generations rebuilding. And if we stay...”

“We’ve lost five ships so far,” said Tamiko Inoue. “The Cascade, Toledo, Bolivar, Pizarro, and the Villa. They can’t touch the Ajax, but the others are on the ground and vulnerable.”

“They shouldn’t have been able to do that. We’re far ahead of them in weapons.”

“A stone ax can kill you just as dead as a particle beam.”

Someone laughed. “They weren’t throwing rocks.”

“They were lucky.”

The General shook his head. “Spaceships are fragile things. We knew we might pay a price.”

“At least they don’t have any more jets or missiles.”

“They can’t even make them. We’ve destroyed their factories.”

“Dynamite will do,” said Tamiko.

“Use the nukes.”

General Lyapunov shook his head again. “It’s too rich a world for that. We’d like to colonize it sometime soon.”

“I wouldn’t mind living here myself. There’s a place on the northeast coast—forest and cliffs and a bit of beach. Beautiful view.”

“I’ve got an eye on an island, myself,” said the captain of the melted-down Bolivar. The screen he occupied showed a fabric backdrop, the interior of a tent in the valley far below.

“If it wasn’t for the coons.”

“They’ll make good servants once they learn their place.”

“So no nukes.”

“Of course not.”

“Then we should send someone back for reinforcements.”

“We can’t spare anyone yet,” said General Lyapunov. “Though it won’t be long before the opposition is silenced.”

“Send the Ajax.”

“We need to stay right here,” said the General.

“Supervising,” said Tamiko with a glance at her chief.

The screen that showed the image of the Bonami’s Captain Quigg emitted a

snorting sound. “At least until they get the rest of us.”

“They won’t,” said General Lyapunov. “They can’t.”

“Five ships so far.”

“And five left. That should be enough.”

“Just four down here.”

“We aren’t about to cut and run,” said Tamiko. “We won’t abandon you.”

“Not until it’s too late.”

“Captain!”

“Sorry.” But Captain Quigg’s face was glowering, dark with resentment.

“Yes,” said the General. “It would be nice to have some reinforcements. But

it would take weeks to go home and come back. And they don’t have the ships. It would take months more to build them. Maybe years. We’re really on our own. We have to do the job by ourselves.”

“No matter what it costs,” said Tamiko.

“I do wish we could land the Ajax. But...” The General shrugged. “Someone

has to stay out of reach. If they somehow do manage to destroy the remaining ships, we’ll take the word back to Earth. We’ll have to, even though I would rather not go back at all without a clear-cut total victory. With no resistance left to plague us later.”

Many of the others were nodding in agreement with his sentiment, but their faces looked no more cheerful or optimistic than they had when the meeting began.

* * *

“Stop grinning at me!” Tamiko Inoue was scowling at Sunglow, who was once more chained to the souvenir bench in the office the human had been given.

“I can’t really help it, you know. You’ve done your best to destroy everything we’ve ever made or done, like a bulldozer in a playroom. But we’re fighting back.”

“Gyppin’ coons!”

“We’re making you bleed for what you’ve done to us!”

“You had it coming! You’re unnatural! A blight upon this world! It’s our duty to destroy you!”

Sunglow tried to laugh, but the destruction on the world below was far too real and far too thorough. She choked instead and beat her cast against her chest. When the spasm subsided, she managed to say, “There was a time when I thought we could be friends.”

Tamiko stared at her desktop, apparently unable to meet the Rac’s eyes. “Me too,” she said at last. “But...”

“But you’ve made that impossible.”

“We had to. Can’t you see?”

Sunglow shook her head. No, she couldn’t. She could not see any

circumstances when one group had to exterminate another or destroy the basis of its identity, not even when the groups were tailed and tailless Racs.

Nor could her fellow prisoners, who glared at her every time she returned from one of these sessions with the human woman and sang suspicion deep in their throats. “You carry no pain,” they said. “They do not shock you or beat you. What do they do? What do you do? What are you telling them?”

She had tried to explain that she had met Tamiko before the human attack, that her mate, or her one-time mate, was a prisoner on First-Stop, that she thought Tamiko felt some connection to him through her even as she asked her endless questions about where the Racs were hiding.

But all they said was, “What did you tell her? Did you reveal all our secrets? How long will our friends and kin survive your treachery?”

“We told them secrets enough before, when we thought they were Gypsies. And when we told them too much, they turned on us.”

“Traitor!”

“Traitor!”

“Trai...”

Now Tamiko was asking, “Would you like separate quarters?”

Sunglow could only stare. With all their other marvelous abilities, could

the humans also read minds? Silly thought, she told herself. If they could do that, they would never need to ask questions. Secrets could last no more than moments. Opposition would be destroyed as rapidly as it formed.

Then her face, gone vacant and reflective while she recalled the reactions of her fellows, had been as transparent as window glass. Or else... “You watch us, don’t you?”

“Of course we do.”

Hoping to overhear some clue to where the natives hid with their guns and bombs and last surviving remnants of the Gypsy heritage.

“Then yes. Of course. Get me away from them.”

“I’d hate to see them hurt you.”

And I, thought Sunglow, would hate to have you hear what they might blurt out while attacking me.

* * *

The new room was a narrow chamber. From one wall a padded shelf folded down to be a bed. There were also straps to hold a sleeper in place when the ship was in zero gee. There were empty cupboards and a toilet. And the door was locked, with a guard standing watch outside it.

“My own apartment is just three doors down the hall,” said Tamiko. She sounded pleased, as if she thought that Sunglow would make a good and friendly neighbor.

When she was gone, Sunglow pulled herself into the corner where the bed met the wall. She lay there for hours, staring toward the door and through it and everywhere within the ship that she had seen.

Strangely, she did not feel that she hated the humans. They were mad. Of course they were mad. But it was the madness of a force of nature, singleminded and unsympathetic, unaware that the beings in its path had hopes and dreams or that they suffered pain and loss. She thought that any single human might be as potentially a friend as Mark or Tamiko. But in the mass they were a tidal wave or forest fire, a flood or volcanic eruption.

One could not hate such things. One could fear, yes. And flee. And suffer the blows that came one’s way.

And sometimes one could defend. Erect seawalls against waves and levees against flood. Bring water against fire. Erect earthen dams to divert a lava flow away from homes and loved ones.

But how could one defend against a plague of humans?

How could one fight back when one’s whole world lay in ruins?

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 24

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The Racs had never thought it essential to make the interior surfaces of the caverns within the bluffs as flat and smooth as those of the buildings outside. They had filled holes in the floor. They had removed stalagmites and stalactites that posed hazards to toe and head and tire. They had carved away the largest of the bulges in the wall. But what remained was still more natural than artificial.

This meant that the map pinned to the wall of the briefing room rippled and swelled and dipped as if it were trying to imitate the surface of the world outside in three dimensions instead of two. When Edge-of-Tears tried to draw a circle on the paper, the stone threw his line off. When he stabbed at the paper in frustration, the point of his pencil broke through.

He threw the pencil aside and used his finger instead. “There,” he said. He was indicating an intersection of two main roads. “The nearest cache. There’s a hidden door in the bridge abutment.”

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker stood near the back of the room, watching quietly. They were, he knew, plotting a last desperate resistance. He thought the effort was doomed, but he knew better than to say so. Many coons would not even care to be reminded of his presence. It was better that he remain inconspicuous.

“How long will it take us to get there?” asked Dotson Barbtail. He himself had brought Hrecker from the cell he still occupied at night.

“If we could drive, full speed, two hours.”

“We can’t do that. They’d spot us.”

The burly soldier nodded. “So we hike. It’ll take us three nights. And then, if it’s still there, if it’s still intact...”

“We drive back.”

They would travel at night because then it would be a little harder for the

humans to spot them. They would drive back because they could not possibly carry what they hoped to

find. And they would hope desperately to escape notice, knowing all the while that that was impossible. The humans had proved themselves far too good at spotting the night-running trucks that brought supplies and arms to the caverns. Sometimes only one in ten made it all the way.

“Maybe we’ll get away with it,” said Dotson.

“There are clouds coming,” someone said.

“That won’t help. They’re ahead of us, and we had infrared sensors on our satellites.”

