

Lethal Weapons

As the afternoon wore on, fewer and fewer people could be found on the streets of Center Sect. Other than small groups of workers scurrying to and from wiretrains and air-cabs, they saw very few citizens at ease anywhere. Protectors traveled in pairs. It was Jak who pointed out that they weren't carrying stunsticks.

"Those are perseps," he said. "Highly lethal weapons, specially coded to the user, so that they are useless without their owner's brain pattern to activate them. They were once common on Kephalon."

Samante seemed shocked. "But weapons aren't allowed on Palace. It's a capital crime for anyone to have weapons that can kill."

Vida looked at her friend with an amused expression. "Funny, Samante, but Riva's Leps don't seem to have heard of that law."

"You don't understand, Vida. After the Schism Wars, it was the one thing everyone agreed on. No matter how bad things got, no—"

Suddenly, there was an enormous boom that sounded like thunder. The powerboom of a saccule.

"Greenie!"

Vida whipped around and saw Greenie fling its small body at a trio of Leps. One of the Leps swatted the saccule aside and fired its weapon, a flash of light and no sound. Jak's hands moved so swiftly that they were a blur. Edged weapons sprouted from the throats and eyes of two of the Leps. The third one, however, managed to fire his weapon before he died. Vida felt the impact of the weapon's charge. It slammed her off her feet and against a wall so hard she blacked out. ...

By Catharine Kerr and
Mark Kreighbaum

Palace: A Novel of the Pinch

Mark Kreighbaum

THE EYES OF GOD

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*For
Karen*

"Nature is strong ..."

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Part 1
SCHISMS

Perfect Separation refines and defines us. What is more true in the Sight of God than a solitary fire of faith burning endlessly in the eternal night? Some have said that our exile in the Pinch is an accident of blind fate. I say that the Eye of God is never blind. I say we were summoned to Gehenna. I say that this is our Purgatory and we shall be cleansed and purified. And once we are clean, shall we not be a new race of angels, returning to the Rim upon wings of fire?

—Cardinal Roha d'Tele-Tres

The airhopper skimmed over the Motta Farms of the southeastern Agriculture Sect. Vida L'var glanced up from a stack of legal skims in her lap, rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms, and looked out the window. The quilt of land below was dotted with hundreds of metal towers housing bases for automated tenders. The tenders cycled around the sect on guide wires, spewing pesticides and clouds of anti-fungals. Hordes of naked green and gray saccules worked in the fields, harvesting fruit from the orchards, grain from the fields, and rice from vast paddies that glittered like lakes of silver. The slaves performed tasks not suited to robotics, but also some that should have been automated. Vida tried to imagine spending her whole life weeding huge farms out in some lonely corner of Palace. She thought of her own saccule, Greenie, waiting for her in her rooms at Government House.

"Samante, do the Lifegivers keep census figures on the saccules?"

Vida's factor and friend, Samante Dinisa y Gossales, turned away from a low conversation she was having with a pair of Vida's accountants. The factor was a short stocky woman with plain features and wary gray eyes. She wore a gray and red suit embroidered with the L'var gene-glyph, a unique twist of DNA. Vida had given the suit to Samante for her changeday at the end of last Gust, when her factor had become a Not-child, an adult in the eyes of Palace society, and the moment when a citizen began receiving the life-extension treatments. Samante wore the suit like a uniform.

"I don't know. I doubt it. Probably the Merchant's Guild keeps track of how many neuters are bartered from the wild saccules of the swamp. I'd guess that most clans keep a record of their purchases for tax purposes. Maybe other planets do things differently. Do you want me to have someone look into it?"

"No, don't bother. I was just curious. What's next on the agenda?" It had been a long day already. They had visited four Sects today on various errands and Vida was tired.

Samante glanced at a flatplate cradled in the palm of her hand.

"We're due back at Government House for the reception at the fifteens. You and Wan will have to be together for that." The two women exchanged significant glances, but with all these people in the airhopper, and not all of them loyal to the L'vars, neither dared say anything out loud. "The Peronidas are hosting a private dinner party after the reception for the Souk legate and his *jii*."

For once, Vida didn't have to ask for an explanation. She'd been raised in the Pleasure Sect, where she'd studied every variation of marriage and bond in the Pinch. A *jii* was a transition wife, a sort of therapist and sex surrogate. Vida knew a great deal about them. So she'd at least have someone interesting to talk to at dinner, which would be a welcome change.

"And after that?"

"Nothing scheduled, but you asked me to remind you about the air-ken trials. They're being held in Service Sect this year. The first round starts at the eighteens."

Vida perked up. Air-ken was one of her favorite sports. She'd followed all the teams for years.

"Jak?"

A lithe figure covered in short golden fur leaned forward. Vida's Garang Japat bodyguard regarded his human employer from large black eyes and sharply angled features that were just similar enough to a human's to be disturbing.

"I do not advise an outing to the Service Sect at this time," he said. "Although the disturbances have settled down since the war memorial bombing, Service has a high

percentage of Ty Onar Lep. According to my sources, they still hate the Peronidas. The Riva cult is particularly strong there. Perhaps it would be best to watch the trials on the screens."

Vida nodded unhappily. "I suppose you're right."

As the last of the L'vars, she represented a legacy of treason that shadowed the Leps on Palace. Besides, she'd been instrumental in the capture of Vi-Kata, a Lep assassin who had become something of a martyr to his people. It'd be best not to stir up trouble needlessly. If only she could think of some way to improve life for the Leps on Palace ...

Vida sighed. How could she, when she couldn't even improve her own life?

"I'd still like to do something with the entourage. Everyone's been working so hard. Let's go somewhere after the dinner party, okay? Isn't there some new club in the West Tower that everybody's talking about? TeeKay was raving about it just the other day."

Samante and Jak looked at her so blankly that Vida had to laugh.

"Pardon, Sé Vida, but that would be the Station," said one of the accountants, diffidently. "They have holobell dancers, and the best *gopi* players on Palace."

"Sé Ahandra, isn't it?" The accountant looked surprised. Vida's perfect memory and her habit of keeping track of the people who worked for her often startled them. "Thank you. Why don't you join us? It's going to be a big party and the L'vars will pick up the tab. If it weren't for you accountants, I wouldn't have a credit to my name anyway."

"Thank you, Se."

Vida flashed her famous smile.

"Oh, Samante, and speaking of inviting people, we should have the Cyberguild master and his apprentice, to reciprocate for our invitation to that party last month."

Samante gave a sharp nod, all the comment she would ever make about her patron's transparent efforts to make opportunities to see Rico Hernanes y Jons, the guildmaster's nephew, heir, and Vida's secret lover.

Jak, on the other hand, had no such compunctions.

"Sé Vida—" he began in a low voice.

But Vida forestalled him with a raised hand. She was tired of arguing with Jak about Rico. In any case, this was not the time or place. In response to her curt gesture, Jak settled back in his seat without another word. He didn't sulk, though. That was a refreshing character trait of the Garang Japat; they had pride, but little ego.

With a sigh, Vida returned to studying the pile of legal skims in her lap. Just keeping track of all the lawsuits against the L'var estate was draining. She couldn't imagine actually being one of the attorneys involved; some of these actions were decades old. While she worked, Vida fiddled with a pendant on a chain around her neck, a wooden disk carved in the shape of an eye. It was a talisman that her mother had sent to her through a friend, a symbol of the Eye of God. Vida had rubbed its rough edges smooth from handling. *It* was her only tangible reminder of her childhood in the Pleasure Sect and it comforted her to have it near. The man who had given it to her, Brother Lenno, was dead, killed by an assassin who had been hunting Vida.

Two hours and several Sects later, the airhopper settled into its approach vector for Government House in Center Sect. Vida got a good look at the twin towers, two enormous spires made of ancient blueglass that drank in the gray light of Palace and returned a deep violet. People said they were the only thing you could see from low orbit. The East Tower, where the Peronida family worked and lived, was capped by an immense roof garden, a small city of green. Vida loved the roof garden and spent as much time there as she could, which wasn't much these days, what with Karlo turning her into a roving goodwill tour for the Peronidas.

The airhopper spiraled in for its landing on a private pad in the middle of the roof garden,

and Vida remembered with a painful nostalgia that only a few months ago she had arrived at this very spot as a naive child from the Pleasure Sect. Now she was the chief patron of the L'vars and a political force in her own right. She didn't feel powerful or smart. She felt alone and unhappy most of the time, in fact. She often wondered if she would have been happier as a Marked courtesan, working for her mother, Aleen, in Pleasure: no responsibilities and lots of chances to be with her real friends in the Close.

"Vida?" Samante leaned close to her to whisper. "Do you mind if I meet you later at the reception? I have an errand."

"Sure." Vida would have liked to have asked more, but clearly Samante didn't feel comfortable confiding in her. If Pero were still on Palace, she would have guessed that Samante was meeting him. Maybe she'd found a new lover. She hoped it was someone who could make her happy. "What are you going to wear to the reception?"

Samante rolled her eyes. Arguing about Samante's clothes had become a running joke between them and they spent the remainder of the airhopper's descent debating Samante's dress for the evening.

At the landing pad, a crowd-of people waited, including Karlo Peronida's factor, Dukayn. Slim and dark, the First Citizen's head of security was one of the most feared men in Government House. Like his patron, he was a survivor of the Lep destruction of his homeworld, Kephalon, and that terrible act of genocide shadowed him always. He trusted no one and his acts of vengeance were legendary. For some reason, perhaps because Vida and Karlo were on such good terms, Dukayn was always pleasant to her, or at least as pleasant as such a man could ever be.

Samante drifted away to meet with some members of Vida's entourage who had come to greet the airhopper. Her factor disliked Dukayn intensely, though he had never so much as raised his voice to her.

"Sé Vida?"

"At your service, Sé Dukayn." Vida grinned and waved to the other people leaving the airhopper. Most of them, including Ahandra, waved back. "What can I do for you?"

"I understand that you were planning to accompany Wan to Souk when he leaves tomorrow?"

"Yes. I've been looking forward to it for weeks. Wiry, is there some problem?"

"The First Citizen has arranged for your birth-permit review with Sister Romero, but it has to be before she leaves the city to begin her research project. Would you mind canceling your trip?"

Vida's training with Aleen saved her from showing any outward sign of distress, but her smile felt stiff on her face.

"Sé Dukayn, I haven't had two minutes to myself since I came to Government House. I spend most of my time doing public relations for the Peronidas. I'm sure Sister Romero will be available for a meeting after we get back from Souk. Anyway, she's made it pretty clear that she doesn't think I'm ready for children yet. I don't see how a few weeks will matter."

"They matter extremely to the First Citizen. Sé Karlo would regard it as a favor if you attended the review now rather than later."

"You mean I can refuse?" Vida asked.

"Yes, Sé Vida, Karlo made that very clear. This would be a personal favor to him, not a command."

Vida thought it over. She had never been off planet before and traveling on a shuntjammer had been her lifelong dream. But having Karlo in her debt could prove useful. Politics. She was starting to hate the word.

"All right, Sé Dukayn. I'll do this as a favor to Karlo. Should I tell Wan, or will you?"

"Oh, I'll take care of Sé Wan." His smile was a slash of malice. Dukayn detested his patron's heir. "Thank you, Vida. I told Karlo that you would be sensible."

Vida kept smiling and inclined her head graciously. If the Garang could learn how to take disappointment without pouting, then she could, too.

Samante rejoined her. The two women strolled through the roof garden, with Jak a discreet distance behind them. The daalenerry was coming into bloom and the bright red and blue blossoms gave off a delicate, sweet scent. Vida picked a bloom and twirled it in her hands as they walked.

"Trouble?" Samante asked.

"No, not really. But we won't be going with Wan to Souk tomorrow after all. Damn!" Vida tossed the daalenerry flower away. "I was really looking forward to it, too. Oh, don't look at me like that Wan isn't *that* bad."

"If you say so, Sé Vida."

"He's a drunk and an idiot, but he hasn't tried to hit me since Dukayn and Karlo talked to him."

"Talked?"

"Well . . . anyway, he's been a pain, but it would've been worth it to get a chance to go off planet. Have you ever been to Souk, Samante?"

"Yes. I did my postgraduate work there." Samante's voice had the clipped precision she used when she was upset or angry.

Vida had been about to ask what it was like, but abruptly decided to drop the subject. Maybe when they knew each other better, she would ask. Samante wasn't like the girls she'd grown up with in The Close of the Pleasure Sect. It was hard sometimes to know how to be her friend.

"You said you had an errand?"

"Oh, yes. Thank you for reminding me. I'll meet you at the reception then?"

"You should wear the gold shimmersuit and that ice-light braid pin. It sets off the gray in your eyes."

Samante laughed. "Walking around next to you, I don't think it would matter if I wore swamp reeds."

Vida smiled, but felt a twinge of hurt. Did everyone always have to make such a point of her looks? "See you at the fifteens, then."

As Samante departed, Vida glanced at a floating clock. Twelves, she had plenty of time before the reception. She didn't often have free time. Maybe Rico could be pried away from his precious Mapstation for a little while. It was probably a bad idea to visit him so directly, but the news that she wasn't going to Souk after all had left her feeling a bit rebellious.

She headed for the Cyberguild office using the secure corridors set aside for the Peronidas to avoid the media. Jak chose not to make any comment about their destination, though she knew he guessed where they were headed and disapproved.

The door to the guildmaster's office was a special tri-stil slab embossed with the Cyberguild glyph, a dendritic lattice.

"Rico? It's Vida."

The door responded to her voice and slid open, revealing a nicely appointed anteroom with subdued light, a few formfit chairs, several access points for portable Map-stations, and tables littered with toys and puzzles. The walls were covered with a variety of art reproductions. Vida's eye was particularly caught by a nice lithograph of a Bassi Ev painting that had been added since her last visit. The original was hanging in The Close, Vida's former

home in the Pleasure Sect. Vida grinned. She'd be willing to bet that Rico had chosen that print.

The room had one exit, an archway screened by a hologray curtain. The archway concealed an autogate, a security device that could read a person's DNA structure and freeze, or even injure, an intruder who wasn't permitted passage. Vida was coded to pass through, but Jak wasn't. The Garang settled into a corner of the waiting room without comment.

"I'll just be a little while, Jak. I hope you won't be bored out here."

Jak couldn't read any of the flatplates because the Garang Japat were illiterate. Something about their brains made it impossible for them to process written language. Samante, a licensed interpreter and linguist, probably knew why. Vida would have to ask her about it sometime.

Jak crossed his muscular legs with a fluid shift of joints that no human could possibly match. "A Garang Japat is never bored, Sé Vida. I will meditate."

Vida wasn't sure if Jak was joking. Her bodyguard always seemed so serious. He didn't talk anymore about Vida's grand Destiny, because he knew it made her uncomfortable. But it was clear that he hadn't forgotten that he was blood-bonded to her and a witness to greatness. Vida thought it was sweet, but a little scary. Everyone in Government House acted like everything they did was of world-shaking significance. She hoped she'd never become that self-important. "Okay then. Have fun."

Vida gave Jak a casual salute and stepped through the autogate. Maybe it was psychosomatic, but she always felt a feathery tingle whenever she passed through one of the things. It was kind of creepy to think that her fundamental genetic structure was being scrutinized by the Map.

The main office was huge, with lots of specialized wallscreens and a horseshoe-shaped autodesk in the middle of the room. There was a double row of offMap workstations with datachairs attached. At the moment, they were unused, but she had seen them filled with dozens of cybes naming all sorts of programs that would later be uploaded to the Map. She wondered where everybody was. Maybe the guildmaster was holding a meeting.

Rico and his uncle had added a score of Mapstations since the last time she'd been here, too. Several of them were running stand-alone applications, enclosed by holofields pulsing with crimson danger sigils.

"Sé L'var?"

"Huh?" Vida spun around to see a slight young woman enter the room. She was dressed in a drab gray suit that matched her eyes. Her black hair was coiled perfectly, set in tringlets and braids, studded here and there with a glass bead that winked in the light. "Oh, Sé Jevon. How are you?"

Hi's factor smiled slightly. "Well, thank you. Were you here to see Sé Rico?"

Well, no point in playing games with Hi's factor, who had been with the family for years. She must know perfectly well what was going on between her and Rico.

"Yes, if he's available. And how is your mother? I understand that she's been ill."

Jevon's cool demeanor cracked for a moment to reveal some flash of pain or anger, but she recovered quickly.

"You have an amazing memory, Sé L'var. I wish I could remember trivial details that easily." Jevon went behind the autodesk and checked some readout. "Rico is still walking the Map, but he will be off shortly; he has entered the Jons transition space. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if you waited in his office. You know the way, I think."

"Yes, thanks. Give my best to Sé Hivel will you? And please call me Vida."

"Of course. Sé Vida."

Vida was already out of the reception area and walking down the corridor when it occurred to her that Jevon hadn't replied to her question about her mother. Jevon reminded her of Samante; both factors had a habit of ignoring questions they didn't care to answer.