“But a storm. That could keep them from flying.”

“If we’re lucky,” said Edge-of-Tears. “But we can’t tell this far ahead. We don’t have weathersats anymore.”

Hrecker knew he should say nothing, but he could not help himself: “I want to go with you.”

The first response was silence. Then Edge-of-Tears asked, “Why? Do you think they’ll spot you if you can get outside? Rescue you?”

“Or do you want to light a fire and give us away?” asked another Rac. Dotson did not know his name, and his pelt was a nondescript gray.

He was shaking his head when Dotson gestured apologetically, sympathetically. “It doesn’t matter. You’re not fit anyway.”

The others stopped protesting as if Dotson held much more experience and rank than he did. Briefly, Hrecker wondered whence the other’s authority had come. It could not be his loss of Sunglow, for others had lost loved ones too, either to death or to captivity, and they had gained nothing for their sacrifices. But then he realized: Dotson had given them Gypsy Blossom, and he remained close to that emblem of their gods.

He touched the bandage on his head. “It’s almost healed.”

Edge-of-Tears showed his teeth. “Almost won’t do. Even if we could trust you.”

“When do we leave?” asked the gray Rac when Hrecker slouched defeatedly against the wall.

“Now,” said Edge-of-Tears.

“Why wait?” asked Dotson.

Within a day after Gypsy Blossom’s suggestion that there must remain caches

of hidden weapons, the soldier had found a survivor of the headquarters team that had overseen the caches’ maintenance. She had had no maps or other documents, and she had not been able to recall

where all the hiding places were. But she had remembered this one, and she had known the codes that would open it.

“What are we going to find there?”

Edge-of-Tears could only shrug. “She didn’t know. They varied. But no nukes.

No strange, new superweapons. Just ordinary stuff. Vehicles and guns and ammo.

The sort of stuff you need when your back’s against the wall.”

* * *

Once they were beyond the boundaries of Worldtree City, the road was no longer blocked by piles of rubble over which they had to clamber. Yet the pavement was rarely as clear as it had been before the human starships had appeared in First-Stop’s sky. Homes and shops had been destroyed, and their wreckage sometimes spilled into the roadway. Vehicles stood where warheads and cannon shells had found them. Water stood in potholes that had never been before. Once they had to detour around a fallen warplane.

The only hint that Racs had died was an occasional whiff of rotting meat from beneath some ruined building or curl of honeysuckle vine. The survivors had been able to remove and bury only bodies in plain view, and not all of those. Nor were they done, for here and there beside the road were small groups of Racs with shovels in their hands. Some stood beside one or two oblong, canvas-wrapped bundles.

They spent their first day hiding in the forest beyond the city, listening as human pilots patrolled First-Stop’s own jets and helicopters above their heads, watching thin clouds grow thicker and spread across the sky, listening as fitful breezes strengthened and made the tree limbs lash. Few slept, even though whenever two or three began to discuss the prospects of this last desperate effort, Edge-of-Tears hissed them quiet.

That night, the clouds thinned again and a few stars peeped through. Yet the wind continued to strengthen, and when Dotson said, “No storm after all. They’re sure to see us,” Edge-of-Tears answered. “Can’t tell yet.”

By the time that dawn was near, several members of the party were complaining of sore feet. All were happy when Edge-of-Tears pointed at a silhouette of bare girders and twisted metal roof-edge against the cloud-racing sky beside the secondary road they were following. “They won’t see us in there,” he said. “And tomorrow night, we’ll have to hike for just three more hours.”

Dotson Barbtail found a windless niche beside a fallen girder, leaned his back against the metal rough with rust, and rubbed his feet. He sniffed honeysuckle in the air and heard above the wind-noise in the dark around him soft voices saying:

“Three more hours.”

“Three too many.”

“I can hardly wait. Even a bulldozer would be a ride.”

“Whatever they stashed for us.”

“I’d rather have a nice, comfy command car.”

“A tank. Then I could shoot back when they spotted me.”

“You’d never have a chance.”

“At least I’d die comfortable.”

“Shh.”

Sunlight struck him in the eyes. He blinked and pulled himself to a sitting

position. Had the sky cleared? He stared upward. There were still clouds, thick and dark, but to the east there was indeed an open zone.

He blinked again. Who was that in front of him?

“Shh,” again. A female with a mirror in her hand. Young and well shaped, her

barred auburn pelt sleek with recent grooming, no signs of injury or hunger.

He touched the side of his muzzle. “What-- ?”

“Shh. You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not?” He blinked again and craned his neck, and yes, someone stood over

every one of his companions.

“You might attract attention. You have to go.”

“Tonight,” he heard Edge-of-Tears’s voice protesting.

“Now,” another voice insisted.

“But why?” asked Dotson. “What’s so important about a ruined factory?” He

scanned the framework of what remained as if he hoped to see the answer. There were broken windows, high brickwork, twisted beams like the one he leaned against, chains and pulleys and apparatus he did not recognize. Beyond an expanse of unbroken roof, green-tinged light suggested the out-of-doors.

“We can’t tell you,” said his awakener.

“Why—“ But before he could complete his question, voices arose from the

direction of the light:

“Hey! C’mere! You won’t bel—“

“Stop!”

“Leggo!”

Dotson almost laughed. Someone had risen early and gone in search of a bush or water or perhaps a fruit tree.

The other Rac slumped and shrugged and said, “I suppose we might as well show you now.”

A few minutes later the entire party was overlooking an oblong of dark, weedless soil. One of the locals was gesturing them to remain beneath the overhang of roof and explaining: “We wish you hadn’t come. If you attract any attention at all, we’re lost.” A wave indicated the plot of soil. Three small shoots of green jutted from the dirt. Hard by the edge of the plot was a bank of honeysuckle vines.

“What are they?” asked Edge-of-Tears.

Dotson smiled. He had no trouble recognizing the young plants before him. He

had first seen a similar shape in his own apartment, many months before the humans had appeared in First-Stop’s sky.

He shook his head and wished that Gypsy Blossom were with them. She would love to see this, even though she could surely see something very like it deep inside the caverns where he had left her.

Yet perhaps she could. He looked at the vines once more, and then, feeling like an idiot, he waved at them. If the roots reached so far, if she were plugged into the network and watching over her kin...

“We had four of the seeds,” an older Rac was saying. “But one was cracked.

Someone stepped on it.”

“Trowel!” said another. “It was that way when we first saw it. It was crushed when the Great Hall’s roof fell in.”

“They’ll grow very rapidly,” said Dotson.

“That won’t save them if the humans see you here. Stay back. Please.”

Dotson and his companions obeyed, retreating into shadow, leaving the

seedlings and their caretakers behind. Only Trowel, the senior gardener, remained with them, saying, “Better yet, leave. Get as far away from here as possible.”

“They’d surely see us if we left right now,” said Edge-of-Tears. “But tonight. We were planning to go then anyway. We’re almost to our destination.”

“What’s that?”

He told the gardener.

“Then you’ll be coming back this way?”

The soldier nodded.

“You have to take another road!”

“There isn’t one.”

“But you’re bound to draw fire!”

“We know.”

“They’ll destroy you all!”

“We hope a few will make it through.”

“They’ll get us too!”

Edge-of-Tears shrugged as if to say that was a price they might have to pay.

If he did not pursue his mission, if the cache proved empty, if the humans indeed destroyed them all and whatever they found on their way home, it would hardly matter whether a few bot seedlings lived or died. There were others after all.

Trowel sighed heavily. “Then we have to move.” He turned away and began to give decisive instructions. Shovels and large buckets appeared. Soon the seedlings were ready to depart to what their caretakers hoped would be a safer refuge.

The two groups of Racs then settled down together, talking quietly of times before the humans came, watching the clouds thicken once more, waiting for dark to come again.

* * *

The remainder of the journey was uneventful. A few planes passed high overhead or to one side of their path. Three times helicopters chattered at the windy night and they dove for whatever cover there was beside the road they followed. They threw themselves flat in ditches, huddled under bushes and in tangles of honeysuckle vines, rolled under abandoned vehicles. Once Dotson felt cold and matted fur beneath one hand, but before his stomach could do more than roll within him, the helicopter was gone. They got up and hurried on, eager to reach their destination.