Vida navigated the maze of corridors easily, another benefit of an eidetic memory—she never got lost if she'd visited a place even once, and Vida had been here several times. Rico's office was protected by yet another hologray curtain and autogate. This autogate, she knew, was programmed for lethal interdict. She always felt a twinge of fear and relief when she walked through it unscathed.

Rico's office teemed with clutter, circuit blocks, blueglass, optic fiber, switchers and datachair components, a galaxy of specialized tools and thousands of flatplates. The formfit he'd rigged as a sleeping couch was currently blanketed in flatplates and long rolls of printout. Vida knew from experience that no matter how chaotic the mess looked, Rico knew exactly where everything was, and would get cross with anyone who attempted to rearrange it. When it came to his work as a cybe, Rico could be as fussy and particular as a temperamental chef.

Rico squirmed in a datachair, his wrist implants jacked in and a full-face Mapstation powered up over his head. A large glowing timer on the side of the chair told her that he'd been walking the Map for over three hours and that gave her a chill. According to the manuals, the Cyberguild frowned on sessions over two hours, even for experienced masters, and Rico was barely out of the apprentice stage. The veins of his muscular forearms stood out sharply and his slender body jerked and spasmed constantly as his body reacted to the psychometric feedback of his actions on the Map. Rico sighed, mumbled rapidly, and occasionally even moaned. It upset Vida to watch and she tried to distract herself by skimming some of Rico's flatplates, but he didn't have anything fun to read. Most of the texts were so technical that she couldn't understand one word in ten, though the diagrams were sometimes interesting to look at

"Vida?"

She glanced up from a structural diagram of blueglass isomers to see Rico detaching from the datachair Mapstation. His long black hair was lank with sweat and his face was pale and a little twitchy. The pupils of his eyes were disconcertingly large.

"Are you all right, love?" she asked.

"I'm fine." His tone was sharp and he realized it immediately, because he continued in a softer voice, smiling at her. "I'm fine. Just ... a long day. I wasn't expecting you."

"Is it okay that I came?"

"Of course! Can you, . . . how long can you stay?"

Vida flipped the flatplate carelessly to the floor and stood up. She sauntered to him with a deliberate swing to her hips. He lay back in the chair with an appreciative smile on his face that she liked very much.

She leaned over him, letting her long red hair fall around them.

"How long can you . . . have me?"

He laughed and reached up to caress the back of her neck. His fingers twitched slightly, but his touch was gentle and assured, so different from the first time they'd made love.

"All my life, Vida."

He pulled her down for a kiss.

Jevon sat behind the autodesk after Vida left. She drew out a holorecorder remote from an inner pocket of her suit, cupping it in her small, delicate hands. Dukayn had given it to her and instructed her to activate it whenever Vida visited Rico in his office. She stared at the device. Dukayn's demands on her were becoming more elaborate and more frequent. Having raped her, he seemed to think he owned her now, and gone was any pretense to being equals in the

service of UJU. Jevon was his plaything and he knew some terrible games, though he never touched her again, at least not sexually. She was to meet him later today, in fact, down in Deeplock. The thought made her stomach twist.

If only she could talk to Sé Hivel. But her patron must never know that she had betrayed him and given classified documents to UJU. She was trapped. She was doomed. But at least she didn't have to betray Rico, too. Arno had loved his cousin, and Jevon had loved Arno. To think that the pampered pet of Karlo Peronida actually cared enough to ask after her mother! Vida L'var might be just a whore from Pleasure Sect, but then wasn't Jevon just a plain girl from the alleys of Center Sect? Jevon put away the holorecorder.

The factor's implant buzzed and she blinked her eyes twice to activate it. Her patron's gravelly voice echoed in her skull.

"Jevon, I can't raise Rico. Do you know where he is?"

"He is in his office, Sé Hivel. He has ... a visitor."

"Ah. Well. This can wait, then, I guess. While I have you, though, a couple things. I have to make a quick trip to the Pleasure Sect. Can you have an airhopper chartered for me right away?"

"Of course." Jevon's fingers danced on her Mapstation. Strange. What was so important there? She would have to tell Dukayn, though he probably already knew. The man had snoopers everywhere, but if she failed to pass on information of the guildmaster's movements, he would punish her. "It will arrive in ten minutes at the East Tower landing pad."

"Great. Thanks. The other thing . . . well, I know you're not going to like this, but I've asked Sé Joto to look in on your mother. Let the man earn his retainer."

"Sé Joto?" For a moment Jevon's mind was an utter blank.

"I should have sent him a long time ago. I know how you feel about Leps, but God's Eyes, Jevon, the man's the best geriontist on Palace. Call it an order from your patron, but anyway, it's done. He's already been sent. I'm sorry about violating your privacy, but, ah hell, I just had to do something when I heard that she was ill." .

"I don't . . . I . . ."

"Look, I have to get to that airhopper. We'll talk about this later, if you want. Just don't resign on me, okay? I couldn't get by without you, kid."

Jevon couldn't speak. After a few seconds, she heard Hivel sigh, then close the connection. After sitting stunned for what seemed like an eternity, Jevon jerked forward and made a commcall home, punching in each number with an angry jab Her mother's third husband, Ben, answered. Dark-haired and dark-skinned, he twitched a smile at her.

"Hello there, Jevon." He wouldn't meet her eyes and his voice sounded tentative, very unlike the plainspoken honest man she knew.

"You don't have to lie, Ben. Sé Jons just told me about the geriontist."

His relief was obvious.

"She just kept getting worse. Wouldn't even discuss going in for life-extension counseling. It turns out that she's got a cancer, mye—myeloma, or something. She made me promise not to tell you."

"So, you told my patron instead."

"I'm sorry, Jevon. She just kept saying how tired she was ... I couldn't bear it anymore. Sé Joto, he thinks that the cancer can be fixed."

"He's a Lep."

"Yeah." Ben nodded, but there was a defiant set to his jaw. "You know what? He got her laughing five minutes after he showed up. I haven't seen her laugh in a long time, Jevon. He

saw my UJU poster on the wall and he didn't say a damn thing. And he's just like a regular guy, no airs. Even had a drink with me. Turns but he's got Mends and family here in Service Sect, too."

Jevon frowned. "We've never said that some Leps aren't good people, just that they shouldn't mix with humans. Look at the war memorial bombing. Look at what those Riva terrorists are doing."

"I know. But I also know I love your ma. I'm sorry, Jevon. I should've told you sooner, but I'm not sorry that Sé Joto is here." There was an uncomfortable silence between them for several moments. "Look, do you want to talk to your mother?"

"No." Jevon's mind was a whirl. "No . . . but I'll come by tomorrow. Ben, I know you only did it for Ma."

Ben smiled tentatively.

"She'll be real happy to see you. It's been eating her—both of us—to not tell you."

Jevon forced herself to return his smile until she closed the connection. She dreaded what Dukayn would say about this. Almost as if she'd summoned him with the thought, her implant chimed in the special signal they used. She subvocalized her reply. "Yes?"

"We will reign in what?" Dukayn's cold voice sent an icicle into her stomach.

"Splendor and the light of God's Eye. When will the time of splendor be?"

"At the opening of the return. Report."

Jevon hesitated for only a moment, then told Dukayn about Hi's sudden trip to Pleasure. She also told him about a private meeting he'd had with the Lep cybermaster Ri Tal Molos, and a number of other highly confidential Cyberguild matters. Each small betrayal of her patron made her sick. He interrupted her frequently to ask precise questions that showed he already knew much of what she told him. She never dared hide anything from him. What would he do to her if he ever caught her in a lie? Dear God, how had she become mixed up with this man? Finally, she concluded her report by telling him about Sé Joto.

"A Lep, treating your own mother? You must stop it, immediately."

"But won't that offend Sé Jons?"

"So? Do it the moment he returns from Pleasure." Jevon was too shocked to answer. Fortunately, it didn't occur to Dukayn that, she would even consider refusing. "What is he doing there, by the way? Screwing one of the whores?"

"Probably," said Jevon, though she knew that he would never have ordered an airhopper for such a purpose. The tiny lie made her heart race.

"Fool. Well, while he's off playing with whores, we won't waste our time. Meet me at Deeplock at the twenties." He closed the connection without waiting for her acknowledgment.

Jevon sat in the reception area for a long time, grateful that no one else was there. Finally, she reached a decision. She would not make the geriontist stop treating her mother. There was no hope that she could keep such a thing from Dukayn, of course. He would be furious. Most people thought that Dukayn was an emotionless robot, Karlo's deadly little tool. But Jevon knew differently. She had seen him in moments of extreme emotion. Only murder and torture relieved his bottomless rage. What would he do to her if he found out that she had disobeyed his order about Sé Joto?

She had to do something. She had to protect herself somehow. But she had no one to turn to, no one she could trust, not since Arno's murder. She couldn't go to Hivel. What about UJU Prime? Jevon shook her head slowly. No, it was too risky. Dukayn was a much more valuable operative to Prime than she was. There would be no help there.

Was there anyone on Palace who would dare stand with her against Dukayn? Jevon thought of her old Service Sect friends, the gang she'd run with as a child. They would have

done anything for her, and she for them. Were any of them still alive? Jevon started to do a directory search with her Mapstation, but stopped. No. She would have to do this in a way that no one, not even Dukayn, could track. She thought about how to go about it. Her stomach felt as if it were filled with broken glass and her hands trembled with fear. She couldn't live like this anymore. Maybe UJU was right and maybe not, Jevon wasn't so sure anymore, but Dukayn was evil. He had to be stopped. But how?

While she worked, Zir set her vidscreen to repeat scan. It cycled through all of Palace's two hundred some channels—flashing them on her screen in clusters of twenty-four—with a fifteen-second delay between cycles. Zir had little patience for the anthropocentric bias of the news and entertainment shows, but it was important, to stay current on the issues and interests of the humans, so she kept her vid open to all of the broadcasts instead of picking a few dozen to keep, as most citizens did.

"Mute," she growled at the vidscreen and the sound disappeared.

The clusters of images continued to flash by at fifteen-second intervals: shuntjammers arriving from the Palace microshunt, air-ken teams in a play-off game, a Lep dance recital, historicals about the fabled Colonizers, soap operas and comedies, dubious pseudoscience about the Rim, an instructional channel demonstrating how to use a Mapstation, slick commercials for useless services, a tour of the Pleasure Sect, and news feeds, dozens of news feeds. One channel was doing a story on the war memorial bombing. Zir had written an autorecord meta to download and compress any reference to the bombing, but she was tempted to lock the channel and relive her lover Vi-Kata's great triumph. But that would be a self-indulgence that she couldn't afford. She returned to the task at hand, a tricky bit of microcircuit generation that might be the key to an even greater triumph for the Leps on Palace.

Zir studied the tiny device under a scanning electron microscope that she'd modified for her own purposes. After several minutes of patient preparation, she entered a series of commands into the workstation. Microbuilders grew another processor on the blueglass, flowing into a circuit cluster of Zir's invention. She continued the meticulous work, lost in a task that demanded all of her concentration and skill. When she was done, she spent another hour with the microscope examining the device square by square, verifying that every processor was bonded completely to the blueglass and channeled properly.

"Seal," she said, and the slim square of circuitry was immediately encased in a block of tri-stil with a jackpoint left open.

"PaRivaZir."

Zir snapped her head up with a startled growl to see that her vidscreen now showed a single image, an old gray female Lep, wearing antique jewelry and her habitual expression of disdain. Usually, Riva contacted her by holographic revenant, but there were no projectors in Zir's workspace. The energies interfered with delicate micro-building. Zir had plenty of security devices on her vidscreen. It annoyed her that Riva overrode them so easily.

"Have you finished work on the key, daughter?"

"Yes, grandmother." She held up the square of tri-stil. Riva nodded, but her head crest did not lift. Zir had never seen Riva show any sign of simple pleasure. She supposed her hatred of humans left little room for joy.

"Good. The mission will take place soon. You will lead."

"Me? But I'm not a warrior."

Riva laughed, a sibilant Lep hiss, but there seemed no genuine mirth to it. "Killers are plentiful, daughter. If I need a throat slashed, I'm sure I can find a willing Lep. But for the task of leading our people to freedom, I require intelligence and creativity. And loyalty."

"I'm no Vi-Kata—"

"Do not speak" that failure's name to me." Zir was shocked to silence. Vi-Kata was her hero, a great martyr to the cause. "He let his pride rule his mind, the fool. I require a less passionate tool. Will you serve?"

"I . . . yes, of course, Grandmother Riva."

Zir was troubled, but even Vi-Kata had often said that Riva was the best of their race. He *had* been foolish to try to kill the L'var girl inside Government House itself, the most secure place on Palace.

"What of the neuters? How many do you have?"

"We've bought two hundred through various fronts. Dukayn monitors any large financial transactions. We have to be careful."

"That's not enough. Steal them from work gangs, or undefended compounds, if you have to. We must have at least a thousand before our ... guest joins us."

"Stealing saccules . . . that will attract attention. Can't we trade for them with the swamp saccules? We have plenty of barter goods."

"No. You must have no contact with the wild saccules."

"As you say, Grandmother Riva."

"Good. The destruction of the humans is very close."

"Yes, grandmother."

Riva disappeared off the vidscreen without another word.

Zir pocketed the device she had created. Kata had occasionally spoken of Riva's coldness, but she hadn't realized how intense it was. Perhaps the Ty Onar Lep needed Such an implacable champion to raise them from oppression, but Zir wondered what terrible event had so emptied Riva that she could speak of Kata thus. It doesn't matter, Zir thought, firmly. Riva is a master of the Map. She has access to precious Colonizer technology—including a teleporter—and she has been working for the Lep cause for many years, since before the Lep-Human War. There was no question of Riva's dedication to her people. That's all that matters.

Still, Zir wondered if she would ever be the focus of that icy contempt.

"Today we will be discussing the mathematics of the pseudo-lattice as applied to the Merlin Project. Those of you with multiplex facilities should tune your holotables to channel ninety-six for the revenant version of this lecture.

"By now, you should all be very familiar with the three families of lattice structure represented by the twelve existing AIs in the Pinch. Last week, we discussed the topological qualities of the Defense AIs—Nimue, Kali, Titania, and Morgana. This week we explored the less complex topology of the Helpers, Magnus, Georgie of the Gyre, Dee, and Circe.

"The last family of AI is the Coordinator, of which we only have the crippled Caliostro as reference. The Merlin Project is intended to replace the Coordinator with a pseudo-lattice modeled after Caliostro. Naturally, it will be some time, perhaps years, before the Cyberguild will be ready to even energize the lattice. But we can certainly discuss the mathematics of its operation.

"The quantum behavior of subatomic particles generated by the blueglass medium in a planar configuration is described by the following two equations . . ."

Rico stared at Vida, sleeping beside him. Her glorious red hair was a rumpled mess. She shifted in the blanket and snored. He smiled down at her and brushed a lock of her hair out of her eyes with a hand that still shook slightly from the vestiges of the cyberdrugs.

He couldn't sleep. The drugs that kept him alert and focused on the Map had the side effect of keeping him awake and fidgeting for hours off the Map. Having sex while under their influence was a fantastic rush, though. He'd felt as though he could touch every cell in Vida's body, that her taste was quicksilver and her every sound a symphony. God, it was good. Too bad he couldn't use them every time they made love, but that was a good way to get addicted.

It was almost the fourteens and he'd promised to wake her so she could get ready for some stupid reception, but he didn't want to. He hated to flunk of her out of his arms and playing the dutiful Peronida wife to that drunk asshole Wan. His eyes burned as if they were dry stones. The drugs enhanced his sight so that he felt as if he could see every inch of her, down to the bones if he concentrated. He wanted to memorize all her features, the way her lips curved, the angle of her eyebrows, the shape of her ears, the light hairs on her neck and arms. God, how he loved her. Partly, it was the drugs that heightened every emotion to a fever pitch. But mostly, it was her, the piece of his soul that he hadn't even known was missing. Her voice, her laughter, her touch. She was brilliant, funny, sexy, and far more fragile than she thought. How had he lived before her?

The alarm chimed and she jerked in his arms, her eyes snapping open. Looking into those bright green eyes felt like looking into green stars.

"Rico, I have to go," she whispered, but she snuggled closer to him and kissed his wrist.

"I love you so much," he said, tears stinging his eyes.

She raised her head up to kiss him, a slow deep kiss that aroused him.

"I have a surprise for you," she murmured. Just from her tone and that half quirk of the lips, he knew it would be something good. "I'm not going with Wan to Souk tomorrow. We'll have weeks together while he's gone."

Rico laughed and hugged her.

"That's great!"

He'd been dreading her time away and brooding about what she'd be doing with Wan. But then he frowned.

"You were looking forward to that trip so much. I know how much you want to be on a shuntjammer. What happened?"

"There'll be other trips. You'll just have to be my shuntjammer for now."

She gave a wicked smile, and perhaps someone else would have missed the pain in her eyes, but Rico saw it and hugged her close. He couldn't be sorry that she wasn't going, but he also couldn't stand to see her hurt.

"Someday, you and I will go everywhere, Vida. We'll see all the other planets. We'll even go visit the macroshunt, if you want. We'll jam the whole Pinch, I swear."

She kissed his neck, but said nothing. Her silence went through his heart like a needle. She rose up from his couch and adjusted her hair and clothes. In moments, even he couldn't tell that she'd spent the last two hours in bed with a lover. She sat down beside him and they talked for a little while about trivial things, a pet jadewing that Rico had when he was a kid, a holonovel that Vida was reading, about who would win the air-ken trials, a new club that Vida had heard about. It was so easy to talk to her. He loved to make her laugh and when she touched him, even just a light touch on his arm, his whole body answered like the air before a stroke of lightning.

Then, too soon, she was gone and Rico was left alone. The drugs kept him jittery, and his emotions veered up and down wildly. He should take the transition drugs and get some sleep, but his mind was shuttling furiously. He was thinking of Vida, of ways to see her while Wan was gone, but part of him was also working through a few Map problems. His highest priority was to track Riva, but as Hi's heir, he had a heavy load of duties on top of his ordinary work for the Cyberguild. He just couldn't relax, he was too keyed up. It was too soon to go back on

the Map, though he glanced at the datachair longingly. He should check in with Hi. But first, he needed something to settle his nerves. He flipped through his medlocker until he found an extra vial of frulose. It would keep him up another twenty hours, minimum, but at least he wouldn't be so jumpy.

Rico whistled as he strolled out of his office to the reception area. No one was out there except Jevon, which puzzled him until he remembered that Hi had given the staff the day off to-make up for their working through a couple of holidays. "Hey, Jevon."

The factor looked at him so strangely that Rico stopped dead. Could she tell about him and Vida? Rico felt himself blushing. But as he came closer to her, he could see that she looked frightened.

"Jevon, what's wrong? Are you okay?" The woman shook her head, but didn't speak. Rico came around the autodesk and took a seat next to her, unsure what to do. He touched her shoulder lightly, felt her tension. "Look, should I get Hi?"

"No! No. Please."

He just sat there with her for several minutes, feeling helpless and stupid, while she stared off into space, like a woman under sentence of death.

"Rico, you knew Arno better than anyone," she said eventually. Her gray eyes bored into his. Rico nodded. "How could he turn into an addict?"

Rico had known about Jevon and Arno, of course, though his cousin never said anything to him in so many words. He looked at her for a long moment, thinking hard. Uncle Hi must have had his reasons for not telling Jevon the truth, but Rico wondered how he'd feel if Vida thought he was a worthless head killed by drug dealers. Rico made a decision.

"Jevon, Arno was no addict." Her expression could not have been more astonished if Rico had told her that Arno was a saccule. "He was working for Hi, in secret. He couldn't tell anyone, not even you. He didn't even tell me, until, well, just before he was killed. I can't tell you what he was doing, but it was important."

"Then, Sé Hivel didn't just leave him out there to die?"

"What? Are you crazy? Uncle Hi loved Arno. He's all torn up about his murder. But he has to keep pretending it doesn't matter, so no one will know about the work Arno was doing. Not even my mother knows the truth."

Jevon's expression went through some remarkable changes. Rico had always thought that the factor was efficient and remote, but kind of a cold fish. Now, he saw the fire she kept hidden.

"I should have been told! God's Eyes, I thought . . . oh, Arno." After a moment of silence, she reached out and took hold of one of Rico's hands. Her grip was light but strong, like a bird. "Thank you for telling me, Rico. Thank you."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"I have to go. I have to meet someone. But I'd like to talk with you about Arno later, if you don't mind?"

"Sure. Anytime."

Jevon looked at him and her gray eyes were so old and sad that he couldn't believe he'd ever thought her cold. She lifted her head up to kiss his cheek.

After Jevon left, Rico sat for a while behind the autodesk idly playing with the equipment, thinking about Jevon. She'd been with the Hernanes y Jons clan for years and he'd never guessed how deep her feelings for Arno ran. She had always been so standoffish. He'd assumed she didn't like him. Rico shook his head and leaned forward to lock down the autodesk until the staff came back tomorrow morning. But he paused with his hand on the control. Jevon had been so upset that she'd left Hi's itinerary up. She'd marked Hi as going to the Pleasure Sect, probably to see Aleen, though of course Jevon would never write

something like that down. But below that entry, almost invisible; in a corner of the screen, she'd left a meta running, its icon spinning slowly. Rico frowned. That wasn't a Jons icon. He knew all of them; it was part of his job to keep track of the library.

In fact, now that he thought about it, the icon didn't resemble anything that a factor might use. The shape of an icon was supposed to provide its taxonomy, but this one didn't fit the classification schema. That, alone, was a felony. What was Jevon up to?

Rico hesitated a moment longer, then pulled a cable from Jevon's Mapstation and snapped it into his wrist implant. He circled the icon on the open screen with a cutout app and downlinked a copy to his wrist storage, buffered in case it had defenses. Then he turned off the itinerary. Probably, it was nothing. He decided not to mention it to Hi until he'd had a chance to dissect it. It might even have been something Arno had written for her, though the thought rang false.

After locking down the autodesk, Rico left the office. He rarely had free time these days and when he did, he spent it reading technical abstracts, debugging metas on his offMap workstation, or with Vida. Today, though, he just didn't have the patience and concentration to work. He needed distraction. Rico decided to try that club in the West Tower that Vida had mentioned, the Station. She'd promised to be there later tonight. He glanced at the clock built into his wrist implant. Just after the fifteens. By now, Vida would be at/the reception, probably hanging on the arm of Sé Ain't-I-Handsome. Rico scowled and a young scribe scurried out of his path. He just wasn't getting used to this. How would he feel when Vida was pregnant by that insufferable jerk? It wasn't fair.

Sometime later, Rico snapped out of his mood to notice that he had, once again, managed to get turned around, and of course he'd forgotten his portable map again. He didn't get to the West Tower much, of course, but still he hated always getting lost. Okay, there was the main axis of the West Tower, of course, two railings to his left. These offices with the gold holodoors were for some financial analysts; he recognized that holosculpture of a shuntjammer. Right. There should be a lift booth just down the corridor. '

After another pair of wrong turns and the humiliation of having someone cue up a tower map for him and explain where he was, Rico managed to locate the raucous Daahs Level of the West Tower, where the hottest clubs and restaurants were. The Daahs Level was, literally speaking, three levels, connected by lots of air-tubes, slidewalks, staircases and the like, to make partying easy. It was just sixteens, but already hordes of sapients were having fun; Rico even saw clusters of Leps and that made him feel good. Maybe tempers were cooling now that Vi-Kata was gone.

Rico felt his spirits lift as he smelled some kind of barbecue and heard a thundering bass beat shaking the air, while the sound of laughter and delighted screams echoed everywhere. The air-ken trials would start in a few hours and Rico saw lots of people wearing team jerseys and shoulder slaps. A crowd of men and women were playing an open game of down-ken with saccules dressed as goalies and he was tempted to join in, but he was still wearing work clothes and he didn't want to get them dirty. Someone flung armloads of bubbleflares over the railings into the huge hollow center of the West Tower. The flares popped with a whiff of sweet scents, Or rang out a chime, or turned into mechanical birds, or spilled coins into the air. The Daahs was packed and he realized he didn't have a hope of finding the Station without a guide. He wished Vida were with him; she would love this. Would there ever be a time when they could be together without worrying about being seen? On a whim, he ducked into the first club whose entrance wasn't blocked with partyers—the Zhu, some kind of Hirrel bar.

Music like liquid silver flowed from a multitude of hidden speakers as Hirrel glided around the place. The club was dimly lit, to accommodate the sensitive eyes of Hirrel. Deformed tables loomed out of the darkness. They were weirdly shaped, like melted mushrooms. Apparently, there was some trick to getting your, food and drink balanced on them. The dome of the ceiling looked like a starry night and if you looked closely you could see a tiny red dot that must represent the thousands of Hirrel ships comprising the Nomadia on its endless journey, circling its microshunt.

Everywhere he looked, Rico saw the delicate figures of Hirrel, all tall and slender, many

appearing emaciated, most wearing dark-colored suits tailored and accented with odd bits of jewelry and what looked like brightly colored seashells. Their breathing filled the air like the humming of a lullaby.

Rico stumbled over the floor, which was uneven and seemed deliberately crafted to make people trip, though none of the Hirrel customers appeared to be having any difficulty. In fact, he didn't see any other humans in the bar. Rico hoped he wasn't in a Hirrel-only club.

At a counter that looked like a warped horseshoe, a tiny revenant of a Hirrel appeared in front of him.

"A oiewoi, Zhu, *sapient*."

"Hi," said Rico, hoping that the revenant was a waiter. "Could, I..get a cup of *kiviu*?"

"Spiced, or mulled?" The revenant switched to perfect Gen, though oddly accented.

"I've never had it spiced. What's that like?"

"Rimmy, *sapient*, trust me." The miniature Hirrel sounded vary enthusiastic.

"Sure, why not? Oh, here's my chip." Rico flashed it at the revenant who scanned it with a lightbar.

A corner of the club became less dim and a Hirrel wearing a spidery black gown stood up. The alien began to sing, a rich atonal piece unbroken by any pause. Rico debated asking for a translation, but it would have been distracting. The singer might have been female, though Rico had a hazy idea that you couldn't tell about such things with Hirrel. In fact, Vida had explained it to him once, that the sexes were conditional, but he hadn't been paying attention at the time.

A saccule, dressed in a specially tailored black shift, brought Rico his spiced *kiviu*. He thanked the saccule with a throat-hurting boom that Vida had taught him. The saccule let out a delighted squeak and puff of sweet air. Rico sipped me *kiviu* cautiously, but had to admit that the tiny Hirrel was right. The spiced version was excellent, a mixture of rum, red cinnamon, and some kind of spicy butter that tasted so good he would have eaten it by itself, plus some other stuff that must be native to the Hirrel hydroponics ships.

After a moment, another corner of Zhu lightened to reveal another poet-singer. This one rapped out lines like a fist on a door and there was a harsh undertone throughout, until the end when he, or she, switched to a lilting voice of heartbreaking purity and kindness. Rico hadn't understood a word, but he applauded enthusiastically. The Hirrel around him seemed to approve of his applause and he felt really welcome. Still, he kept wishing Vida were there to share this with. Being without her was a physical ache.

The tiny revenant and its saccule servant kept him supplied with *kiviu* and Rico found himself uncharacteristically chatty, asking about the performers and even paying for a download Of translations that he'd read later. The revenant seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of cybe jokes—it had picked up on Rico's blue gown right away— and some of them were actually pretty funny. He hoped he'd remember them tomorrow to share with Vida.

At some point, Rico even stopped checking his clock implant and just relaxed into the evening. It occurred to him that the *kiviu* was reacting with the frulose in his system, but it didn't seem to be causing any harm. In fact, the combination was very nice. He felt mellow and unconcerned. For once, he wasn't eating himself up over Vida and Wan. Thank God for *kiviu*. He'd have to get the recipe and have some ready after every Map session.

Rico's eyes were closed and he was half-asleep, humming the refrain from one of the Zhu's poems, when a hand touched his arm lightly.

"Huh?" He looked up and saw Pukosu standing over him with an enigmatic smile on her pale thin lips. Rico blinked. "Wha' you doin' here?"

"I came with friends." Rico glanced around owlishly and the tall woman laughed. "They left some time ago."

Rico frowned. Why was she talking to him? They'd never been friends. She and Arno had been rivals for years.

"Uh, hi."

Pukosu looked at him with a combination of amusement and calculation.

"Aren't you going to invite me to join you?"

"Yeah, sure. I guess." Rico made an effort to straighten up and pay attention. He noticed that Pukosu - wore a revealing skintight and that she had a pretty nice body. Well, if Vida could snuggle up to Wan, why shouldn't he have company? "Siddown."

"Thank you." The slender woman perched on a stool beside him. Rico ordered her a cup of *kiviu*. "I wasn't aware that you were interested in Hirrel politics, Rico."

"Huh?" He blinked at her. "The ice cube with eyes" is what he and Arno had called Pukosu. She didn't look much like an ice cube at the moment. In fact, the look she was giving him was making him feel pretty warm. "Politics? This is a music club."

Pukosu laughed. "Oh, that's just how Hirrel do speeches, in poetry with music. You're fraternizing with some real radicals tonight, Rico. Over there"—she pointed to the Hirrel with the spiderweb gown—"is Sé Ceui. She thinks that the Hirrel should stop wandering around the Pinch in their Nomadia and settle down on some nice planet. The movement is gaining a lot of support in the Nomadia."

Rico stared at her, "Are you kidding? That's nuts. The Hirrel have been living on generation ships for hundreds of thousands of years. They don't even know what part of space they originally came from."

"Cèui *is* considered a bit strange. She also thinks that the Hirrel should eliminate one of their sexes."

"What? But, but, how would they, you know . . ."

Pukosu laughed again and sipped her *kiviu*. Rico had never seen her relaxed and smiling before:

"It's very complicated and would take a while to explain."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Pukosu smiled, shrugged, and launched into a convoluted explanation of Hirrel sexuality. Meanwhile, more radicals sang out their manifestos. Pukosu explained the gist of their polemics after each performance. None of them were as odd as Ceui, but they were all pretty strange. Pukosu had a knack for spicing up the explanations with sarcastic asides and she kept Rico laughing. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this relaxed. He and Vida always had to be so careful in public. It was nice to not have to worry about being seen or overheard.

A long time later, customers seemed to be drifting away and Rico got the sense that the Zhu was about to close. Rico had stopped drinking *kiviu* and switched to coffee.

"How'd you get to know so much about the Hirrel?"

"Oh, no mystery there. I studied on Souk at the L'Ibertin College and they have a lot of Hirrel students. Cèui was my roommate for a while."

"I wish I could've gone to L'Ib. They've got the best hyperMap courseware in the Pinch. But Mom wanted me to stay here and learn all the family Protocols."

"Mm," she said, noncommittally. Pukosu set down her cup and looked at him oddly.

"Well," he said, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden. "Thanks for joining me. It was fun."

"Ah," she murmured. "You're seeing someone?"

He nodded, unable to meet her eyes.

"Is it exclusive?"

Rico thought about Vida and Wan. Hell, she was *married* to him. Suddenly his whole relationship with her seemed foolish. Pathetic, even.

"No. No, it isn't."

He stared at Pukosu, who gave him that half smile that was at least a little predatory. She was the wrong person to get involved with, no matter what. But he was tempted. Very tempted.

"Look," he said. "Thanks for a fun time. See you on the Map."

The some slipped a bit, a hint of genuine sadness? Who knew? Pukosu was such a political person, always angling for position, it was hard to believe that she ever did anything that wasn't thoroughly calculated. Being partnered with a patron-track who had been named as an heir to the guildmaster was probably just smart business to her.

"Thanks for the *kiviu*, Rico. See you on the Map."

Rico got up and left. He looked back once to see the club nearly empty and Pukosu sitting alone, a cup of *kiviu* steaming at her elbow.

Hi liked to sit up front next to the pilot when he traveled by airhopper; he was a pretty fair pilot himself, though he seldom got opportunities to fly. Nju remained in the passenger compartment, probably checking the hopper for snoopers and bombs.

The big curved window gave an excellent view. At the moment dusk was turning the gossamer sky into a curtain on fire. The sky drizzled, as it did most of the time on Palace, but the light rain only made the air sparkle all the more.

The airhopper was a private charter and Hi could have used his status as guildmaster to authorize a priority route, but he thought it unwise to call attention to his trips to the Pleasure Sect. As far as he knew, no one had yet guessed that Madam Aleen Raal, a prosperous owner of brothels in Pleasure, was Hi's trusted ally and adviser, and he liked that fact just fine. So, they took the slower route in, queuing behind all the other hoppers for a parabolic descent into the public lanes.

As they banked across an Ag Sect, Hi got a good look at a series of farms that resembled an immense chessboard lit by floating moons of amber—specialized growlights and anti-fungals. But now with the drizzle in the air and a mist creeping in with dusk, the lights shimmered like fires below.

Finally, the pilot brought them in at a steep angle to the Pleasure Sect, one of the oldest and most beautiful places on Palace. It looked like an enormous colosseum, surrounded by slender tri-stil minarets that pierced the fog like deformed fingers. These were the Eyes of the Colossi, the guardians that ruled access to Pleasure since the time of the Colonizers. Resembling AIs in many ways, the guardians acted as gigantic autogates scanning any sapient who came into range and capable of obliterating anyone who tried to enter or leave without permission. Their primary function was to activate the brain bomb in all Marked citizens of Pleasure if they attempted to leave the Sect; only the chief Lifegiver of the Sect could override the program. According to the old histories, Pleasure used to be called Quarantine.

The airhopper circled for some time until the Protectors approved its landing site. The hopper dropped through the haze. Hi leaned forward to gaze down on the perfectly sculpted and landscaped interior of the Sect, or what was visible through the mist. There were roof parks, tree-lined streets, fountains, and gaily colored buildings everywhere. It was a beautiful prison, though the twilight fog made it seem an eerie and lonely place.