They crested a rise. Edge-of-Tears pointed ahead. “It should be the next overpass.”

Trowel, the gardener who seemed to be in charge of the seedling bots, shook his head. “It can’t be that one. If it is...”

“What do you mean?”

As they drew closer, they saw and shared Trowel’s doubts. A direct hit from

a human missile or bomb had dropped the overhead roadway in their path. The rear of a truck trailer jutted from beneath one concrete slab. Other slabs tilted and jutted like frozen storm waves. Beside the road were the broken stumps of three utility poles.

Once, vertical concrete pillars had braced the upper roadbed. Now they too were shattered. But to either side remained stone drainage ramps that slanted up from the ground to shelves that had supported the upper road’s steel frame. The left-hand shelf bore a small metal sign painted with a contractor’s name.

Edge-of-Tears climbed the ramp to pry at the metal square. It lifted on one edge, opening on well oiled hinges to reveal a panel of polished knobs and buttons. His fingers worked, turning, tapping. Motors came to life and labored. The stone ramp beneath his feet cracked. But the crack was no wider than two fingers when the motors stalled.

Dotson imitated the soldier’s stare at the sky. Visible through a rapidly closing gap in the clouds was a single spark of light. It was just south of the zenith, not far from where the Rac’s embryonic space station had been so short a time before. “Will they see us if we linger?”

“We can’t stay with you anymore,” said the senior gardener. He waved at his fellows, who promptly seized and lifted the poles that supported their buckets of earth and bot seedlings. They headed up the bank as if intending to follow the other road as quickly and as far as possible.

“It can’t be helped,” said Edge-of-Tears. His voice suggested that his name was more apt than ever. “We need to clear that out of the way.” He pointed at a single slab of roadway whose massive end rested against the masonry that should have yawned before them.

The gardeners stopped. One turned and shouted down the bank, “You need a lever. Here!”

Soon all the Racs of both groups were straining to fit the end of a broken-off utility pole under the slab. They leaned into it, grunting, grunting harder when the slab trembled and lifted, cheering when Edge-of-Tears worked the controls again, the hidden mechanism groaned, and the doorway now slid unimpeded into a slot at its base.

Starlight showed them a shallow room and a second door that opened more easily, pivoting inward on heavy hinges. Lights came on, dim at first and then brighter as the door swung shut behind them.

This room was as deep as the highway behind them had been wide. The walls and ceiling and floor were unpainted concrete. Black wires ran from light fixtures to a generator that hummed as it drew fuel from a large, gold-painted propane tank. The smell was of oil and ozone and just a hint of mildew.

Immediately before them were three forklifts, their smaller propane tanks fat and round on their backs, their forks facing the interior of the room and a row of six drab, squat vehicles on thick rubber tracks. The windshields were little more than slits. A padded bench would hold a driver and two passengers. The back was a high-walled truckbed shielded by an arch of heavy steel.

“APVs,” said Edge-of-Tears. “All-purpose vehicles. Not enough armor to do much good, and the only

weapons are those in the crew's hands. But they're fast. And they don't mind rough roads."

Against the walls were stacked crates of guns and ammunition, mines, field rations, and other supplies. Edge-of-Tears was already climbing into the seat of a forklift. "We need as much..."

"What are those?" Dotson was pointing at a dozen racks of cylindrical objects wrapped in protective fabric.

"Missiles," answered the soldier. He pointed at the shortest of the cylinders. "Antitank. You fire them from a shoulder-tube. Like that." The tubes rested atop the rack.

Dotson was more interested in another rack, whose contents were nearly as long as he was tall and as thick as his thigh.

"Ground-to-air," said Edge-of-Tears. He touched a bundle of sturdy metal tubing strapped to the side of one of the missiles. "They launch from a tripod. Lousy accuracy, though."

"What's the problem?"

"Moving targets. We've got heat-seekers too, but not here. This is all old stuff. Obsolete. Just-in-case backup."

"I want them anyway."

The soldier gave him an appraising look. His thought was as plain as if he

had spoken aloud: He was in charge of the expedition, but Dotson was the Rac who had grown the bot whose ideas had sparked it. He wore an aura of authority all his own.

It did not take long to fill the APVs with as much obsolete weaponry as they could hold, but by then it was far too close to dawn to leave. "They'll spot us anyway," said Edge-of-Tears. "But it might take a little longer at night. Especially if those clouds stay thick or the storm begins. And we only need a little time."

"Before we left you said two hours, driving."

"Make it four." The soldier slapped a tread. "These aren't as fast as wheels."

* * *

When the next night finally came and Dotson flipped the switch that opened the cache's broad door, the sky was as black as the inside of a cave. The wind was louder than it had been any night of their quest, and occasional drops of water struck his face. He stared upward as if he could see the stars or the bright spark of the humans' flagship through the clouds. A long moment later, he realized that someone was

beside him.

“We’ll stay here.” Trowel scratched the side of his short muzzle apologetically. He held a rapid-fire rifle with a massive clip in his other hand. “There’s light, and the roof is thick.”

“The light won’t last,” said Dotson. He pointed at the generator to one side. Its steady hum showed no sign of faltering. “As soon as that tank is empty...”

“Long enough, I’m sure. We’ll turn out most of the lights and leave the door ajar. It’ll last until you win.” The gardener’s face said he did not think that likely. He lifted his weapon a handbreadth. “Or until the humans go away.”

“That could still be a while.”

“Then we’ll need shelter for the winter, won’t we?”

Edge-of-Tears snorted a laugh as he joined them in the doorway. “It’s all yours, then.”

“Should we wait?”

The soldier shook his head. “Do it now. Before we lose our edge.”

“Our nerve, you mean. They’re going to see us. They always do.”

“It’ll take time to get planes in the air. We’ll split up. We’ll be moving fast. And the wind will help us.”

“Four hours.” Four hours of life as a target.

“Maybe three.”

* * *

The APVs roared out the door into pouring rain just before midnight. Edge-of-Tears had the lead vehicle. Dotson was behind him. The others followed, and in the back of each vehicle, crammed in between the crates and cylinders, was a pair of Racs with shoulder-tubes and antitank missiles.

The storm quenched the glare of the APVs’ headlights—essential in the dark—and surely the rain washed from the air much of the heat the vehicles generated. But they remained detectable from afar. Shortly after they passed the ruined factory where they had found Trowel and the other gardeners tending seedling bots, the first fighters appeared over the horizon. The Racs left the road, twisting and turning among trees and ruined houses, hoping to evade the human fire.

Slugs from airborne cannons hammered the sides of the vehicles, but their armor was thick enough to

survive those blows. Fire sparkled in the air, marking the exhausts of air-to-ground missiles. Two of the APVs vanished in titanic blasts of light and sound and smoke. The remaining four raced onward, jiggling in their paths, spurred by the explosions that rattled the landscape around them. One dove beneath a highway bridge. A missile found it anyway, but not before the Rac among its cargo got off a shot of their own. The larger explosion destroyed the bridge. The smaller turned the fighter into a ball of flame.

The other planes sheered off. Dotson drove his APV frantically, desperately, wishing that he knew what he was doing, that he had ever handled more than an ordinary car. Where was Edge-of-Tears? Did he still live? Was he ahead? Behind? To one side or the other?

Was Dotson the only survivor? Then he could not last. Six of the hidden vehicles had started out. Three were already gone. He had seen them, heard them, felt them go. Had he missed the others' deaths?

Why hadn't the humans killed them all? The storm. Not the clouds. Not the rain. But the wind, that shook the warplanes in the air and spoiled their aim.

But now the fighters were back. The Rac beside him counted those he could see: "Four. Seven. Ten."

Dotson wished he knew who his companions were. But he knew only their names:

Silvertouch and Laughs-at-Locks. Had one been a musician once, before? The other, a burglar?

Two warplanes collided in the air, victims of the wind.

He had no idea who was in the back, ready to fire what they had at their attackers.

He wished he dared to close his eyes long enough to ask the Remakers, Gypsies, gods of First-Stop, to intervene once more. "Make them cautious!" he keened out loud. "Too cautious!"