Soon, Hi and Nju made their way to The Close, the most exclusive brothel in Pleasure and Aleen's home. The Garang said nothing, but Hi sensed his disapproval. He thought these trips were unmanly, a sign of weakness. Hi wondered sometimes how the Garang managed to reproduce at all with their attitude toward sex. He wished he dared ask Nju, but the

bodyguard would be terribly offended.

While they walked together to The Close, Nju drew out an iconized list of security issues for Hi to review. From long years of experience, Hi was able to decipher the Japat symbols at a glance. The Garang had no written language of their own, but their Japat warriors had developed a pictoglyph system centuries ago to use with their employers. Each Japat tailored the lexicon specifically to the sapient he worked for. Hi and Nju had squabbled amiably for years over theirs.

Aleen's assistant, Tia, a short woman conservatively dressed, met them at the door. Her eyes, red as a sunset, sized up Hi and Nju. Hi always felt uncomfortable with the woman, though she was unfailingly pleasant and professional with him.

"Sé Jons," she said in her cool voice, using the more formal construction of his name. "Madam Aleen is expecting you."

"Nju, I may need you to run an errand for me. Would you mind waiting down here?" The Garang merely nodded. The Close unnerved him. Hi nodded to Tia "Lead on, fair Tia."

The woman's smile slipped a little, as if she didn't quite approve of his charm. They moved to a lift boom that Tia unlocked with a palm key.

"I hope your nephew is well," she said as they entered. Rico had lost his virginity with one of Aleen's girls.

"He's great."

"Do you ever see Vida?"

Hi hesitated, unsure of Tia's motive for asking.

"Well, yeah, though not much. The First Citizen keeps her real busy! She's going to be a fine chief patron."

Tia nodded, but when she spoke, her tone was wistful. "We all miss her. Please give her our best?"

"Sure, my pleasure."

Hi punched a private code into the lift booth. The booth opened up on the fourth floor and into a hall. Hi tapped another code into an unmarked door and stepped through into Aleen's public bedroom.

She'd redecorated again, this time with a Varanian motif: paintings of sky and water, bine and white furniture, couches curved in semicircles, the ceiling cloaked in holo clouds, the soft voices of birds singing in the background.

Aleen Raal stepped into the room from a side door hidden by a holosculpture of a spear tree. She emerged like a dryad from the trunk of the tree. The smartthreads of her white suit gave off flashes like miniature lightning. Tall and graceful, Aleen moved with poise and confidence that would have been the envy of any chief patron of Center Sect. Her face was narrow, with high cheekbones and pale skin. Her every movement and gesture communicated precision and intelligence.

"Thank you for coming, Sé Hivel. It's always a pleasure to see you."

The two slipped into their roles as courtesan and customer until they'd settled on a price and duration. Aleen led Hi into her private apartments through the bole of the tree. Once out of the public areas, where Aleen allowed snoopers to flourish, Hi drew out his blackbox, a slender square of circuitry, and activated it with a breath. The edges glowed red. Now they could speak freely. It wasn't that uncommon for chief patrons to use illegal tech like blackboxes to protect their privacy during sex. Few people would suspect that Hi and Aleen had much more political intercourse in mind.

"You used the priority code," said Hi. "What's happened?"

Aleen poured them *arts*, a light wine imported from the sky cities of Varan. Still continuing

the design motif, Hi thought, with affection.

"Someone has been sifting the gene-base for Pleasure Sect. My own genetic screen was accessed. I believe that someone has guessed my relationship to Vida, or is close to doing so.!"

Even with the blackbox, Aleen's habitual caution made her speak obliquely. Hi sipped his wine. Had she dragged him all- the way out here just to fret about her daughter? That wasn't like Aleen. There must be something more serious involved.

"It could be almost anyone. I'd put my money on Vanna."

Aleen nodded. "Yes, that was my thought, too."

Hi slumped into a shapeless blob of a chair filled with some kind of viscous fluid that gently rippled around him like mercury. Soft music played in the background like rain falling on grass.

"Well, what of it? Vida's definitely a L'var and everyone already knows her mother was a . . . was a citizen of Pleasure Sect." Aleen smiled tightly at Hi. "You don't think Vanna'd try to move against you with this?"

The Madam shook her head.

"No, she wouldn't waste her time on the likes of me. That's not the problem. It's a lot more serious than that."

Her cybereye, red and glowing, seemed to burn like an ember in her face. Sometimes he regretted giving it to her. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Ah, he thought. Now, we get to it.

"Yeah, I do."

Aleen licked her lips, hesitated, then finally blurted out, "Molos and I altered my genetic screen."

Hi was silent for a long moment. Aleen had just admitted to a capital offense. Both she and Molos could be summarily executed if the truth was discovered.

"I didn't know that was possible. Not even Roha can tamper with the devices."

"You're right The testers still have my true template in them, though only someone like Roha is supposed to have the authority to access the originals and no one has the power to change them, not even the Pope on Retreat. No, we altered the output on the Map, just a little, just enough to protect Vida."

"You mean no one can use the genetic screen listed in the Protectors' database to identify you as Vida's mother?"

"Right. Unless they look at the raw birth-test data, which is what this, person is doing now. Obviously, they weren't satisfied by the Smid cover story."

"So, it's got to be Vanna or Roha."

"Or someone else with the skill to crack the toughest security on Palace and no fear of the Lifegivers. Someone who could, for example, tamper with autogates."

"Riva? God, I hope not! But why would she be hunting Vida's mother? No, it's got to be Vanna forcing Roha to help her." Hi scowled and rubbed his chin as he thought "Aleen, this is serious. I've bent the rules for you in the past, but never anything like this. I can't believe Molos agreed to tamper with the Protectors' gene-base. He and I are going to have a talk about that. Well, there's only one thing to do now."

"What?" Aleen's voice was crisp, but he heard the note of tension.

Hi grinned at her, feeling young and reckless.

"We have to replace your Mapscreen with the original correct one before it's too late. That

way no one can prove there was ever any tampering. In a way, we'll just be repairing some damage on the Map."

"Molos will help you. I'll let him know that we've talked."

"Good."

"There's one other thing," said Aleen.

Hi grinned up at her as she paced the room like a caged animal. "You're full of surprises. What?"

"The other reason I had Molos change the screen was that I have a genetic defect that will show up in the raw birth-test data. We had to hide that fact."

For once, Hi was speechless. It took him several seconds to regain, his composure.

"How did it slip past the Itinerant when she did Vida's test?"

"Vida is clear. My defect didn't carry into her genotype. But that doesn't matter, not to the Lifegivers. You don't have to have a damaged chromosome to be a legal cull. If we hadn't supplied Vida with that false pedigree for her mother, there's no way she and Wan would have been approved for children, which was our only leverage with Karlo. The irony is that there's nothing wrong with Vida at all. Her children will be fine—Romero's test proved that—but the laws of Palace won't bend for common sense."

Some citizens might have been shocked to hear Aleen talk like this, but not Hi; He thought the genetic purity laws were ludicrously draconian. Still, they *were* laws, the most consistently enforced in the Pinch.

"Great. If Vida can't give Karlo his precious heirs, he has no use for her. She'll be lucky if she isn't shipped right back to the Pleasure Sect the minute Vanna finds out." Hi frowned in thought, but finally just shook his head. "I can't think of any way around this, Aleen. It's one thing to help you hide information, or correct it. But I'm the guildmaster of the Cyberguild. I can't be a party to actual tampering, even if I could think of a way to break into the testers. I could be unguilted just for having this conversation."

"If you're thinking of getting someone else to help you alter the original template, by the way, don't bother. Not even Molos could do this for you. People have tried for centuries and failed to beat the testers. They're Rim tech, little AIs. You can hook 'em up to the Map, but they aren't truly interactive with it. This is what they were designed for, after all, to find genetic problems and safeguard the information from any possibility of tampering. Even back in the Rim they took their genotypes seriously."

"It was the Colonizers who thought up locking away the culls in Quarantine, though," said Aleen. "And locking up their children, whether or not they actually represented any danger to the gene pool."

"Yeah. The Colonizers were big on putting people in their place. I'm sorry, kid."

Aleen perched on a corner of a table, her back straight. Only because he had known her so long could Hi tell how upset and worried she was. It must have cost her pride a lot to summon him like this and beg for his help. Then, to have him turn her down ... Well, she wasn't used to being denied, but she took it well. Aleen Raal knew what dignity meant.

"I'll think on this, Aleen. There's got to be something we can do to protect Vida. Get her off planet, maybe."

"Where would she go? Where is a cull welcome in the Pinch?"

Hi had no answer to that.

"She was my hope, Hi," Aleen whispered. "She was going to be everything I never could."

He wished he could think of something comforting to say, but there was nothing that she wouldn't know instantly was empty platitudes. That was the trouble with loving a woman like Aleen Raal. Nothing was ever easy. She didn't plead with him, or argue with his ethics, though

he certainly owed her plenty of favors over the years. She'd broken her share of laws to help him hide Arno, for example, but she would never bring that up.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "You know that."

She nodded, came over to stand behind him. She dug her strong fingers into his shoulders, began to massage the knots away.

"I know you will, Hi. Thank you. Now, shall we do some business? I've heard some very interesting gossip about the movements of the Hirrel Nomadia that you may find useful. In return, I'd like to know what your sister Barra is really doing on Orbital."

Hi kissed one of her hands. She squeezed his shoulder. The ceiling shifted into a dazzle of clouds, while the music of birds played softly.

Wan met Vida on the way to the reception, on time and sober, for once. He wore an odd saronglike garment that wrapped tightly around his shoulders and hips. The fabric was some sort of tartan weave. Any other man would have looked foolish, but Wan cut a striking figure with his wide shoulders, slim hips, sculpted features, and long dark hair flowing down over his shoulders. He looked like a wild warrior out of a holonovel. The media outside the reception hall couldn't stop taking pictures.

"You look very nice tonight, Sé Wan," said Vida, still feeling a warm glow from her afternoon with Rico.

Karlo's son gave her a sour look. Vida noticed that.

Wan's factor, Lenobai, had failed to show up again. She would have to have a talk with Wan about replacing his drinking buddy with somebody competent. Samante often ended up doing Leni's work as well as her own at these gatherings, which was unfair.

Wan plucked at his clothes with a disgusted expression.

"I feel ridiculous," said Wan. "This thing is hot as hell."

Vida suppressed a smile and tried to affect a look of sympathy.

"Well, shall we go in?"

He shrugged, but offered his arm. Vida could smell a faint musk on Wan. Hm. Maybe he'd had a little playtime of his own today. Well, none of her business. They'd slept together a handful of times since their marriage; it couldn't be avoided with Karlo so intent on his heirs that even without a birth permit, he expected them to practice. Each session was awful in its own way, but she had to admit that her husband had a fine body and knew what he was doing in bed, more than Rico in some ways. He just didn't give a damn about her pleasure and she certainly didn't arouse any passion in him. It was humiliating. She guessed it wasn't much fun screwing a woman because your father thought you were a lousy heir.

The reception hall had been decorated to resemble one of the great theaters on Souk. All the walls had been switched to transparency and holos filled the room with stelae, columns that swirled with color and were programmed to interact with guests in a variety of ways. Arm in arm, she and Wan strolled the perimeter of the hall, pausing to chat with everyone they met. Vida did most of the talking, while Wan plastered on a fake smile and murmured platitudes. His thoughts were obviously light-years away. In fact, she felt as if she were being escorted by a ghost, until Wan saw his father, without Dukayn for once, burst into the reception in a swarm of media, politicians, and entourage. The muscles in his forearm became stone and a shadow of hatred crossed his face. A moment later he had a drink in his free hand.

Aleen had very definite theories about working a room and Vida tended to follow her principles—spiral in, focus on individuals but plan for the next encounter, and work to make every contact pleasant and memorable. But with such a large gathering of people from all different Sects, guilds, and even planets, the effort drained her very soon. She kept looking out for Samante. Vida hadn't realized how much the interpreter acted as a subtle buffer and

her language skills and cultural knowledge were invaluable in a situation like this. Wan was no help, though surprisingly he had a gift for languages and often spoke the native tongue of the people they met with an offhand fluency that annoyed her. Since their marriage, she'd discovered that Wan had talents that he chose to keep hidden from everyone; especially his father. She couldn't understand why he preferred to be seen as a stupid drunken buffoon by Karlo when it was clear that he had some intelligence.

He detached from her early on, in any case, to flow into a raucous crowd of younger people, mostly soldiers and Interstellar guildmembers. She sighed. It wouldn't be long before he was drunk and making an ass of himself.

"Sé Vida, how nice to see you again." The round little Countess of Motta clasped Vida's hands in her soft warm grip.

"And you, Countess. I'm sorry I couldn't stop by to see you today, but I did wave as we passed over your plantations. I loved the arrangement of the rice paddies, in the shape of your family's gene-glyph, aren't they?"

The countess clapped her hands and laughed with delight. The group of hangers-on and would-be entourage all laughed heartily with her, like little echoes.

"You know, you are the first person to notice that. I feel that anything worth doing is worth doing artfully, don't you?"

"I do. My guardian is very fond of art and she had me tour all the galleries on the Map when I was a girl."

"Have you been to the Nomadia's Collection, men?"

"Oh, yes! The Hirrel have such a unique visual sense. I adore their poetry. I've often thought that 'Iai i' is meant to be part of some larger idea, all those rivers flowing into each other. I confess that I don't understand the poem, even in translation."

Suddenly Samante stepped into view. She was wearing a long black smartsilk gown that pooled around her like liquid shadow. Her icelight pin shone where it clasped up her braids. Vida wondered how long the interpreter had been standing there, silent and unobserved. "The Sh'mil version is a poor translation, hackwork. May I offer my interpretation, Sé Vida?"

"Oh, please do," said the countess, her face open with honest interest, or an exceptionally good imitation.

"Yes, if you wouldn't mind, Sé Samante."

Samante inclined her head.

"First, I will give you the poem in Relzhu. It would be a shame not to hear it first in the Hirrel's native tongue:"

*Iai i uani i zhuris,
zhuri i oma,
omamiu aoa w'orina,
i mam iai maw iaimi.
Zhur.*

Samante paused. The little group around them was an island of complete silence. Vida hadn't realized what a pure singing voice Samante possessed.

"The extant translations all attempt to make false rhymes, or obey some artificial metrical structure, Sh'mil is famous for being a slave to forms. There is always the human tendency to try and make alien art fit our own preconceptions." Samante gazed off into some distant place.

*Love knows no river,
rivers don't sing,
singers believe in star-swimming,
not moments. Kiss moments of passion.
Flow.*

The Countess of Motta clapped her hands and, after a moment, so did most of the others, including Vida.

"That was beautiful, Samante, much better than the Sh'mil," said Vida. Then she added, ruefully, "But I still don't get it."

Everyone laughed and even Samante smiled.

"It's a kind of tone-poem, meant to create an ambience for the artwork. It helps if you've read other work by the poet of 'Iai i.' She often works with metaphors of movement. If we ever get to Souk, I'll introduce you to her."

"You know Kiltë?" exclaimed the countess.

Samante nodded. "I met her on Souk. She is the ship-sib of a friend." But now the interpreter seemed to feel that she had been the center of attention too long and she stepped slightly back. "Sé Karlo asked if you might join him at some point."

Vida excused herself and fell in step with her factor. She leaned close to her and whispered, "I like the dress, but I still think the gold shimmy would've been better."

Samante laughed and her icy manner seemed to melt away. A saccule came up to them with a tray of various drinks balanced on its palm. Vida took a fingertube of what looked like pink sherry and gave a little boom of thanks. Samante kept her hands tucked into the billowy sleeves of her gown.

"You're probably right, but Greenie had, ahem, an accident on it and this was the only clean thing I had to wear."

Vida sighed theatrically. "Greenie has got to learn not to get so excited when laying out clothes."

They chatted just like usual as they crossed the floor toward Karlo's group. Vida glanced around for Wan, but her husband was nowhere to be seen. She hoped he hadn't just left the reception and forgotten about the private dinner after.

The First Citizen wore his fleet uniform, the dress version with medals and honors, and he was an impressive sight, all gold and silver with clusters of jade and ruby. Vida had never seen him in full regalia and found herself staring at his military decorations. Karlo, whose blunt features concealed a quick wit, noticed. His white teeth flashed.

"I look ridiculous, don't I?"

"Oh, no, First Citizen," said Vida, honestly startled. In fact, she'd been thinking that he looked wonderful, like one of the characters in her beloved holonovels come to life.

Vanna arrived, and the swirl of people around them grew. The Second Citizen might be vindictive and dangerous, but she was also a valuable ally to many families. Vanna wore white slit skirts, a style more usual for Leps than humans. The dress showed a lot of skin, all of it covered with elaborate blue tattoos, a legacy of her youth in the Interstellar Guild.

While Karlo greeted his wife, Vida took the moment to scan the crowd for Wan. She leaned close to Samante.

"Could you please find Wan? It looks like he's forgotten the dinner."

Samante nodded and turned toward a saccule Servant to whisper instructions. Vida realized Vanna had said something to her.

"I'm sorry, Sé Vanna, I didn't hear you."