Another disappeared in flame.

So did another APV, too distant for Dotson to feel the air and ground shake with pain although the flash was visible through the storm.

Near misses made Dotson's vehicle lurch and grind its gears. But somehow he never took a direct hit, and then there were the ruins of Worldtree City, hulks of brick and stone to shield him from the human gunners and intercept their missiles. The ground shook. Masonry fell around him. But the tracks of his vehicle roared over every heap of rubble that would have stopped a car or truck on wheels. He hardly slowed as he spun around one corner, another, and here was the avenue he wanted, there the yawning tunnel mouth.

He was diving deep into the interior of the bluffs around the valley. He was safe.

And there was another APV. One more. Wet tracks and puddles and two Racs lowering bodies from the back. A third standing beside it, proudly erect even though fatigue was visible in the set of his shoulders. A military bearing. Edge-of-Tears had made it too.

The rest had not.

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CHAPTER 25

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Tamiko Inoue stared at the guard as she approached the door. He slouched in the corridor, eyes half closed. His cheeks were lean, his muscles cleanly limned under smooth cloth, the sliver of pupil that showed between his eyelids gleaming with an alert readiness his posture belied.

As she approached, those eyes opened wide and held her steadily, darting away only briefly to check other approaches to the door. The guard wore a snug jumpsuit that left no cuffs or collars free for an opponent to grab or an object to snag. He held a compressed-air gun that fired slivers of glass that would shatter when they struck the ship's hull but would destroy a human target.

Tamiko knew he was not there to stop her from opening the door and entering the small room beyond. But still she hesitated.

"Forget your key, ma'am?" His eyes were as watchful as ever, but now he was smiling and holding his own copy of the magnetic card that barred the door. He remembered her.

She shook her head. That wasn't the problem, though she was less sure that she knew what was.

He ignored her. He slid his cardkey into the slot in the jamb. The door slid open. "There you go."

She did not answer as she slipped her own cardkey back into her thigh pocket and entered the room. The door slid shut behind her.

Sunglow was sitting on the edge of her bed. There was still a cast on her arm. The bandage on her thigh was gone, leaving only a livid line of nearly healed flesh. Already the fur was growing back.

"Do you think he's still alive?"

"He is if Dotson is." Sunglow was quite sure of that. He would honor the

implicit agreement Tamiko had offered by releasing one of her prisoners to pass the word that she herself survived.

“I wish I knew.”

“At least, if he’s dead it’s an accident.” The coon’s fingers twined

together, as expressive as any human’s of worry. “You made sure Dotson wouldn’t hurt him. But if Dotson’s dead...”

“You could help us settle this.”

“It’s all settled. You’ve destroyed us.”

“Not entirely. You’ll rebuild.”

“And you’ll be back.”

Tamiko nodded matter-of-factly. Indeed, that was the plan. “You could save a lot of lives.”

“Wherever I told you, you’d attack. And Dotson...”

Tamiko did not need to hear the coon say that if he was still alive, her

words could kill him. Or that once Dotson was no longer there, the remaining coons might well vent their anger, their need for vengeance, on the one human in their grasp.

She shook her head. “A quick, surgical strike,” she said. “A rescue mission. And then we can leave.” She reached across the narrow room to activate the veedo and call up all the reasons why Sunglow should want the humans gone as soon as possible: images of the world below—airports and military bases littered with wrecked equipment; ships awash in waves; cities in ruins; a line of hotspots racing along a highway toward the valley of the Worldtree, diverging across the landscape, planes diving and swooping and jiggling, explosions on the ground and in the air.

But there were not as many ground explosions as there had been fleeing hotspots. Two of those frantic vehicles had reached Worldtree City and sped through the rubble streets while human-piloted planes pursued and fired guns and missiles. Then they had vanished from the screen.

“There used to be more of those,” said Tamiko. “We got them too. Most of them. And then you gave up. Or ran out of trucks. We don’t know why...”

“Food,” said Sunglow. She knew better, for she knew the storerooms in the caverns had been full enough to keep the refugees alive for months more. “They’re running out of food. My friends are starving. So’s your Mark.”

“Food shipments don’t blow up like that. And they don’t run so fast, so frantically, or shoot back. These were weapons smugglers.”

“They must have had something impressive.” Sunglow was not surprised, but hearing the human say the words made her both feel and sound hopeful. Her people had not yet given up.

“They were only desperate.” The human’s tone and gesture dismissed the hope as beneath contempt. “And we got them all. There’s nothing left you coons can do.”

“You’re wrong.” There had been no explosions to mark the ends of the last two vehicles. They must, Sunglow thought, have reached the tunnels and vanished from human sight.

“Don’t you want to save him?”

“It’s not up to me.”

“In your position, I…” Tamiko sighed. “Don’t you love him after all?”

The coon only glared at her.

“You’re not very sentimental.”

“I try—we try—to be sensible. To recognize reality.” She paused. “We have our feelings, of course. Our sentiments. But we know the world does not bend itself to suit mere wishes.”

Tamiko shook her head once more. “That’s not very human.”

“It’s as human as the Gypsies.”

“They were monsters, not…” She stopped. She told herself that calling

Sunglow a monster was no way to gain her cooperation. And, she knew, the coon was not a monster. Really, she was human enough despite her fur and the shape of her head and her race’s origins in a genetic engineer’s test tube. They shared a common worry, their males, their mates.

She tried to change the subject. “The General thinks we’re too friendly.”

Sunglow did not answer.

“He wants me to use the electrodes.”

Silence.

“He said that if you cooperate, you’ll be well treated when we get home. No cage, but an apartment. Bigger than this one. Though I’ll be there, too.”

“You can be her keeper.” He had laughed when he said that.

Still silence, though the coon had turned and now faced away, her shoulders shaking.

Her voice emerged, a quiet, wordless keen.

Tamiko said nothing more, though she asked herself why she bothered. She

knew the answer, of course. It was obvious. They had been two couples. They had known each other briefly, even liked each other, and then...

Of course, the coon had not discarded her mate and then discovered that his replacement was no better.

“You can’t kill us all,” Sunglow said at last.

“We don’t want to.”

“Some of them escaped, you know.”

She was looking at the lifeless video screen. “Not really,” said Tamiko. Did

the coon think they were blind? “Underground garages or warehouses. We dropped a few bombs down the holes. They were trapped. Now they’re dead.”

Sunglow turned back to face the human woman, but she said nothing more for fear of what she might reveal. Instead her eyes, hot and heavy, noted the lack of weapon, the flat outline of a cardkey in the pocket on the woman’s thigh, and then she looked away once more.

“I’d like to get him back before we leave,” said Tamiko. “We’re almost done, you know.”

“Then tell them that.” Sunglow did not think Tamiko had noticed what had drawn her attention. She shifted her gaze to the door behind her visitor, to the sliding doors of empty cupboards, to the blank screen, everywhere but that pocket and its contents. “Tell them that you have finally destroyed everything that’s worth destroying. Tell them the libraries and books and plaques are gone. The universities and factories. Everything, and now we must rebuild it all.”

“But now what you build will be all yours. Pure native coon, uncontaminated by the Gypsies.”

“Tell them that too. And then, even then, if they—if we—really believe it will make you go away and not come back, we will give him back.”

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CHAPTER 26

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The tunnels that had led them to safety beneath the ruins of Worldtree City were now choked with rubble. The warplanes overhead had dropped bombs and fired missiles. Dark tunnel maws had vomited flame and smoke and roared with pain. Ceilings had collapsed. Shock waves had rumbled through the deeper caverns. Dust had ridden a gust of wind and sifted from the walls.

And the warplanes had gone, their human pilots surely grinning in their satisfaction at a job well done. They could not have known how deep the tunnels led, how extensive the network of caverns beneath the surface, how numerous the refugee Racs who waited for a time when they could emerge to reclaim their world and not just by ones and twos at night to bury their dead.

The remnant stink of high explosives drifted even here, where the roadway widened to form a parking area. The tiles that covered the walls were missing in spots, broken loose by the shaking of the rock. Window glass sparkled on the pavement. Doorways and window openings were crowded with refugees despite signs that said they had once belonged to food shops and bookstores.

The chamber's bright lights seemed to pool near the edge of the roadway like the spotlights of a theater stage. The eyes of every watcher were drawn inexorably to the two surviving APVs, gouged and dented and torn, their metal gleaming where cannon shells and shrapnel had stripped away their drab paint. Their crates of guns and ammunition had already been removed, delivered to the Racs who would use them. The ground-to-air missiles were laid out on the pavement beside them in three rows of half a dozen each, all that had survived the journey to the cavern.

The dust stirred up by the humans' futile attack had mixed with the storm water that still clung to the vehicles. The resulting mud had had time to dry. Now Dotson Barbtail stood beside the APV he had driven so desperately. One hand brushed at a clot of dirt in front of the windshield, over and over, even after the dirt had crumbled to dust again and fallen to the pavement below. One foot was awash in a puddle of engine oil or coolant, but he barely noticed that either. He was exhausted. He craved a quiet corner in which to fall asleep. He wanted to see Gypsy Blossom and hear her latest discoveries. He ached to get Sunglow out of the human clutch.

Lined up on the other side of the ranks of missiles were nine small trucks of the sort Racs who spent their days behind desks had once used to pretend they were country folk. Their paint jobs were bright and flashy, their transmissions provided power to all four wheels, and their tires had treads more suitable for mountainsides than paved roads. In case of accidents, they had roll bars. Each truck bed was large enough to hold two missiles.

Edge-of-Tears rounded the front of the APV and cocked his head. "Go to bed," he said.

"I'd never wake up," Dotson mumbled.

"You'll pass out. You'll miss the excitement for sure then." He pointed at

the nearest truck. “The seat’s soft enough. And the driver’ll have to push you out of the way.”

Dotson knew the soldier was right. He was swaying on his feet. “I am a driver.”

“Not in that condition.”

“Where are the rest of them?”

“The drivers? In bed. We can’t do a thing till dark. You know that.”

“They’ll still see us.”

“By then it’ll be too late.”

* * *

“Dotson?”

He grunted. He tried to avoid the hand that tugged at his shoulder by rolling over, but something stopped him. It pressed against his muzzle, rough fabric, stiff but yielding, curved.

He opened his eyes. Stripes. Blue and mauve stripes. Above him a low roof and a tiny light.

His bed lurched and rocked. Something made a metallic bang.

“We need the truck, Dotson.”

The truck. Memory returned. He let himself fall flat on his back, and there

was a face framed in the open door of the cab. A human face but topped with petals instead of hair.

“Gypsy Blossom. Did you see... ?”

“Yes. I saw you wave. They’re safe. So far. And we’re ready to go.”

He pushed himself into a sitting position. He peered groggily through the

windshield. The walls were lined with refugees, many more than had been leaning out of the shop doors and windows that morning. The APVs were gone. The trucks in front of him each held a pair of missiles, their noses pointing over the downfolded tailgates. Technicians labored over them, making last-minute adjustments, readying them for the task ahead. To one side was a single pipework rack, slanting nearly horizontal instead of vertical, a launch-stand for a missile.

“Not you,” he said.

“Yes, me,” said the bot. “You know I have to come. The honeysuckle.”

He yawned and licked his teeth. They tasted vile. Gypsy Blossom passed him a

bottle of fruit juice. He twisted off the cap and drank.

“Better,” he said. A moment later, he sighed. “You’re right.” And she was, of course. She and the honeysuckle were their only hope of avoiding traps or knowing when the humans launched their counterattack.

The technicians were done. Two collapsed the launch-stand into a compact bundle of pipes and braces and tucked it between a missile and the side of a truck. There was a similar bundle beside the other missile. They wedged themselves into the narrow spaces that were left, and then they cradled rifles and antitank missile launchers in their arms.

Engines were starting.

He was awake enough now. He slid beneath the wheel.

“You’re driving?” She sounded surprised.

“Climb in and sit down.” Did she think he would want to miss this moment? It

was their last hope. If it failed, they were doomed. If it succeeded...

“Follow them.”

“I know.” They could not reach the surface by the same tunnels that had led

them here. But there were others, including some that reached the surface much closer to their targets. He remembered the briefing that morning, before he had let exhaustion claim him. He remembered the route. He remembered what they planned to do.

Or try to do. There were no guarantees of success. But this was the last chance that they could see to claim any sort of victory.

They would have to get as close as possible. Or the humans would have too much time to respond. Enough time to doom them all.

He let his teeth show and curled his upper lip in a way that said he intended nothing resembling a smile. Then he stepped on the throttle and steered the truck into its place in the procession.

The refugees who watched from the cavern’s edges said nothing. They did not cheer or wave or wish good luck aloud. But they too, every one of them, showed teeth in as feral a display as his.

If the humans in their ships could only see it...

One could. There was Marcus Aurelius Hrecker, standing near the dark opening

where the road left the wide parking area. Flanked by two burly guards, he was watching the trucks and the missiles, absorbing the preparations for departure. He spotted Dotson and raised one stiff-bladed hand to the level of his chest. The arm of the guard on that side lifted briefly, tugged by the chain that bound Rac and human together. The guard scowled and jerked his arm. Mark’s hand came down, and his face looked pained.

The other humans would only laugh, he thought.

Teeth were no threat to them.

But he stared at the back of the truck ahead of him. The technicians grinned back at him, showing their teeth too.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker had been sidelined. So too would every other human be. For just a moment Dotson thought that might even, someday, include the Gypsies, the Remakers, the gods of the Racs themselves.

But then he snorted and shook his head and stared at the two missiles that pointed their noses at him. He hoped their engines would not ignite prematurely.

* * *

The opening from which they finally emerged was surrounded by jagged walls of masonry. The only way they could be seen was from directly overhead, and when Dotson looked up, he could see no stars.

“It’s still cloudy,” said Gypsy Blossom. She shivered, and for a moment Dotson was aware despite his pelt of the chill in the air. “But the rain is past. Most of it. It’s pouring on the coast.”

“The honeysuckle, right?” He felt her nod in the flexing of the seat.

“They’ll see us anyway, as soon as we can see them.”

Perhaps they could see already, he thought. The Ajax was in orbit, high above, looking down, and it had sensors that would not be blocked by clouds. On the other hand, if the rain would only return, the drops of falling water might confuse a radar image. It depended on the frequency they used.

Whether the Racs could see the Ajax or not, as soon as there was a line of unobstructed sight between them and the ship, the humans might be alerted.

Racs, like their wild predecessors, had good night vision. But this night was dark even so, too dark, as much an obstacle to them as to the humans, and to prove it the truck lurched as a tire sank into a crater in the pavement. Dotson wished they dared to use headlights as they had the night before.

A small hand-held light bloomed in the back of the truck ahead of him. He glimpsed the missiles it carried, the feet of two armed technicians, the road before him. He spun the wheel to avoid another pothole.

The other trucks now had lights as well, and he could see that there were still walls between them and that spot in the sky where the Ajax hung. The lights ahead of him swung from side to side as the lead

truck stopped. There was no flare of brake lights; they had been disconnected.

“This is where I check the ground ahead.” Gypsy Blossom was already climbing from the truck’s cab and walking toward a large bank of honeysuckle beside the road. Someone aimed a light ahead of her, but she flapped an arm to say she did not need the help. The first raindrops hit the windshield.

The bot did not push into the viny thicket. She stopped even before her feet touched the outlying shoots. She unfurled the ruff around her shins and burrowed her roots into the soil. She stood still, moving only when she slowly turned to face the way they had been going down the road.

A few minutes later, she was walking along the line of trucks, saying, “There’s no one ahead of us. They’re inside, out of the weather.”

“The robots?”

“They don’t leave the valley. You know that.”

“Then let’s move.”

“Use your dimlights,” said the bot. “It’s safe enough.”

It was raining harder when she sat down again beside Dotson, smelling of wet

and soil. He turned on both the windshield wiper and the small lights set in the ends of his front bumper.

The trucks ahead began to move. They accelerated, speeding up as much as the improved visibility permitted in the rain. Five of the trucks turned right, onto a road that would lead them to the edge of the bluff overlooking the valley. The other four kept on straight, heading for an overlook that would give them a clear view of the Gypsies’ old landing field.