The Second Citizen was a tall, muscular woman, and the tattoos that covered her whole body vaguely unsettled Vida. She spoke slowly, enunciating each word.

"Where is your saccule? A chief patron should always bring a saccule to stand behind the chair and serve as a dinner servant."

The large group of people around them consisted of a mix of people, younger patron-tracks from families in Vanna's debt, or hoping to be, soldiers on leave from the fleet, politicians and diplomats. This little scene was bound to become a piece of Government House gossip. Every time she saw Vanna, this sort of thing happened. She was getting used to it. Vanna was obviously setting her up for yet another insult.

Vida fixed a polite smile on her face.

"Greenie isn't feeling well." Actually, Greenie was still clumsy and nervous. She would never dare bring the saccule to an important social function. "I'll have to borrow one of yours, I'm afraid. My good fortune. Everyone knows that the Makeesa saccules are the best trained on Palace." Maybe a compliment would deflect her this once.

Vanna glanced at Samante and Vida guessed what she was going to say a moment too late to stop her.

"Sé Dinisa, perhaps you would stand for your patron?"

Samante's face drained of color.

"Vanna." Karlo stepped close to his wife, but the Second Citizen laughed.

"Oh, please. It was only a joke. You weren't offended, were you, Dinisa?"

"No, Second Citizen, of course not." Vida was amazed at Samante's level tone. "Excuse me, please, I have to run an errand for my patron."

Samante bowed and melted into the gathering. Vida stared at Karlo, who only shrugged. Even Karlo didn't dare confront Vanna Makeesa unless it was a matter that concerned him and obviously the hurt feelings of a mere factor didn't signify. Vanna laughed again and her crowd of sycophants echoed her with weak chuckles. What a talent she has for cruelty, Vida thought. No wonder she has so many enemies. Maybe it was time for the L'vars to build a coalition against her. Vanna must have sensed something in Vida's look, because she smiled at her with a look of inquiry. Vida remembered the lesson of the Garang Japat and maintained a pose of calm dignity. But it was a good thing Vanna couldn't read her thoughts.

"Perhaps we should go in to dinner?" said Vida. "I'm sure Sé Wan will join us momentarily."

The tension of the moment was past and Karlo and Vanna led them out of the reception area to a private room in a cordoned-off area of the East Tower, where they met the guest of honor and his companion. As they walked, Vida studied the legate and his *jii*. He was a tall Varani with a dyed goatee and clothes whose cut and fabric even Aleen would have approved, though as Karlo had hinted, they were very brightly colored. They'll wore a simple white shift and no jewelry. She was a tiny thing, not more than five feet tall, with no obviously exceptional attributes, though she had a nice compact body. But she exuded a genuine charm and her quick laughter never seemed forced. Aleen had made Vida study the techniques of the *jii* very carefully and it made her a bit uncomfortable to realize how much of her own interactions with people were based on the psychological theories of sociobiology used by *jii* transition wives to make their husbands happy and comfortable.

The dinner party was smaller than Vida had expected, only a dozen people total, including the Souk legate, his *jii*, and a mere half dozen of his entourage. Vida felt very nervous. Neither Wan nor Samante were back and this was her first occasion where the Protocols really mattered. She remembered the correct order of greeting, gave each Souk citizen the proper angle of bow, and kept her remarks short and neutral, but she continued to get more and more anxious. If Wan didn't arrive before they sat down to the first course and opening toast, it would be an obvious insult to the legate. Damn the man

At the last moment, Wan and Samante entered the room. Wan's beautiful sarong was

speckled with blood, his hair was matted, and his face was flushed. Samante's expression was as close to genuine fury as Vida had ever seen. Wan quickly joined Vida and stood behind his chair. The Souk legate was a master of the Protocols, but he couldn't resist this dramatic entrance.

"Sé Wan, you are not hurt, I trust?"

"No, Sé Abelvaas. I'm sorry to be late."

"What happened?" That was the *u*, who was probably the only person in the room who could get away with such an obvious breach of etiquette, but you could sense everybody's relief. It was the question everyone wanted to ask.

"I caught Captain Wintershoal beating a saccule." Wan met his father's glare without flinching. Wintershoal was one of Karlo's favorite officers. "I asked him if he wanted to take on someone a bit taller. He won't be whipping any saccules with that silly little baton of his for a while."

Abelvaas laughed delightedly. "The famous Peronida chivalry. Well done, Wan. I despise bullies."

"Yes, well done, Sé Wan," said the *ji*.

With that, the dinner party-got off to a splendid beginning. The legate, previously a bit cool to Karlo and Vanna, seemed to warm up to them and by the time desserts were served—a special confection of klosh topped by cream—it was clear that he was on their side in some matter of importance. Wan, a bit unused to being treated like a hero at these things, relaxed and kept the table enthralled with stories of hunting swampworms Avith the wild gendered saccules.

"They're very different from the neuters, of course, much larger and with a wider range of sounds from their throat sacs. But you'd be amazed at the similarities. Saccules don't see well, but they can smell a change of light, I swear."

"Souk doesn't have many saccules," said *the ji*, who by custom did not reveal her name in public, but simply went by the honorific. "I understand the Pope's Eye is here to determine their sapiency?"

Wan nodded, swallowing a mouthful of klosh and wiping the cream from his chin absently. "Yeah. I've talked with her a few times. She's serious about it. I even offered to help her find the old research stations out in the swamp. The maps are useless. The swamp changes every day. You can't find anything without guides."

Vida hid her surprise. Wan had met with Sister Romero? It made sense, she supposed. But somehow Vida hadn't imagined that Romero would spend her time with someone like Wan. But then, she hadn't thought that a petulant drunk like Wan would care so much about saccules, either.

"I would love to go with you," said the *ji* wistfully. Was she *flirting* with Wan? "We're only here for a short visits though, I'm afraid."

Vida turned to her right, where Samante was having an animated conversation with Abelvaas's interpreter, a young man with delicate features. They were speaking rapidly in a language Vida had never even heard. Vida looked across the table and caught Vanna staring at her intently. She didn't look away, either. Vida turned away and pretended to be listening avidly to Wan's explanation of the lives of neuter saccules in the swamp. She could feel the weight of Vanna's hostile gaze.

". . . children. Nobody knows why. Sister Romero has some ideas, though."

"And they sell them to you?" asked the *ji*.

"Right," said Wan. "The gendered saccules thought that the Colonizers were gods and they offered them neuters as a gift. It was only later that it became a barter situation. After the Schism Wars, in fact."

"Yes," Vida said, attempting to join the conversation. She probably knew more about the Schism Wars than anyone at this table; it had been a particular hobby of Aleen's. "But that varied according to the tribe, didn't it? I seem to remember reading somewhere that the arctic saccules *did* buy and sell their neuters, even before the Colonizers showed up."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Wan, a sulky tone entering his voice. "They all do it now, that's for sure."

"Where *do* they come from, Sé Wan?" asked the *jii*. She focused only on Wan. She was flirting with him. That was very improper for her profession. At least the legate didn't appear to mind, though he certainly noticed. "It seems unlikely that so many would be born neuter. Why, Palace must have hundreds of neuter saccules. I've seen dozens right here in Center Sect."

Wan frowned, as if this thought had never occurred to him.

"There's never been a census of the wild saccules. They've got most of the planet to themselves. There were a few attempts to enslave them, too, but the Colonizers figured out real quick that not even Rim tech gave them much of an advantage in the swamp, even with swamp-suits. There could be millions of 'em for all we know. Sister Romero is planning to do a real census soon."

"Originally, the first people on Palace were researchers," said Vida. "They didn't become Colonizers until after the macroshunt closed. Part of their research was a study of the saccules. I'm sure they did a census then."

The *jii* looked at her as if she were a fool. Wan said nothing, but he seemed to have lost all interest in the subject. Soon, he had another drink in his hand, and he and the *jii* began to chat in Helane, a blatant snub. Vida felt thoroughly off balance. Usually, she was so good in these settings, much better than Wan. She'd thought that she and the *jii* would hit it off, but instead the woman seemed to have taken an immediate dislike to her. Well, why not? Vida was the wife of this man she obviously wanted.

At the head of the table, Vanna was telling a convoluted anecdote that had the legate and most of the people up there laughing continuously. It always surprised Vida that Vanna could be so charming when she wanted to. Karlo was doing some kind of business with his neighbors and Samante seemed completely oblivious to anything, but the intense conversation she and the other interpreter were having.

It was going to be a long dinner.

"Welcome to Perspectives, where today's newsmakers speak out on the issues that popvoters want answered. My name is Handro Gomez y Syoc.

"Tonight, we have quite a coup. The leader of UJU has agreed to appear live. You'll notice that his image is scrambled and voice disguised. This is to protect his safety in the wake of the war memorial bombing and Riva's public bounty on him."

"I'm not afraid of Riva for myself, Sé Gomez. But she's threatened to assassinate the family of UJU Prime."

"Si Prime, your organization has been accused of inciting violence against Leps. How do you respond to those charges?"

"I'm glad you asked that question. UJU has nothing against the Leps. In fact, we are concerned for their safety and happiness. It's obvious that humans and Leps can't share this planet peacefully. We feel that it's imperative for our leaders to find a new home for the Leps living on Palace before another tragedy, even worse than the war memorial bombing, becomes the flashpoint for civil war."

"How do you respond to those critics who label UJU as a racist organization?"

"Such labels are the last resort of those without the courage to face honest dialogue. It's common knowledge that the Leps of Ri and Souk hold immense financial holdings on this

planet. They don't care that our human citizens are facing the highest unemployment in decades. You'll notice that Ri has made no effort to invite humans to emigrate to their world, yet they continue to encourage their own citizens to settle here, where they often become wards of the state and, tragically, many of them turn to crime to support their families."

"But the statistics don't support—"

"The statistics are controlled by Government House. One of the things UJU is asking for is an independent census of the Leps on Palace."

"Your critics charge that UJU only wants to use such a census to impose greater restrictions on citizen Leps."

"Our critics are highly paranoid. Why, some of them have even accused UJU of secretly funding Vi-Kata's terrorist bombing of the war memorial. We're not interested in wild accusations, Sé Gomez, just facts. All we ask is that the citizens of Palace think for themselves."

"Fair enough, Sé Prime. If you don't mind, could you stay after the break and give us-UJU's perspective on interspecies marriage and blended families?"

"I would be delighted, Sé Gomez."

* * *

Roha made a habit of visiting the Gazes of other Sects several times a month. Romero, and even the Pope, might think him too anthropocentric, but no one could fault his attention to the duties of a cardinal. Besides, there was no substitute for talking to his bishops in person and meeting the flock to gauge the mood of the people. Karlo and Vanna put too much faith in popographs. The cardinal had sensed the discontent of the Leps long before Riva rose to unify them. He had sown the seeds of UJU, too, and knew why it succeeded and who believed in its goals. With the war memorial bombing, the Peronida y Makeesas had assumed tensions would increase between humans and Leps, but Roha discovered that the opposite was true. Somehow, the bombing acted as a moment of catharsis and the great majority of Leps had fallen away from Riva. Choosing to destroy the war memorial, a touchstone for so many citizens of Palace, had been one of Riva's rare miscalculations.

Roha moved through a smelly, garbage-strewn district of the Service Sect, more casually called the Lep Sect for its huge ghetto of Leps. He wore a simple black Lifegiver gown and he went alone, though he wore armor under the gown and carried a concealed weapon. He had decided to meet with Pa Nor Falik, the pastor of a splinter church that had arisen in the very shadow of the Service Sect Gaze. Falik was gaining a following and Roha wanted to take the Lep's measure, see if it might be possible to discredit him without turning him into a martyr. The cardinal hadn't risen to his high station by ignoring nascent threats.

Roha saw few Leps out on the streets. The few he did see, often ragged stooped elders, seldom even looked at him as they scuttled about. The streets, buildings, wire-train tracks, everything was green and gray with mildew. The stink was overwhelming. Roha wished he had thought to bring an air filter, but he had forgotten how quickly the sporefall could drown a Sect if it couldn't afford saccules and equipment to clean constantly. It was a good thing that the Colonizers built anti-fungals into so much of the infrastructure, or Palace would be buried in the swamp in a year.

He turned a corner and was confronted with a study in contrasts. At the end of the block a huge tri-stil dome filled a square planted with colorful flowers and a geometrically measured double row of spear trees. The Gaze of Service Sect was the only clean edifice for miles, and Roha saw private airhoppers—expensive models—parked on a gleaming landing pad nearby. In the opposite direction, a ramshackle structure, cobbled together from a laughable amalgam of materials, tottered over an alleyway. Roha squinted at the facade and saw a sign above an open portal. *Amin* was written there, followed by "Church of Hope" in several languages, including Gen. So, *this* was the hotbed of grass roots schisms that Roha's advisers had warned him about? Ridiculous.

Still, as long as he was here, he might as well look in on Falik and see what he was about.

The portal, like that of a Gaze, had no door. Roha stepped through into a cramped, dirty anteroom, with another open portal to the interior of the church. The semicircular anteroom consisted of a battered metal bowl on a handmade stand and an iron rack that held about a dozen gaily colored ribbons. The bowl contained a few coins. Roha frowned. What in the world was this?

"Welcome, sapient, to Amin, the Church of Hope," said a soft voice in heavily accented Gen.

Roha turned around to see a Lep step from the interior of the church. He was short for a Lep and slight. He wore an amusing mix of clothes—green slit skirts, a wrap shirt of blazing yellow, red kithboots, and a queer little garland wound around his crest. A silver ribbon trailed from his belt. .

"Greetings, I am—"

"Cardinal Roha d'Tele-Tres," the Lep finished. Was there some note of irony in his voice? It was hard to tell through the accent "Welcome, Your Eminence, to our humble little church. Pa Nor Falik; at your service. Amin ya-lo mi'il." Seeing his confusion, Falik translated, and this time Roha was sure he heard a hint of amusement "Honor grows from an honest meeting."

"Well, thank you, Sé Falik." Roha rarely felt off balance, but this oddly dressed Lep with the soft voice and air of quiet humor was not what he had expected at all. "I hope I haven't come at an awkward time?"

"There are no awkward times, Your Eminence, only awkward people. Oma i oman i-a."

Roha scowled. He wasn't used to being taunted by his inferiors.

"Relzhu, isn't it?" Roha asked.

Falik gave the cock of the head that passed for a bow among the Garang Japat. "It is a famous Hirrel phrase, in fact. 'Sing, or do not sing.' A poor translation for a profound statement, but the meaning is clear. Services are about to begin. Will you join us?"

The cardinal stared at the little Lep. The effrontery! But he had to admit he was curious. What sort of sapient would willingly come into this reeking shack?

"Jawol, da," said the cardinal, speaking Palais, the human tongue. Not one in a thousand Leps could understand it, let alone speak it.

Falik's crest lifted. "Well said, Your Eminence. But I believe you meant 'das,' since we go together, neh? Please take a ribbon, if you like. We usually ask for a donation, but your mere presence in our humble church is donation enough."

Roha narrowed his eyes and gestured to the wiry little Lep to precede him. What an annoying creature. The cardinal snatched a crimson ribbon and tied it to his belt as Falik had done with his. He rummaged through his shoulder-sack for a moment and tossed a handful of gold soves into the bowl. Falik noticed and his crest lifted, but he said nothing.

Inside, the Church of Hope was just as dilapidated and smelly as one would expect. Roha smelled old wine and urine. There were dozens of rough wooden benches arranged in a pentagonal shape surrounding a podium that was blackened, as if rescued from a fire. The room was filled with hundreds of sapients, all speaking in low voices and all wearing colorful ribbons at their belts. The congregation consisted of Leps, humans, Hirrel, and even a Garang Japat.

After a moment, Roha realized that there were saccules here, too, sitting on the benches as if they were attending the service. Their smells came to Roha and he quickly drew out his handkerchief, soaked in perfumes that overwhelmed the Stinker odors. Even so, he felt himself respond to them with strong tumescence, a unique weakness that he had suffered, and hidden, all his life. He had to get out of here, quickly. Thank goodness for the robes to hide his erection. He kept as far back in the shadows as he could. No one paid him any attention. Roha saw that he wasn't the only person here wearing Lifegiver robes. So, what he'd been told was true. His own Lifegivers were attending these blasphemous services conducted by a

Lep! He marked them all, determined to see them stripped of their robes.

Falik didn't go to the podium, as Roha expected, but instead moved among the sapients, sometimes sitting on a bench to talk. Roha heard him speak to each person in their own language. He even managed to mimic the booms and moans of the saccules, as if the noises of saccules could be treated as a language. This went on for some time as Roha waited for the Lep pastor to address the flock. But he never did. After some time, many minutes, a human got up and went to the podium. He was a broad-shouldered man with plain features and a diffident manner.

"Hi, my name is Ben and I've been coming for a while now. I guess I just want to say, I like it here. I used to believe in UJU, that there wasn't any way for Leps and humans to live together. I guess I spent a lot of time hating Leps for all kinds of things, my family's troubles, me being out of work." The man paused, looked down at his shoes. His next words were barely audible. "I understand now that God only wants to see love, not hate. You can't make anything good out of looking away from the truth. Amin mi'il."

"Honor grows," responded the congregation in chorus.

Ben returned to his bench, ducking his head shyly. A Hirrel and a pair of saccules sat next to him and a Lep passed him a bowl of something to drink.

A Lep went up to the podium and spoke about how he'd learned that God was a friend keeping an eye on him, not a spy, and how he welcomed the Sight now instead of hiding from it. Like Ben, he concluded his speech with the ritual phrase and the congregation answered him in unison. This went on twice more before Roha had his fill and slipped back out the portal. A pair of Leps were in the anteroom, picking out ribbons. They recognized him instantly and one of them growled low. Roha fell back, fumbling under his gown for his weapon. Falik appeared suddenly.

"Kovir, Sikil, this is a child of hope. Don't you see the ribbon?"

The one called Kovir said something very rapidly to Falik in Lepir. The pastor answered at length, shifting at some point into a singsong voice that drew raised crests from the Leps. They stared at Roha with their small, unfathomable dark eyes, then passed through the portal.

"My apologies, Your Eminence. The Church of Hope has some rough customers."

The cardinal ripped the ribbon from his belt and flung it at Falik.

"This church is a blasphemy. I'll see it shut down and you in Deeplock, unless you disband it now!" Falik cocked his head.

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, Your Eminence. I promise that this structure will be gone by tomorrow morning, if you insist"

Roha was taken aback. Was the little Lep such a coward, then?

"Good."

"If you are not too busy, Your Eminence, may I show you something?"

After, Roha couldn't have explained why he agreed. Curiosity? That had always been his great weakness. He and Orin L'var had become friends out of a mutual curiosity about the Schism Wars and other heresies. Maybe it was just that the Lep seemed such a comical figure that he couldn't conceive of him being a threat.

Falik led them back through the main gathering hall where another Lep was speaking at the podium, and through a curtain that Roha hadn't noticed. They were in a cramped little room that reeked of urine and antiseptic and blood. Roha had lived through the Lep-Human War and he knew such smells all too well. With his own hands, he had tended the wounded and dying. A dozen Leps, some hideously disfigured—missing crests, limbs, and even eyes— were being nursed on makeshift cots by saccules and two human men. Unguided men, one of them short and stocky, with iron-gray hair—a Not-child apparently.

The pastor of the Church of Hope spent a moment speaking softly to his helpers, then he

turned to Roha. His crest was low on his head and his soft voice was a whisper.

"These are the veterans of Deeplock, Your Eminence." The Lep spread his arms wide.

Roha stumbled back a step, as if the Lep had attacked him. "You seem surprised. I thought nothing that occurred to your flock escaped your notice. I thought the cardinal of Palace was an Eye of God."

"You're lying. These can't be from Deeplock." But Roha had heard stories and he was well aware of Dukayn's hatred of Leps.

"No?" Falik's soft voice was implacable. The Lep went to a dented metal box on a corner table and took something out. He came to Roha and held out his hand to him. Identchips glittered on his palm, still blood-speckled from being cut out of flesh. "Please take them. Scan them, if you like. I'm sure you'll find they all come from Leps arrested by Dukayn's secret police."

Roha stared, at the Lep. He snatched the chips and stuffed them into his shoulder-sack.

"I still want this church torn down."

Falik's crest lifted slightly, though, of course, his lizardlike features showed no expression that Roha could interpret.

"Of course, Your Eminence. You have my word that this structure will be gone by morning." The Lep stepped closer, and though he was shorter than Roha—frail in fact—the cardinal took another step back. "But Amin will rise again in another Sect. The place means nothing. Honor grows."

The cardinal looked around the room. The smell of blood was starting to make him physically ill and the place was filled with saccule nurses whose smells muddled his thoughts. He glared down on Falik with what he hoped was some measure of dignity.

"I will have the Medguild send people here tonight. I will personally investigate your fantastic claims and if there is any truth to them, which I doubt, Dukayn will answer to the Lifegivers. You have my word, as the cardinal of Palace."

Falik's crest lifted higher. "Who would ever doubt the word of an Eye of God?"

Roha turned on his heel and strode quickly out of the church and into the street without looking back. Darkness had fallen and the great Gaze down the block was ablaze with light, a star itself. The cardinal felt his nausea fade away. He would look in on Bishop Domi, perhaps even assist with the twilight service. That would wipe the bad taste of this day away. It was impossible that Dukayn was torturing Leps. Falik must be lying.

Later that night, Roha returned to his office in the Cathedral of the Eye in the West Tower of Government House. Here saccules cleaned constantly, around the clock, and sophisticated filters and robots scrubbed away every trace of sporefall. The air was clean, not a hint of mildew and fungus. He entered his office and dispensed with the priority items as swiftly as he could manage. Usually, he spent at least a little time answering letters from parishioners, but he was too rattled.

Roha passed through a holo of a starry sky that disguised the entrance to his private apartments. He walked through an autogate that had been specially modified so that only he could go through it safely. Anyone else would be killed instantly. He had performed the modifications himself. No one must ever know about these apartments, let alone enter them.

Inside his apartments, soft music played and the scent of lavender filled the air. He could feel the tensions of the day melt away. Imagine that scrawny little Lep presuming to keep that odd church within sight of a Gaze! And accusing him of collaborating with Dukayn in the torture of Leps. He had half a mind to call Dukayn now and clear up the matter immediately. But Roha had heard stories about Deeplock, disturbing stories that even involved Jevon, an-

other member of the inner council of UJU. The Leps might be arrogant and with only a fraction of the starsoul granted to humans, but they were God's creatures, too. They had no chance to be reborn as stars and that was punishment enough. Roha could not countenance

torture.

Still, Dukayn and Karlo were inseparable. Even if Falik's claims were true—impossible!—it would not be easy to bring him to account. Perhaps a talk with Karlo? In the meantime, he would have to safeguard these identchips. There was also Dukayn's involvement in UJU, which figured prominently in Roha's plans for the future of Palace. Dukayn was a member of the inner council of UJU, as was Roha. Perhaps he should contact UJU Prime. No, not until he had satisfied himself that Falik was tying. He wished that Orin L'var were still alive. He missed having a friend to talk to.

Roha called for Sweetie. The saccule neuter came out of its room wearing the pink lace smock he liked and bearing a tray of fine liqueurs and sweets. In his mind's eye, Roha saw again those dirty naked saccules sitting on benches in the Church of Hope, pretending to listen to the services. Ludicrous. A blasphemy. Even so, it took the cardinal some time and several fingertubes of strong whiskey to banish the image.

He made a gesture and a high-pitched boom at the saccule. Sweetie knelt between his knees and its warm smooth throat sacs brushed Roha's inner thighs. He reached out to stroke the creature's skull, smooth and slick. There could be no shame here. The saccule was only an animal, soulless, and didn't the Eye of God deserve some comfort?

"Slower, Sweetie, slower." He added a series of soft articulated booms. Falik wasn't the only one who could learn to communicate in other tongues.

The saccule did as it was told.

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The Papal Itinerant studied a holosim of a DNA ligase of her own design repairing a phosphodiester bond. Her severe features relaxed as she admired the enzyme's dance. She had an idea for correcting a genetic defect in Lep children. It was only one of dozens of such research projects she worked on when she could spare the time. A little part of her wished that the Pope had not seen fit to raise her so high in the Lifegivers hierarchy. It was here, in the manipulation of enzymes and polymerases—the tracteries of God's thought—that her mind was content and her heart fulfilled.

"Sister Romero?"

"Um?" She looked away from the sim reluctantly as her factor entered the office. "Yes, Thiralo?"

Wasting no time on pleasantries, he drew out a silver tube and activated it. The device, called a *mir*, was a piece of Colonizer tech that only the Pope's closest advisers knew about. It was proof against any form of spying. Not even a blackbox was a better shield. They used it only for the most critical conversations.

"I have two pieces of information for you, Sister. One, the mother of the L'var Child is her former guardian in the Pleasure Sect, Aleen Raal."

"Ah. Logical, now that you point it out. How did you discover the truth?"

Thiralo's bland expression cracked with a rare hint of self-satisfaction. He was still young by Palace standards, only forty. At the moment, he looked much younger.

"We were having no luck searching for the Smid woman, Vida's supposed birth mother, despite all our resources. It occurred to me that we might be on the wrong track. Perhaps, the Smid woman was a construct. We knew when her mother must have lived in Pleasure Sect by genetic age analysis and a study of Orin L'var's itineraries, so I simply used the Sect's master gene-base, elementary statistical analysis, and basic logic to winnow down the possible birth mothers to a mere two thousand, then ran genotype analyses on the original birth-tester data until I found the appropriate homologies."

"Clever," said Romero, and only possible for a papal legate with access to the human genome database maintained by Retreat and the Lifegiver programs capable of sifting through birth-test data. Even so, Thiralo downplayed the ingenuity of his work. It occurred to Romero,

suddenly, that Roha must have known about Raal. That would explain some things. "Obtain Sé Raal's full genetic screen from her birth test. Discreetly."

Thiralo inclined his chin.

"You said you had another piece of information?"

"Yes, Sister. It appears that Karlo has decided to give Vanna some Colonizer technology that he took from the Leps after the war and that he has kept hidden on Souk for years."

"God's Eyes! What kind of tech?"

"Bio. Sister, I believe this may be the Spagyra, the datablocks that Tura used to make the plagues that destroyed Kephalon, the ones Karlo and Roha swore on their souls to the Pope himself had been destroyed"

Romero's mind raced through the implications. The Spagyra was supposed to have contained genetic engineering techniques far beyond anything that remained in the Pinch.

"How did you learn of this?"

"I learned it from Dukayn himself."

"Dukayn told you this?"

Thiralo grinned. "Not deliberately. I took the liberty of placing a qi-sponge in Dukayn's neural implant during communion last week and removed the device a few hours ago. It recorded some remarkable information."

"Thiralo! That was a misuse of communion." He bowed his head, but didn't look particularly repentant.

"You took a terrible chance. Dukayn is a dangerous man."

The factor nodded. "Yes, he is. More than either of us would have guessed. After listening to the sponge, I – well, his reputation for ruthless brutality on this planet is not as exaggerated as we'd assumed. For one thing, he has been torturing Leps, in direct defiance of the Pope's own edict on such things. And he is a high member of UJU."

"Really? Well. That explains why the organization flourished, despite Karlo's investigations. Has Dukayn told anyone else about the bio tech?"

"Dukayn told someone he called UJU Prime, apparently the master of his inner circle. This Prime hides behind a scrambled holo image and synthesized audio, so not even Dukayn knows his true identity."

"I'll want a complete readout, of course. The Pope will wish to take steps."

Thiralo handed over a slipdisc without comment.

Romero tucked the disc into an inner pocket and waited for her factor to complete his report. But surprisingly, Thiralo seemed hesitant to leave.

"What is it, Thiralo?"

"It's not my place, Sister . . ."

"Please, Thiralo. I'm the Pope's Eye, but I am by no means infallible. Only God's Sight is always true. You've been with me for twelve years. You know my flaws better than I do. What's on your mind?"

He hesitated for a moment longer, then took a seat.

"Well then . . . do you think it's wise to continue with the saccule sapiency project at this time? With relations between humans and Leps so tense, shouldn't we remain here in the city to mediate, if needed, instead of opening up old research stations in the swamp? Dukayn must be punished and it's clear that Roha is, if not a member of UJU, at least allied with their goals. The cult of Riva is gaining favor with Leps. The Lifegivers should counter all this hate. You are

the one people trust."

Romero sighed. "I've struggled with that thought myself. The Pope, however, was very specific in his last packet. If I could only speak to him in person—"

"He doesn't understand the situation here!" Thiralo paled as he realized that he had simultaneously interrupted the Itinerant and insulted the Pope. "I'm sorry, Sister."

Romero shook her head gently. "It's all right, Thiralo. I understand your frustration. But the Pope is no fool. He has our reports. It was he, after all, who foresaw so much of what has occurred here. We must trust his sight in this matter."

"Of course, Sister." Thiralo rose. "Oh, by the way, I've finished drawing up the license for Sé Vida. Are you really going to approve her birth permit so soon?"

"I'll have to look through this Raal woman's genotype, but yes, I am. That, too, was the Pope's specific instruction."

Thiralo's eyebrows lifted, but he said nothing, only switched off the *mir*, bowed, and left. Someday, Romero thought, Thiralo would make a fine Itinerant. Few people had the courage to speak their conscience and the Pope considered such servants to be valuable. Romero allowed herself a small smile. A lucky thing for her.

Romero reluctantly paused and saved the ligase holosim and queued up the slipdisc from Dukayn's qi-sponge directly to her own neural implant, where it could not possibly be monitored by snoopers.

The qi-sponge was a bit of secret tech developed by the Lifegivers on holy Retreat and, as far as they knew, something the Rim had never thought of. The Itinerants used it to make reports to the Pope, but apparently Thiralo had thought of a more political use. Deciphering the contents of a qi was as much art as skill and Romero was relieved that her factor had already appended a redaction to the end of the slipdisc that compacted the useful data out of a vast swirl of surreal images, many blurred by Dukayn's emotional state, or so precisely focused and vivid that they seemed to burn the air before her eyes. Even edited and reduced, however, the slipdisc was a damning record. Romero watched with increasing horror as image after image of Dukayn's brutality skittered across her mind's eye. The man was a sadist.

Two hours later Romero removed the disc and tucked it into an inner pocket. Dear God. Thiralo was right. She couldn't leave the city until she had dealt with Sé Dukayn, no matter what the Pope said. Dukayn must be stopped, but how? He is the First Citizen's right hand. Karlo would defy the Pope himself to protect him. Is there nothing that Karlo cares for more than Dukayn? Romero glanced at Vida's birth-permit license. Yes. Let's see which Karlo wants more, his sadistic security chief or heirs.

"The People's Factor! YOUR voice speaking YOUR concerns!"

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Vida L'var y Peronida and I'm here for you."

"Today I'd like to talk about UJU and Riva. I've received dozens of Mapnotes from viewers asking the People's Factor to do a show about them. Here's a letter from Sé Ben of the Service Sect: 7 used to be a member of UJU and now I want to tell people that you can't fight Riva's hate with more hate. I lost friends in the war memorial bombing and I don't want to lose any more. Can't we find a way to make peace?"

"Well, Ben, I agree with you. Riva doesn't care about anything but killing people. You know, I've heard from hundreds of Leps here on Palace who were sick about the bombing and have nothing but contempt for this terrorist"

Riva and her followers. The war memorial honored the soldiers in their families, too. ?

"Now, I'm not saying that those of you involved with UJU are bad people. The economy isn't doing well and many of you are worried about your jobs and families. But look around you. Those Leps you're accusing of taking your jobs are looking for work, too, only a lot of them aren't allowed even second level Map access. I think a lot of the Leps of Riva are just"

fed up with the Sect Laws [sidebar on seventy-three discussing the history and impact of the Sect Laws on Leps]. Being from Pleasure, I know a little something about having your rights taken away from you.

"Contact your Sect rep. Make your views known, pro or con. That's what makes Palace the best planet in the Pinch. We have the popvotes. Our voices really matter.

"The First Citizen is no fan of Leps, that's for sure. But he told me just today that this conflict is hurting our image on the other worlds of the Pinch. Can we afford to lose the goodwill of Souk, or Varan? Palace, and the Pinch, can only survive by cooperation and trade. What if the other worlds start thinking it's too risky to keep businesses here? What if the Interstellar Guild closes its Sect' here?

"We can't forget. No one should ever forget the honored dead. But we can forgive and build a new memorial, a memorial in our hearts.

"I see we have some calls coming in. Let's hear your thoughts. Let's talk to each other."

Dukayn thought of the undercity as his home. He had a room down here decorated with hundreds of flatpics of Kephalon after the hellbombs and the plagues. He arranged his collection so that it was a gallery, of sorts, and he slept among them whenever he could. When he wasn't performing his duties as factor and security chief for Karlo Peronida, he was down in the undercity exploring one of its many dark corners. Few natives of Palace knew as much about the undercity as he did.

According to the histories he'd read—and Dukayn had read a great deal about Palace, far more than even Karlo dreamed—these caverns beneath Government House were the original home of the Colonizers, before the macroshunt closed, and before their huge ships were cannibalized to create the twin towers and so much of the rest of the infrastructure of Palace. They'd been researchers then, maintaining their homes and offices beneath the surface to hide their presence from the natives. After the macroshunt closed, sealing off the Pinch from the Rim, they had climbed out of their holes and mastered a world, but the undercity remained, like a troubled memory.

The caverns were a wonder. Not even Dukayn could find out exactly how they'd been constructed. Stretching for miles, they performed a number of functions for the citizens: storage, mining, sewage, drainage. Underground farms grew the kinds of food that must be protected from the constant infernal sporefall on the surface. During the Lep-Human War, the caverns were bomb shelters. During the Schism Wars, a battleground. And now? Dukayn had modified and reinforced one small section, a series of connected vaults—originally intended to store dangerous chemicals—into Deeplock, a holding area for certain prisoners. Special prisoners.