There were only four of the human ships left on First-Stop. Two, the Drake and the Saladin, were in the valley. The other pair, the Gorbachev and the Bonami, sat on the landing field.

When Dotson and his companions reached the brink of the valley, they found the human ships standing high but not quite so high as the bluff tops, seeming almost close enough to reach out and touch. They quickly turned their vehicles to face away. The technicians leaped from their niches in the back and hurriedly set up the launch-stands on the ground.

Dotson looked over his shoulder in time to see them heft the first missile into position. They had debated firing them from the backs of the trucks. The effects of the missiles’ exhaust on truck cabs and drivers and chances to get away alive had almost persuaded them against that option. But then Edge-of-Tears had said, “We are expendable. We have to be, for if we give them any chance at all to anticipate our blow, we will fail. They will be safe.”

“But,” had said a technician, “a launch-stand is stabler. We’ll have a better chance of hitting them if we take just a little more time.”

The rain grew gentler. Just above the far rim of the valley, Dotson saw a few stars. It was clearing then. Perhaps by the time they were done with this night’s work, the sky would be clear and the few humans left alive would be able to look down and see what the Racs had done.

The two ships in the valley sparkled with lights. Dotson saw them as things of beauty and dread and envy. "We'll have our own one day," he said, and he felt more than saw Gypsy Blossom nod beside him.

Something was happening in the valley. More lights were gleaming. Weapons ports were opening. A spot high on the Saladin glowed hot, and the third truck to the left flashed into vapor and slag, missiles and all.

But the other missiles were on their stands and ready. As one the remaining technicians punched the launch buttons. The missiles' engines ignited. Plumes of flame and smoke splashed against the ground and the rears of the trucks. One fuel tank exploded. Something metallic slammed against the side of Dotson's truck, and his leg went numb.

The humans' particle beams caught two of the missiles while they were still in the air. Two of the remaining six missiles struck that remnant of Worldtree Center the humans had occupied for their own purposes. The other four struck the ships, two apiece, and ripped gaping holes in their sides.

At the same time, two dozen lines of fire reached from the ruins in the valley below the bluffs as other Racs fired antitank missiles. More explosions peppered the sides of the ships. They seemed puny beside the earlier blasts, but they still gouged more deeply into the enemy fortresses.

Fire bloomed in the ships' wounds. Alarms hooted. Particle beams and missiles and cannon sought targets both on the bluff and in the valley.

Yet their aim was not precise. The rain of fire hesitated oddly, beams lost their focus, targets were missed. The effect was of a giant who had lost his only eye and must blindly flail after a horde of tormentors.

Dotson felt the technicians leaping into the back of the truck. He hit the throttle as hard as he could. Wheels spun and gripped. The truck beside him lurched ahead, and then he was behind it, accelerating, leaving the overlook just as the ground where he had been turned into an expanding cloud of incandescent vapor.

Neither Dotson nor the other surviving drivers went very far. As soon as there was a mound of rubble between them and the sight of war, they turned parallel to the valley. When they found another opening, they stopped.

Dotson had to peel his leg from the seat. His fingers found the stickiness of blood and the open lips of a gash high on his thigh. Briefly he wondered why the wound did not hurt, but then he saw the others were not waiting for him. They were already silhouetted against the glow of fire and the flash of ordnance in the valley, their legs moving slowly, cautiously toward the valley's rim.

He hobbled after them until he too could see what was going on, and there they stood, together. Dotson and the other drivers, Gypsy Blossom, the remaining technicians, watching as the humans fired every weapon at their command. It was clear, however, that that defense could not be enough. The blow Dotson and his fellows had struck from atop the bluffs had crippled the ships, and the Racs below were unleashing every gun and missile that remained to them.

They must know, Dotson thought, that their ships will never fly again. We have done that much, and now their deaths are only a matter of time. No one will want to take prisoners. We will kill them all. Or they will hide within their ships until they starve.

He hoped those who had gone to attack the ships on the landing field had fared as well.

The battle below was as desperate as any battle could possibly be, yet the din of war seemed distant, muted. When Gypsy Blossom touched his arm and quietly said, “There’s still the Ajax,” he had no trouble hearing her.

“What can they do?”

“They can’t land, but Mark said they have nuclear bombs and warheads.”

“They wouldn’t use them.” He hoped he was right. “They wouldn’t dare.”

But she was shaking her head. “If they are anything like the Engineers the honeysuckle remembers...”

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CHAPTER 27

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Tamiko Inoue hovered just within the door of the room that was Sunglow’s prison chamber. Her hands were behind her back, taut muscles in her arms and neck shouting that they were clenched in desperation. Her face was frozen stiff and pale, her mouth a grim line, her eyes wide and frightened. Her forehead glistened.

Sunglow could only stare and replay the words the human had uttered as soon as the door had slid shut behind her.

“You’ve won,” Tamiko had said.

“What do you mean?” What could she mean? Had Dotson somehow forced the

Engineers to say they would release her, set her back on her own world, send her back to him? How

could he have done that?

“You’ve destroyed our ships.”

“The ones on the ground?” But there were no others, were there? Not here,

not at First-Stop, except for the one that held her. And that one was safe, out of reach from the ground, untouchable, impregnable. Certainly she would have known if it were not.

Tamiko nodded jerkily. “Every one of them. All of them.”

“Then we’re safe! I can go back.”

The human head was shaking now, almost trembling in its negation. “No.

There’s no way to take you back. This ship can’t land. Just the others.”

“You mean I’m stuck.” A prisoner forevermore. Yet that thought did not strike her as she might have feared it would. She was doomed, but her world was safe.

Or was it? Tamiko was all nod and shake and tremble and then two ominous sentences: “You’ll be better off with us. We have one last card to play. We can’t leave them thinking they’re better than us. Or else, when we come back...”

Sunglow pushed off the bunk and hovered over the human woman. Tamiko shifted to one side, flicked the veedo on, and said, “Look at that.”

The grainy, foreshortened view was enough by itself to say the camera was attached to the orbiting Ajax. The ships stood in the valley and on the landing field. Smoke billowed in and around them. Rac troops gathered on the ground at their feet. There was no sign of combat or of prisoners. Bodies were arranged in lines like the pickets of flattened fences.

“You killed them all,” said Tamiko. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Sunglow almost laughed. “What do you want them to do? Make pets out of them?

You said yourself, there’s no way to send them home.”

“And you wrecked the drives. But just in case, we’ll put some nukes right there. Then we’ll...”

“Sterilize our world.”

“No. No-no. We can’t do that. We couldn’t possibly, not with ten times the

bombs we carry. But we can make the soil and water toxic to you and raise clouds of dust that will block the sun for months. The plants that feed you will die. If you don’t freeze, you’ll starve.”

Sunglow was close once more. “Then we’re dead anyway.”

A trembling nod. “Most of you. But we won’t be able to settle here for

centuries.”

“And that’s our victory.”

“A Pyrrhic victory.”

Sunglow could not possibly have recognized the reference, but she thought

she understood its meaning: the victory of the pyre. She also understood she could no longer hope ever to see Dotson Barbtail again. She would never bear his children. She would never...

“You’ll be okay.” Tamiko sounded placating, as if she thought the Rac’s personal survival was all that mattered to her. “We’ll take you with us, take care of you. We’ve got some males too. You can have cubs, or whatever you call them. And...”

Sunglow blinked as tears flooded her eyes. There was only one chance of avoiding the fates her captors intended for her people and for her.

As calmly and as deftly as if she were spearing a tasty-tail, an aquatic dumbo larva, for a snack, she reached out her hand and extended a single finger and its claw.

The movement felt like it took forever, but the eternity through which it stretched could not have lasted half a second.

Tamiko neither tried to flee nor closed her eyes as the claw approached her throat.

Nor did she scream when Sunglow ripped through her flesh. The only sound she made was the gurgle of blood in her windpipe.

She was no longer capable of protest when Sunglow reached into her thigh pocket and found not one cardkey but two. The Rac took them both.

* * *

The guard in the corridor proved no more difficult to kill.