Dukayn checked the seals on his iso-suit and tested the air pressure of his oxygen pack. He glanced at a floating clock, though his time sense made such things superfluous. In three minutes, Jevon would be late. Dukayn already felt the fire in his veins at that thought. No. Balance.

When he had studied on the Garang Japat homeworld, one of only a handful of humans ever granted that honor, Dukayn had learned how to touch and flow with his inner gifts: his ability to sense the moment and direction of any attack, the uncanny sense of time, and especially his balance. He could walk a wire in-the-dark, miles above the ground, and never falter. He was never off balance, not physically, not mentally, not spiritually, not emotionally. He was the master of the wire. He was a whole man, as complete as any Garang. But there was something about Jevon, something that unsettled him.

"Sé Dukayn?"

There she was, on time, and he hadn't even heard her arrive. She had put on her own iso-suit without being told, a point in her favor. The clear faceplate showed him that she was, as usual, terrified and trying not to show it. Dukayn walked over to her and checked her suit, verifying the seals. Nothing must happen to Jevon. Not unless he intended it.

Without speaking, they moved through a series of pressure locks and autogates to enter Deeplock One, the entranceway to the interrogation rooms. The room was empty except for a slender metal bar that bridged two doors. In reality, the room was filled with an odorless colorless nerve gas and the floor below the bridge was electrified and mined in a pattern that only Dukayn could safely navigate. She paused at the edge of the bridge. It was narrow, with no handrails. With a minimal hesitation—she knew what would happen if she delayed him—the woman climbed up on the bridge and shuffled slowly across the span, arms held far out from her body. His heart stopped every time she wobbled. Inside his own suit, whose faceplate was tinted one-way glass, Dukayn smiled in relief after every recovery.

On Japat, the teachers would be shouting, pounding the bridge, throwing stones at her while she walked. She was learning from a gentler teacher. Finally, she got to the other side and knelt down before the opposite door, with her back to him. Dukayn hopped up on the bridge and trotted lightly across. He was tempted to do spins and jumps, to show off, but that was not the Japat way. And, in any case, she wasn't looking.

They passed through two more levels of security, personally designed by Dukayn, until they came to a small bare room outside Deeplock True. Jevon removed her iso-suit, as did Dukayn. Sometimes, he made her take off all her clothes at this point. Dukayn's Japat teachers had often done so with him, though for different reasons. Today, she wore a gray suit and no jewelry, and the simplicity, the humility, pleased him. He would allow her to keep her clothes this time. She stood before him, head down, arms at her side, and waited, trembling. Many things could happen at this point, as she knew.

"Hair," he said, proud that his voice showed none of the emotion he was feeling.

She reached up and hurriedly undid the braids and smoothed out the tringlets as much as possible until her hair hung around her shoulders like the weeping black vines of Kephalon. At this moment, though she would never know it, she was the image of Dukayn's older sister, his *omu*. He walked around her, reaching out, but never quite touching her. Wisely, she kept her head down, eyes averted. If he saw her eyes, the fear, he would touch her. If he touched her, he would lose control. He would lose his balance. The two of them walked a wire together and Jevon was starting to understand their journey. When a Garang Japat takes a mate—a rare and celebrated ritual— they struggle in many ways. He wondered if she would survive their courtship.

Finally, certain that his control both within and without was complete, he led her into Deeplock True.

At present, there were thirty-two prisoners here. Thirty of them were Leps. Dukayn had cells ready for a hundred times that number, but Karlo would not permit him to use them. Not yet. Perhaps never. It seemed that the First Citizen was willing to forget the war memorial bombing, to ignore the countless outrages of the Leps. He was easing restrictions, cooperating with the sympathizers. Karlo was learning to forget Kephalon. He needed to come visit Dukayn's gallery, to walk among the images of a planet inhabited only by flies and maggots. If only Karlo had someone like Jevon to sculpt into a reminder. But Dukayn knew better than to make such a suggestion. His master didn't completely understand his servant's ways. Like it or not, Dukayn would obey his master's commands. He was blood-bonded to Karlo. Besides, there would always be Deeplock. And Jevon.

Dukayn paused before a cell. Jevon stopped, too. Dukayn looked at her tenderly. He couldn't help it. It was bad for the student to know of a teacher's affection, but how could he not reveal it? Her fear of him made her beautiful. His *omu* had feared him, too. But best not to think about that. Dukayn tapped in a code and the door became a one-way window made of tri-stil. The Lep inside was curled in a ball, his crest torn off. The cell was brightly lit and appeared featureless, except for a commode. But there were many devices inside those walls.

"We will reign in what?" asked Dukayn. It pleased him to remind Jevon that she had wanted to be part of UJU, that she was now his property by choice.

"Splendor and . . . and the light of God's Eye." She didn't complete the code phrase and they both knew it didn't matter. UJU had very little to do with what went on in Deeplock True.

"This is Pa Min Sirronos. He ran a scale polishing shop in the Lep Sect. He knows something about how Vi-Kata and Riva's other agents move so easily between Sects, somehow avoiding our autogate checkpoints. Thus far, he has been reluctant to help us with our investigations. Today, he will answer all our questions. You will make him answer. Or you will go in that cell with him."

Jevon crossed her arms tightly.

"Please, Sé Dukayn," she said, not looking at him.

"You know how to use the controls. You've seen my techniques. I hope you were paying attention. Remember, don't change the dosage on the gases, and the voltages are scaleable. I want to know how Riva moves her agents. You have thirty minutes."

"Please ..."

"Begin."

She stood there for a long moment, hugging herself, shaking her head.

"This cell could be yours, Sé Jevon. You could share it with this Lep, be his mate perhaps." Again, he reached toward her. And again, he drew back his hand in time. "I've seen women raped by Leps. Well, rape is perhaps not quite the correct term. Would you like me to describe it for you? Or demonstrate?"

"No." Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"Sirronos has family. I could bring his wives and daughter down here to Deeplock to join him. Perhaps your mother would care to visit, too?" Jevon just stood there, staring at the Lep. "Twenty-seven minutes left."

A minute passed, then another. Patience, Dukayn thought. A good teacher must be patient. Let her own fear instruct her.

At last, Jevon stepped forward, put her hand on the control pad. He heard her murmur something—a prayer perhaps?—then begin typing in codes. Soon after, the Lep's screams filled Deeplock True.

Dukayn smiled and leaned close to her, his lips a fraction of an inch from her ear. He smelled her terror, but was there also something else? Perhaps excitement? No, that was too much to wish for, so soon. She murmured soft words and, yes, she was praying. For the Lep? No, she hated Leps as much as he. She must be praying for her own soul.

"God is blind, Jevon. Didn't you know?"

She kept typing in codes, her delicate fingers moving swiftly over the keys. Soon, she began the questions.

Rico woke late, still groggy and vaguely unsettled from bad dreams. His wristclock told him that it was already the elevens and he jerked out of bed. Damn. He'd missed the morning briefing. Hi Would be angry. A glance at the counter on his vidscreen showed that twelve messages were waiting. Somehow, he'd slept through all of them. Well, he was in no shape to deal with anything more complicated than a shower. Rico rubbed his face, feeling the rasp of stubble against his hand, and was disturbed at how fragile he felt. Perhaps a depilatory, as well. A headache made him squint his eyes and leave the lights on dim. He rooted through his medlocker for a few minutes until he found a half-empty vial of trialkonise. He emptied the contents into his skin pump. In seconds, the headache faded away and he felt alert and awake, although his eyes still burned. He had to keep blinking rapidly to moisten them.

Rico showered, skipped the depilatory, and went right to the phone to check the messages after throwing on a robe. As he'd guessed, most of the messages were increasingly irate calls from Hi. Two were from Jevon, and it suddenly hit Rico that he'd promised to see her last night to talk about Arno. One call was from Pukosu, a polite thank-you for a pleasant evening. He felt a little jolt when he thought of her, seeing an image of her body in that skintight. The last

message was from Vida. Rico felt a pang of guilt.

Rather than return his uncle's calls immediately, Rico needed to get some breakfast and coffee and think about how he was going to explain himself. He typed in a call to the kitchen. One of the saccules would bring him something.

A moment later, however, his phone rang and the screen showed Hi. Probably the saccule had reported Rico's request. It was too easy to forget that the saccules weren't stupid, despite what UJU said. Rico had seldom seen such a look of irritation on his uncle's face.

"Where the hell have you been, Rico?"

"Asleep, Uncle Hi." Thank God for the trialconise. He could talk to Hi without revealing his hangover. "I was up late last night working on that meta for Mo— For our friend." The he came awfully easy to him. Hi immediately looked contrite. Any mention of Ri Tal Molos and the way they circumvented the laws to help the Lep always got to Hi's conscience.

"Sorry, Rico. I should have known you'd have a good reason for missing a briefing. Can you have the meta for me by the thirteens?"

"Sure." He was going to have to burn to back up his lie. "Meet you at your office?"

"Fine. Get some more sleep. You look like hell."

Rico switched off and took a look at himself in a mirror. His deep-set eyes were holes in his face and there were bags under them that looked like bruises. His stubble made his face seem haggard and much older. Inside, where it counted, however, Rico felt alert and capable of anything. Rico washed his face again and smoothed a depilatory across his cheeks and chin. After, he looked a bit more presentable, but there was still a haunted look on his face. He felt as if he were looking at a stranger. Did everyone feel so different inside? Was it ever possible to truly know what went on behind another person's eyes?

So, he had two hours to finish a complex meta for Ri Tal Molos, one of the most accomplished cybes in the Pinch, who would detect sloppy work instantly. He'd better get going right away. Rico hesitated at the Mapstation. He really shouldn't mix cyberdrugs and certainly not so soon after his marathon session yesterday, but Hi and Molos were counting on him.- He pawed through his medlocker until he found, in the back, an unopened vial of beta-galactosidase. When had he picked that up? Well, no matter, he was glad to have it. He hesitated, then added vials of alpha-glucosidase, arylsulfatase, and some tailored esterases and phospholipids, all suspended in smartdrugs that would manage his enzyme system while he worked on the Map. In seconds, a feeling like swimming above a tide of kindness rushed through him. A thousand ideas occurred to him. He had enough energy to build a Map from scratch.

Moments later, he'd stepped through the transition routine and entered the Hernanes y Jons workspace. His mailbox was overflowing with messages, most of them with red flags and priority ticks. No time to waste answering them, though: Rico passed into the Mapspace where metas could be activated.

"Rico delta-dev-one. Password: Sugar-238."

The meta flashed him to what he'd called the White Room since his earliest days on the Map. Here, metas could be developed that could interact with isolated portions of the Map without endangering the Map itself. Rico took a moment to look the meta over and recall where he'd stopped work. The meta spread out before him like the petals of a strange flower, curved into a fanciful shape. Each radiating petal was actually a visual representation, an icon, of its code. There were twelve petals, a dauntingly large mass of code. Such an unwieldy set of icons was guaranteed to be problematic. The Map, which consisted of a quantum level conductor, blueglass, and painstakingly developed iconic structures, was frighteningly reactive to metas. If even one of the icon-petals failed to integrate with the meta-structure, the Map would still activate it simultaneous with the others and one of two things could happen. Either the meta would simply disintegrate, causing some level of feedback to the user—perhaps even death—or it might begin a cascade that could, theoretically, crash the entire Map. In reality, the Map had an astonishing number of

safeguards and redundancies to prevent such an event. Still, executing or even writing a cascade meta was a capital offense. Cybes had been hung for it, even when it was an obvious accident.

Rico verified ten of the petals. The drugs in his system seemed to be creating a fantastic synergy. He had never been able to check, flash, and pseudo-call a meta so quickly and surely. The last two petals still needed to be written and Rico dove into the task with more than his usual enthusiasm. He felt as if he understood everything about this meta, down to the atomic level.

In the beginning, he hadn't truly understood what this meta was for, but now he saw, as if it were written in letters of fire, that this meta was meant to be a candle-tracker. Set loose on the Map, it would sniff out damage created by Riva's terrible metas and use a vast array of sig structures to backtrack the origins. It was, in essence, just a far more sophisticated version of the usual route-mark followers that were so ubiquitous on the Map. But this follower would not be so easily shaken by Riva.

The last two petals on the meta seemed to grow before Rico's eyes as he used a formidable array of code-builders to construct routines for reporting, logging, and disguise. It was fun. He was so confident that he even added a back door to the operating system of the meta, just so it could be upgraded in the future. Finally, when he was sure that the meta—which looked now like some majestic tree out of a myth—was finished, he added his sigmeta in a secret place. He and Arno always signed their work. It was a mark of pride.

It was done, but Rico found that his mind was still moving too rapidly to just quit, for one thing, he had realized that this marvel of meta work, probably the most advanced tracker ever constructed, reminded him of something else. It reminded him of the Chameleon Gate. He couldn't have said exactly why. The Gate was an entirely different sort of construct, not a meta at all, but the way they bit into the blueglass, the spin, the flow, something told him that the Gate had been originally made to do a task very like this. He remembered how during his first nearly fatal encounter with a candle, the Chameleon Gate had somehow helped him elude the danger. The Gate had sensed the candle's presence, too. Was it possible to open the Gate up? He hadn't considered that idea before. Damaging the irreplaceable Chameleon Gate would be a catastrophe, but now his mind hummed with ideas for breaking into the construct's inner workings. If they could copy the Gate tech, why, Riva would be caught in days and who knew what else the Gate could teach them? The ease of access to the hyperMap alone would be invaluable.

Rico indulged himself in a little fantasy of catching Riva all by himself. He'd be wormy of being Hi's heir then. This made him think of Arno, and a mind-blurring sequence of ideas and memories of Arno and all they had done together that made him feel a bit like a meta himself. But another part of him made a connection to Jevon and that reminded him of the weird meta Jevon had run on the autodesk. Rico checked the time. A little after the twelves. He'd finished the Molos meta in less than an hour. He compressed it and piped it off to Hi's workspace on their private channel. Hi would be pleased. With that done, Rico had time to satisfy his curiosity about Jevon's meta.

Rico took a shortcut to the buffer zone in his wrist implant. Yes, good, he'd remembered to hook it up to the Mapstation. Using a set of metas that he'd sculpted into a pair of multipurpose forceps, Rico teased the little meta out of its locked area. Just a tiny thing with only a couple petals. Probably it was nothing more than an unsanctioned aid that Arno had written for her. Rico pinned it down and began to cut away the shell.

Suddenly the meta exploded, transformed into something huge, shadowy, and angry. Rico called up all his buffer metas, did an emergency shutdown of the workspace, and tried to locate the operating system on this immense blurring meta that shifted shape and function at will. Panic shivered through him as he realized that the defenses on this thing were beyond the capacity of his safety routines. Already, in fact, the meta's tendrils, shimmering and honey-colored, were peeling away the buffer, trying to escape onto the Map. The damn thing was a cascader, a Mapcrasher.

“ Arno-dev-double-save!”

A thousand insect-sized metas swarmed the big creature, dissolving its tendrils, attacking the operating system, shifting through so many buffer variants that not even a candle could have followed them all. Rico activated wave after wave of attack metas. He even called in scrubbers that would permanently damage his own workspace. In the end, it was only Rico's habitual paranoia about buffering his private workspace that saved him. Jevon's meta gave up its attempt to reach the Map, threw up its own triple sphere of buffering agents, and committed the total self-destruction known to cybes as absolute suicide, leaving no trace of its existence except the horrendous damage it left behind.

Finally, Rico was left to stare at the ruin of his workspace. It would take weeks, if it was ever possible, to repair this area. Thank God that Molos's meta had already been sent off.

Rico subvocalized the automatic shutdown and logged off the Map. He detached himself from the Mapstation and slumped back against the datachair, still shivering and sweating. God, that had been close. What the hell was Jevon mixed up in? That little meta could only have been written by Riva. No cybe would have anything to do with a cascader. He would have to tell Hi, no other choice. But first, he wanted to talk to Jevon, give her a chance to explain. He owed Arno that.

He heard a chime and glanced at a floating clock in the corner of his office. Thirteens! He had spent an hour fighting that cascader. Hi would be expecting him. Rico unhooked all his lines and tried to jump out of the datachair, but his legs collapsed under him and his heart was racing as if he'd just run at top speed up a hill. If only he had some slowbeat. He'd used up all his frulose last night. He just had to lie there and endure it. Hours seemed to pass before Rico could stand on shaky legs. He pressed a palm to his chest, where he could still feel his heart hammering. He took a few deep breaths, then stumbled to the phone to send a typed message to Hi that he would be in his office shortly. He could no more have spoken aloud than walked to Souk at that moment. He rested for several moments. Rico tried to reach Jevon, with no luck. Finally, he left a message for her, cryptic enough to protect her, but he hoped she would understand its meaning.

As soon as Rico entered Hi's office, he knew he'd made a mistake coming so soon. Hi saw immediately what shape he was in. Molos wasn't there yet, for which Rico was grateful. He would have been embarrassed for the famous cybermaster to see him like this.

"What happened to you, kid? You look like you've been cascaded." Rico's expression must have betrayed him, because Hi let out a loud curse. "Damn! Sit down. Let me hear it."