Sunglow slammed the wall with one hand, pulled herself to one side,

activated the door, and as it began to slide open grunted desperately as if she and Tamiko were struggling. The guard thrust himself through the opening, his gun in one hand, ready to intervene.

The sight of Tamiko stretched upon the room’s narrow floor, blood extending sticky tendrils toward the walls, froze him for just the instant Sunglow needed to use her claw once more.

* * *

She clutched Tamiko's cardkeys in the hand that jutted from her cast. The other held the gun she had taken from the guard. The door of her prison was closed behind her.

The ship murmured with the sounds of humans. Occasional soft, sliding footsteps. The small collisions of solid objects. Voices that raged and soothed and rang with vengeful determination.

What could she do now?

She wished she looked like a human. As a Rac, she would be recognized

instantly. She would have to shoot as soon as any human appeared in front of her.

But she could not possibly shoot them all. Sooner or later they would kill or capture her, and then the remaining humans would destroy all that was left of her world.

A buzzing sound heralded one of the humans' tiny robots. It rounded a corner, its wings folded against its back, its propeller still, its insectile legs a blur of motion. She poised her gun, but it gave no indication that it even noticed her much less knew that she was loose. Besides, it was electronic. If it was going to cry alarm, it would have done so already.

When it was gone, she stared at the cardkeys in her hand. She needed help.

And there was only one place where she could find it.

The gun in her free hand burped almost before she realized that a human had emerged from a door just three steps away.

"Hey!"

Someone else was in that room. Someone else had seen the body jerk and go

limp and fall while blood pooled upon the floor.

She reached the door before the other human could do more than lay one hand on the room's communications panel.

The gun burped again.

She caught herself against the door frame. She looked at her latest victim

carefully. Yes, he was dead. He could not possibly be alive, not with that much blood, not with his abdomen so ripped that the residue of his last meal was mingling with the blood, not...

She almost vomited.

She told herself, "Don't linger. Someone else will come around a corner, and

you may not be so lucky. Or the gun's magazine will go dry."

She turned and ran. She fended off a wall with one shoulder, wincing when the blow shook the healing bone within her cast. She shouldered another wall, zigged down the corridor, paused at open doors and intersections to be sure no one would see her before she was ready.

She killed twice more before she heard two voices beyond a door that was not quite closed. She stopped to listen:

“It’ll take a little while, sir.”

“Why?” This voice bore the crackle of electronic transmission, but it was clear enough to tell her the speaker was older and used to giving orders.

“They’re racked right there in the missile bay.”

“They were, sir. When we didn’t know what we faced.”

A third voice butted in: “Standing orders, General. Safety procedures. As

soon as it looked like we wouldn’t need them, we safed them again. Put them back in storage.”

The ensuing silence was broken only when the older, commanding voice said slowly, “I must have approved that.”

No one answered.

“How long?”

“An hour before we can launch the first ones.”

Sunglow did not wait to hear any more. It was enough to know she had an

hour. At most an hour. Certainly not two, and maybe less, and then the humans would do exactly what Tamiko had promised just before she died.

She hoped that was time enough.

She ran again, searching, searching, through corridors that all looked much

the same. Was this the one through which they had led her when they brought her here? Was that the corner they had turned? Yes!

This guard too died without a cry. Her first cardkey failed to work. The second was successful.

A heartbeat later, her fellow prisoners were free.

* * *

Surprise had worked in their favor. So had contempt, for the humans had despite the evidence of a civilized world below their ship seen them as little more than fuzzy animals, quite safe to have around as long as they were caged.

General Lyapunov himself had wasted one precious second gawping when Sunglow and three other armed Racs appeared on the bridge. Then the ship boomed and shook and an entire panel of indicator lights turned red and began to flash.

Sunglow herself shot the General.

The other humans winced and looked resigned to what they knew was about to happen to them all. Tears flowed from one young man's eyes.

Two burly Racs began to growl and snarl. Sunglow knew they were approving what she had done and savoring the turning of the tables. For a moment she was aware that they had tails and she did not, and she almost growled herself.

"What was that noise? What are all those lights? Are we going to blow up?"

The man who was weeping raised one hand, twitched convulsively when a Rac glared and pushed a gun forward, and pointed toward the viewport.

"Jesus!" cried a human woman.

Sunglow recognized the shape that drifted across the view, dwindling rapidly

as it grew farther and farther from the ship. She stepped to the side of the port, and there was another, barely visible to the side.

"You weren't fast enough." The woman's tone was jeering now. "We jettisoned the tanks, and now you're not..."

A gun burped.

Sunglow gestured. "Let's go."

"It won't do you any good. You don't know how to work the ship, and there's no more reaction mass. You're not going anywhere. You can't even land."

"That doesn't matter." One raised hand forestalled another shooting. "You aren't either."

* * *

It was another day before Sunglow could settle herself in one of the bridge's seats and stare at the controls of what had to be a long-distance communicator. There was a screen and a speaker grille, a slide labeled "Volume" in the very same language the Racs had inherited from the Gypsies, several tiny windows that displayed numbers when she turned knobs and pressed buttons, a digital time display.

The Rac behind her pointed at the time. "A few more minutes. He'll be there.

We told them you'd be waiting."

She glanced over his shoulder. His name was Crumbcake, and the skin of his abdomen was loose from the weight he had lost in captivity. "Did it take long to figure this out?"

Crumbcake shrugged. "Not really. A com's a com." He hesitated before adding, "It's a shame, you know. We think so much alike. They could use our planes. We can use their..."

"We were made that way," she said abruptly.

"Yeah," he said a second later. "The hardest part was finding a frequency they were listening on." He paused. "Are we going to keep them long?"

"As long as the food holds out."

"It'd last longer if..."

"Not long enough. It'll be years before..."

A light flickered on the panel before her. A familiar voice issued from the speaker grille: "Sunglow?"

"Dotson!" His image was forming on the screen. Behind him stood Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. Both males looked tired, but where Dotson seemed to glow through his fatigue, the human sagged with exhaustion. Gypsy Blossom watched from the side.

The delay before Dotson answered was noticeable. The Ajax was, after all, in synchronous orbit, high enough above the planet for light to need nearly a third of a second for the round trip.

"They told me you were okay."

But where his voice rumbled with pleasure and relief, hers did not. It could

not. It could only whine with tension and anxiety and a fear that should have disappeared with the Rac victory. The flatness of her words was a startling contrast: "But I can't come home. Not even in a crash landing. We don't have any fuel."

"Ah." Gypsy Blossom set a gentle hand on Dotson's shoulder.

His face twisted. He reached toward the camera that sent his picture to the

distant Ajax and the female who should have become his mate. His rumble disappeared. "I'll miss you."

Hrecker leaned forward, stroked the side of his nose with a finger in a passable imitation of the Rac greeting gesture, and broke in behind his words:

"They'll build monuments to you, Sunglow. If you hadn't freed yourself and captured the ship..."

"I'd rather she could come home," said Dotson.

"The humans can't do that either," said his mate. "That's more important.

But what will they do on Earth when these ships never return?"

Hrecker sighed and shook his head. "They'll build another fleet. A bigger one, better armed. But it will be a while. They'll have to give up on waiting for this fleet to return. Then they'll talk and plan for months, perhaps even a year. Maybe they'll concentrate on building defenses against a horde of ravaging coons." He gave Dotson a brief, sidelong glance. "Or Racs. And when that doesn't come, they'll send the second fleet. It may be years. It may be only months."

"You have to act as if you have time enough," said Gypsy Blossom. "Soon you'll have the other bots. The records in the honeysuckle. You can do it, rebuild, get back into space."

"We'll be waiting," said Sunglow. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Crumbcake nodding. "It's just another Worldtree to climb. And then you'll have this ship. That will help."

Dotson was nodding, but Hrecker looked even more depressed. "You have plenty of supplies, but..."

"Too many mouths to feed," said Gypsy Blossom.

"We'll take care of that," said Sunglow. When Hrecker's mouth twisted with

the pain of what he thought she meant, she added, "We don't know just how yet.

We have to talk about it."

"A ship of ghosts," said Hrecker. "That's all that will be left." He sounded and looked as if the words pained him terribly. "Where's Tamiko? Is she...?"

Sunglow turned away from the com as if she could not bear to meet his eyes even in an image. Her shoulders heaved as she took a deep breath. When she turned back again, her face was frozen stiff. "I had to..."

Hrecker did not force her to finish the sentence. When she stopped, he said, "I see."

There was silence then, broken only when Sunglow finally said, "Where are you? That looks like..."

Dotson nodded. "We wrecked the drives, but not everything. One of the ships just needed power to work..." He gestured as if at the equipment surrounding the screen that held his image. The Racs no longer had facilities of their own that were capable of communicating with an orbiting starship. But they did still have receivers, and it was one of those that had detected the ex-prisoners' attempts at contact. "When someone noticed you were calling, we ran a cable."

* * *

* * *

CHAPTER 28

* * *

“I feel like a specimen in a zoo,” said Marcus Aurelius Hrecker. “Or a pet.”

“You’re not in a cage.”

“No, but...” Hrecker glanced toward the pair of Racs who stood, their arms

crossed, near the base of what remained of the Saladin. They followed him everywhere. “I’m the only one left.”

“You’re alive,” said Gypsy Blossom. And the others weren’t. Not one of the humans who had been on First-Stop that night remained. If any who had ever landed on First-Stop were still alive, it was only because they had returned to the Ajax. Some had died there. Some survived, at least for a while.

“There’s that,” Hrecker agreed. Not far away he could see the cage that had held Sunglow and other prisoners for a short while, before they had been lifted into orbit, to the Ajax and its own doom. He remembered the smaller cages that had held single prisoners, specimens indeed, destined for Earthly zoos. He paused before adding, “I’m glad we failed.”

“Did you?” Dotson swept a hand to indicate the devastation that surrounded them. “It will take us decades to rebuild, to reconstruct the records and libraries you destroyed, to remember the plaques.”

“But you will. You know what I mean.”

Not one of the other Racs nearby had any response to that, though they did

look where he looked, at the Saladin and the scarred, dented, punctured reaction mass tanks from which still trickled dust from the asteroids of Earth’s distant Solar System, at the cones of dust upon the ground, at the jagged edges that marked where the missiles had torn through the sides of the ship and

destroyed the drive.

As near as Dotson Barbtail could tell, the bare ground on which they stood was where he had once trembled in a bank of honeysuckle while a pedestrian strolled along a gravel path. Now the honeysuckle was gone from this spot, scorched into ash and soot although it grew more vigorously than ever, unpruned, untended, not far away. The path was still visible.

The Great Hall that had been his target was gone. Nothing remained but a broken stone curtain that had been a wall, a stretch of floor, piles of rubble.

The Worldtree that had been the center of his life, his world, and all his people still stood. But it was shorter. Its top, the chamber the Gypsies had stocked with carefully engraved summaries of their sacred knowledge and in which the Racs had entombed their heroes, was gone. In its place was only jagged stone.

Finally, he said, "Why did you even try?" His voice was much more a snarl than it had been for weeks.

"Some of us were just following orders," said Hrecker. "Taking the path of least resistance. I was. But that's not what you want to know."

"Who gave the orders?" Senior Hightail's voice cracked, interrupting the gruff sounds of relief with a note of rage.

"No one," said Gypsy Blossom. "The hierarchy. The government. The ideology. The sheer momentum of history. Thank goodness they could not destroy it all. Not even if they crushed every plaque and burned every paper copy and every book that used what the Gypsies taught you."

Dotson nodded. "We can write it down again, can't we? They didn't kill us all. Enough of us remain. Surely we remember what we have learned. And then there is the honeysuckle."

"Yes, there's that," said the bot. "I can read that information. And so will all those other bots as soon as they leave their beds. But there's something even more valuable that you still have."

Dotson said nothing, but when he looked at Edge-of-Tears and Senior Hightail and the other Racs nearby, he knew that he was not the only one who failed to understand.

"It's a way of thinking," said Gypsy Blossom. "Knowledge as a sacred goal. That's something the Engineers could take away from you only by exterminating all your kind."

There was silence. Of course, the bot was right. The Gypsies, the Remakers, had given all Rackind the pursuit of knowledge as a holy mission. And yes, if every library lay in ruins, every ceramic plaque in shards, every paper book in ashes, that would be enough to restore everything the humans had laid waste. And then to advance beyond that level, into space, even to wherever their gods had gone.

"What do you think they'll do?"

No one thought Dotson meant the humans. He was staring too intently at the

sky now, toward that spot where the Ajax would be a spark at night, where Sunglow and the other one-time prisoners of the humans debated the answer to just that question.

A long moment later, Edge-of-Tears said, "It will be years before we can get up there. There is just too much to rebuild. And they cannot last that long."

"Too many to feed," someone said.

"They should kill the humans," said another. "They're outnumbered. If they

don't, there'll be a battle, a rebellion. They'll all die, or the humans will escape and take their ship home and bring more humans back before we can possibly be ready for them."

"But they need the humans," said Senior Hightail. "They can't maintain that ship without them. They simply don't know how."

"Then sabotage."

"Could they survive long enough if they could run the ship?"

Edge-of-Tears shook his head. "Not without a miracle. If we could rebuild

the engines of one of these..." He indicated the nearby Saladin. "But we mangled them all far too well."

"I wish I could help," said Hrecker. When someone snorted, he added, "That was my field, designing drives."

"Then you can fix these?" The voice was eager.

He shook his head and pointed at the wreckage. "I wish I could, but... Once

you get your industries working again, I can show you how to build a drive.

Until then..." He shook his head again.

"And there's one waiting for us right up there." Edge-of-Tears pointed at the sky. "Intact."

"It'll still be there."

"Waiting," said Gypsy Blossom.

"There's no hope," said Dotson. "It'll take years. I'll never see her

again."

"Probably not," said the bot.

He craned his neck to see the Saladin's bulging top, which concealed its

bridge and the com that was their only contact with the Ajax. "I wish she'd call again."

"There's a lot to say, isn't there?" said Hrecker. "I never had the chance."

The ensuing silence lasted until Dotson said, "How long? A year? Or ten years?" His tone said he knew

the answer.

“Maybe twenty,” said Senior Hightail. “In which case I won’t see it. But you will. And then what? You’ll refurbish the ship and take off, but where? Will you go looking for the Gypsies?”

“I think,” said Gypsy Blossom. “That’s what they themselves hoped you would do someday.”

Dotson made a chuffing sound with his breath and turned around. “I’m going to call her.”

* * *

But no matter how many times he tried, no one answered the Ajax’s com until the first Rac Q-ship boosted into orbit eight years later.

Dotson was not on that ship, but he was at the spaceport control center, waiting for the com to come alive once more, at last, and tell him what he had expected for so long that the pain of confirmation seemed no worse than the pain that still lingered in the hip of his injured leg.

Marcus Aurelius Hrecker was not with him. The human had helped the Racs build their Q-drive, and then he had retreated, isolating himself in a small house on the outskirts of the rebuilt Worldtree City. Dotson thought he must have found it difficult to face the inevitable antipathies of the many Racs who had lost everything they owned at human hands, but he never complained. Perhaps he thought he deserved whatever glares and taunts came his way. Perhaps he wished for a murderer or a lynch mob that would join him with his fellow Engineers. He never said.

Gypsy Blossom was supervising the education of the third generation of bots. Like their parents, many would be intermediaries between the Racs and the data stores held by the honeysuckle. Many more would, like the Racs, be builders and discoverers.

A bank of screens showed the Ajax’s exterior. Enlarged in one, the ship’s lock stood open as it had on the Rac ship’s first approach. Another showed the ship’s bridge, a withered body strapped into the captain’s seat, its blonde pelt identifying it unmistakably as Sunglow. The controls before her included an override on the ship’s main entrance.

The Ajax held no air, no living thing. Its storerooms still held all they needed for a one-way voyage to Earth. All but two of its dust tanks, still holding much of the reaction mass for that same trip, orbited not far away. Nuclear-tipped missiles lay ready for launch in its bays. Human bodies filled two locked rooms.

Other Racs lay where they had fallen when the airlock opened.

* * *

THE END

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