Rico dropped gratefully into a couch. Hi made him some kind of drink with a lot of sugar in it. It was just what he needed. Rico closed his eyes, gulped, and nodded.

"Thanks, Uncle Hi. That's better."

"Is the Map safe?" Hi leaned over him, eyes dangerously bright. "Damn you, have you harmed the Map?"

"No, Se. My workspace is trashed, but the Map is completely safe."

Hi nodded, passing a hand over his face. It sobered Rico. He and Hi were members of the Cyberguild. The integrity and safety of the Map was their charge, worth more than their lives, or reputations. Hi thought Ri Tal Molos could help them catch Riva and save the Map from her. He was willing to break his guild's laws, even endanger his whole clan, just for the chance that Molos could help them protect the Map, and here Rico'd been lying to him and performing solitary investigations, thinking only of himself.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right, kid," said Hi with an apologetic look, but Rico couldn't meet his uncle's eyes..

"Sé Jons, I ... oh, God, I'm sorry."

"Rico, what's wrong? What have you done?"

Rico closed his eyes. Maybe it was just the reaction from the cyberdrugs, but Rico felt exhausted in spirit as well as body. He hesitated. Telling Hi about what he'd found on Jevon's desk might cost the factor her job, or even get her arrested. But did he really have the right

to keep anything from Hi?

After a moment he told Hi about finding the meta on Jevon's itinerary, about trying to investigate it himself, about what he did when it turned out to be a cascader. After he finished, Hi was silent for some moments, then Rico felt his uncle's large hand on his shoulder, squeezing it. Rico opened his eyes to see Hi standing over him with an expression that he'd never seen, but it was a good thing, it made him feel warm down to his soul.

"Sé Rico, your apprenticeship is over. As of this moment, you're a master on the Map. I'll see to it before the end of the day." Hi blinked back tears. "You probably saved the Map from that cascader. You could have been killed, but you never even considered running. That thing was designed to destroy anything that touched it. I can't think of another Mapwalker who could have made it absolute or would've had the guts to stay with it to the end. Well done, son."

Rico's throat closed up and he had to swallow hard a few times to get his voice back. He didn't deserve this honor, but he would do his best to live up to it.

"But, Uncle Hi, what about Jevon?"

Hi sat down next to Rico and rubbed his jowly gentle face with his big hands.

"I don't know, Rico. Maybe the thing was planted there somehow. We'll check the visitor's log. Everyone had the day off yesterday, so it would have been the perfect time to sneak in and pull something like this."

"But in your itinerary? That doesn't make sense. There's nothing executable in there. The icon would never have been activated."

"Yeah, I know. Jevon's been under a strain, because of her mother. I don't know."

It was on the tip of Rico's tongue to tell him about his conversation about Arno with her, but he decided he still wanted to talk to Jevon alone, first. He would report what he found out to Hi right after. He was a cybermaster now, and the burden of protecting the Map was heavy on his shoulders.

Just then, Molos showed up and they turned to talking about the Riva tracker Rico had helped build. Hi and Molos had already identified an agent of Riva to track, a Lep woman named Zir.

Molos was full of compliments, but his small dark eyes studied Rico closely. He could tell that something was awry with Hi and Rico, but neither of them would talk of it.

What did the Lep think of them? Rico wondered. Once, Ri Tal Molos had been an honored diplomat, a famous cybermaster, and now he was a sapient cut off from his work, a man without friends, dependent on Hi's charity for funds and Map access. His own brother had been executed for crimes against humankind, put to death like an animal, and Molos had helped capture him. Now, Molos was the last of his Line. What went on behind those eyes? Sadness? Loneliness? Someday, maybe Molos would tell him.

The three cybes spent the afternoon refining the meta and discussing strategies for releasing it. Rico was accepted as a peer for the first time by Hi, and Molos seemed to sense it. It made Rico feel years older. I must always consider the Map ahead of myself, he thought, ahead of everyone, even Vida. It was a painful thought, a promise that both knit something strong inside him and caused a vague ache of loss.

Zir hated the undercity, but it had its uses. Riva had found secret chambers for them, ancient Mappoints, storerooms with weapons and tech that had been sealed and forgotten long before the macrohunt closed. Best of all, access to Riva's world was possible only through the teleporter network and only Riva knew how to operate them. They were safe down here from Karlo's agents. But it was a depressing place.

The undercity was dark and ugly. Leps belonged in the sun. After only a few months down here, everyone's scales were dull, their posture stooped and fearful. That would change

someday. Riva promised that the Ty Onar Lep would possess Palace, that the humans would be gone from the world, perhaps from, the Pinch itself. It was a grand dream and Zir believed that Riva was capable of realizing it.

Zir ducked through a rough hole in the earth and through a very special autogate into a room lit only by the red sigils of hundreds of Mapstations running metas. It was like swimming through magma. The metas were arranged around the room in an intricate pattern, one of Riva's many incomprehensible whims. Only Zir was allowed in this room. All of the metas were applications written by Riva herself. Zir didn't understand half of what Riva was doing, and she knew as much about the Map as any cybermaster. No one else in the organization had even an inkling of just how complex and crucial these metas were to their cause. Not even Vi-Kata had known the full extent of Riva's power on the Map. Whoever Riva was, she was easily the most brilliant cybe ever born. These metas were the result of decades of work. They were lovely to Zir, in the same way that a knife is beautiful to a Garang Japat warrior.

"Are they not beautiful, daughter?" said Riva, echoing Zir's own thought. "My candles. My children."

Zir didn't see the Riva revenant. But then holo-projectors in this room would have been fatal to all these metas. Her voice, uncommonly warm, came from hidden speakers. Zir had a hunch that the flesh Riva lived near here. How could any cybe resist?

"Yes, grandmother, they are."

"The assassin could never understand this. You have better sight." Zir said nothing. It was never wise to talk about Vi-Kata with Riva. "Have you assembled your force? Do they understand the mission?"

"Yes, Riva."

"At dusk, you will take the route I have shown you. Do not deviate from it."

"No, Riva."

"The Nomadia is on its way. Soon, I will have the *Ia-minunim-Minu* and the Spagyra. But first, the *wauzho* must be silenced."

Zir said nothing. She had no idea what these things were, or why Riva considered them important. There was a long pause, then Riva spoke again, abruptly changing the subject.

"Did you know that Dukayn lives down here in the undercity?"

Zir felt a shock of anger and fear. Dukayn and his Deeplock had won them more recruits than fourteen years of the Sect Laws. No one was more hated by the Leps on Palace, not even Karlo Peronida. Yet Riva sounded amused that Dukayn lived near.

"When will you let us kill him?"

"Not yet. I have a use for Sé Dukayn. Besides, you would not find him an easy man to kill."

She almost sounded as if she admired the torturer. Zir would never understand Grandmother Riva.

Karlo rose from the studio formfit and shook hands with the interviewer. The man, a silver-haired intake, had a sur-prisingly strong grip for a gridjockey.

"I thought it went well," said Karlo.

"You never know," the man replied with a crooked grin. One of his eyes had been replaced with a cybereye and Karlo found it disconcerting to stare into a glowing blue marble.- "Could get a meg rating, or smell like a Stinker. The pops'll tell us all what to think."

Privately, Karlo thought that that was exactly true for most of the sheep on Palace, who looked to the almighty popgraphs to determine public policy, but it wasn't an opinion that he shared with anyone. The First Citizen smiled widely.

"Well, I appreciate your taking the time to interview me for Perspectives. I hope we can make these sessions a regular thing. People need to feel that the First Citizen is accessible."

"Sure. Sé Palintrua never much cared for the media. It's nice to have such a friendly First Citizen."

Karlo kept his smile in place, but he wondered what message this man was sending him by mentioning the previous First Citizen, a verbal slight that shaded to insult under the Protocols. Vanna would know. In any case, he mustn't show his confusion. On Kephalon, he always knew when someone was insulting him and what to do about it.

"Well then. May God see you well."

"And you, First Citizen."

Karlo made a point of speaking briefly with a few techs on his way out of the studio. It had taken his lawdaughter, Vida, to teach him this trick. He had noticed how the techs took extra efforts to improve her image with better lighting and such when she did her People's Factor vidcasts. The girl was a natural politician. Beautiful, tough, and practical, all the things he liked in a woman. She was far too good for Wan. Too bad Palace had such archaic notions of bonding and marriage. He laughed under his breath. Vanna would kill the girl in an hour.

"Sé Karlo!"

"Hm? What?"

"This was just delivered to the studio."

One of Karlo's factors handed him a flatplate with a coded message on it. It was from Vanna. He decoded it swiftly in his head and had to make a real effort not to swear when he worked out that she had canceled their meeting with the Center Council. He'd planned his evening around it. Why didn't she just call him on his implant? Damn the woman. Her paranoia about snoopers was foolish. Well, this left him with time on his hands, the whole evening. There were plenty of things he could do, but he suddenly had an urge to take a break from politics for one night.

Karlo seldom took time off. For one thing, he was immune to the life-extension treatments, so he always felt as if he had to make complete use of the years he had.

Vanna couldn't understand his urgency. She was forever counseling him to be patient, to wait, to delay his purposes. They were so compatible in so many ways that this one area of genuine incomprehension always disturbed him.

Also, Karlo genuinely enjoyed the give and take of politics. It was more like street fighting on Kephalon than many of the effete snobs on Palace would care to admit. He had an instinct for people's weaknesses; he'd always had it, something like Dukayn's remarkable time sense. He could always find their point of vulnerability. He delighted in verbal conflict that ended in concessions.

But even he had his fill of dueling with liars at times and sought out something clean and physical to clear his palate.

The dinner for the Souk legate had gone surprisingly well and primarily due to Wan. He wanted to celebrate and reward Wan at the same time, so he placed a call asking his son to accompany him to the air-ken trials. Wan obviously hadn't known how to react to the invitation, but in the end he agreed with something resembling grace.

The two men took a private airhopper to the Service Sect. Karlo was so used to traveling with Dukayn that it was a queer feeling to have his son at his side instead. Wan wasn't nearly as observant as Karlo's factor—in fact, he barely noticed anything around him—but he was also far more relaxed. Wan might not be very popular with the right people among Palace's elite, but he was well received by the common sort, especially the Not-children. Everywhere they went, men and women from all guilds waved and smiled—though with Karlo along, they didn't quite dare to come up and speak to him.

Wan took it all in stride. It was a bit of a revelation to Karlo to see Wan in this light

Normally, his son and heir kept his distance. Karlo knew well enough that Wan hated and feared him. But that was the Kephalon way. A father couldn't be a mother to his son, it was unnatural. But perhaps Karlo had erred in being so hard. Without his mother to balance the equation, Wan had lost his way. Karlo fell into a troubled reverie. How much of Wan's weakness was Karlo's fault? Pero had responded so well to the traditions. Gods, if only Pero were his heir. But that was just wishful thinking, useless.

They passed through a private entrance to a luxury box with wraparound one-way glass. The box was right in the center of the field and they had it entirety to themselves, except for a pair of liveried saccules who brought them pâté and wine. The teams with their colorful kites and gliders were skimming the air, testing the airflow and magpoints. The crowd noise was like a storm. A pair of air-ken forwards flipped a luminous skimmer between them, arcing it into amazing curves and dips.

"What did you think of the legate?" Karlo asked abruptly.

Wan looked startled.

"He was okay, I guess. I liked his *jii*."

"I noticed. So did Abelvaas."

Wan frowned. Did he have any idea how stupid he looked when he was concentrating? "He didn't seem to mind."

"No, he didn't. Don't you find that odd?"

"Why? She's a courtesan, right. Why would it bother him?"

"Wan," said Karlo, but he lightened his tone at his son's reflexive flinch. Damn. Was he really so hard on him? His own father would have slapped him for that flinch. "The *jii* isn't a courtesan and it was improper, bordering on stupid, for her to flirt with you, especially with her husband watching. She didn't strike me as a stupid woman."

Wan just shrugged and turned his attention to the air-ken. Karlo felt his temper rise. Only Wan could do this to him. By God, though, he was going to master himself. He suddenly realized just how much he had indulged his own temper with his son. Blind spots. He was always so good at seeing other people's blind spots, but here he had missed his own for years.

"Wan, think. Isn't it possible that the *jii* was acting on her husband's orders? He knows you're coming to Souk tomorrow to meet with other legates. It would enhance his status for you to be in his debt."

The young man seemed to make an effort to concentrate. His expression of sacculelike stupidity infuriated Karlo. How could his own son be so slow to understand the obvious?

"Okay, yeah, I guess I see that."

Karlo slumped in his seat. "Good. Good. Just do me a favor and try to think these things through. When you get to Souk, don't favor anyone. Sleep with the *jii* if you like, but don't follow her advice."

"All right, Se," said Wan in a neutral voice. He gazed away, out into the night.

When was the last time Wan had called him "father"?

"Look, forget all that. Let's just enjoy the air-ken, okay? Who do you think will win the tier?"

Wan perked up. "Well, Pero is the expert, but I'd put money on the Pansect-sponsored team. Look how well their guards work together. Nobody gets past the blue zone on them."

Karlo nodded as Wan chattered a mile a minute, but his mind was far away. The Pope had accepted his bargain, Karlo's support in repealing the Sect Laws against the Leps in return for an accelerated birth-permit review for Vida and a special dispensation for poor little Damo, who had been born without the Lifegivers' approval. By all rights, Damo ought to have been exiled to Pleasure Sect, but Karlo and Vanna had been able to spare him that, though he

would never be allowed to join a Palace guild.

But now Karlo had to think about how he was going to raise those heirs from Vida. Could he bear to see them reared like Palace children, coddled and smothered with mother-love? His own mother would have sneered at the lack of balance. She'd known the value of giving and taking the back of a hand. The people on Palace were a strange race, the women both too strong and too weak, the men as soft as children. But it was their world after all, and neither Karlo nor any number of his heirs were ever likely to change it. Kephalon was dead and gone. Yet, must all their ways be with them?

Karlo studied his son. When he was sober, he was almost tolerable. Maybe it wasn't too late to forge something with him.

Karlo. It was Dukayn, contacting him by implant.

Yes?

I have just completed an interrogation session in Deeplock. Our fears regarding Susannah have been confirmed. She is building a fleet and plans to send it against Palace.

Why? And how can she hope to defeat my fleet?

I don't know, but the Lep is certain that Susannah has powerful allies. This fits in with my own suspicions. I believe she may have discovered some cache of Rim tech on Tableau, perhaps even a new military weapon.

Damn. Karlo thought hard. How serious was this threat? He clenched a fist. Damn the woman. Why was she doing this? It didn't matter. Their best hope for meeting this threat was a swift response, while Susannah assumed they were ignorant. A preemptive strike on Tableau? Yes. That was the only way.

Contact Pero. Have him meet me in my office immediately. Karlo stood up in his seat.

"Something wrong?" asked Wan.

Karlo gave Wan an appraising look. Should he share this information with him? No, for this delicate task, Karlo needed a son he could rely on. He would wait until after Wan's mission to Souk, see how he handled himself. Then, maybe. If Susannah really did have a secret weapon, everyone on Palace would know soon enough anyway.

"No, just some urgent Council business has come up. Stay here and enjoy the match."

Wan nodded and turned back. He didn't seem even slightly curious about the Council. Would the boy ever learn how to be politically alert? Karlo shook his head and departed, dismissing Wan from his thoughts as he concentrated on how to deploy a fleet to Orbital without alerting anyone who might interfere.

The air-ken went late, into dawn. Pansect's team swept the trials.

Sister Romero strolled alone in the roof park of the East Tower. It was after the twenties, but the eternally cloudy sky of Palace cut her off from the sight of stars. She wore a woolen cloak, but still the chill of the night seeped into her bones. She felt as if her inner turmoil had become a curtain between her and God's true Sight. She had received Aleen Raal's birth-test data from Thiralo an hour ago, just before she had planned to meet with Karlo about Dukayn, and was now caught in the coils of a terrible moral dilemma.

Raal's genotype revealed a defect, an extremely rare recessive. Romero had conducted a dozen rigorous tests on Vida's blood and she was absolutely certain that Aleen's defect had not passed on, but that didn't matter. Had the Madam of Pleasure Sect been born today, instead of fifty years ago, the flaw could have been corrected with all the advances in zygote surgery. Now, it was too late. Vida's mother had an abnormality. By the laws of Palace and the Pinch, the daughter could not be granted a birth permit, even though her own genotype was Unblemished. In fact, it was Romero's duty to inform Cardinal Roha, who must execute the laws of Palace and send Vida back to the Pleasure Sect. Under ordinary circumstances,

this sort of fraud was punishable by prison.

Romero indulged herself in a brief fantasy of having Raal arrested and dressing her down in person. But it was a childish daydream, a useless fit of pique. It would be punishment enough for the woman to see her daughter publicly humiliated and returned to Pleasure under guard.

Romero found herself in a relatively new section of the roof park, where many rows of amber growlights bathed the foliage in cold fire. New plants were growing here, less exotic than the others, but pretty. There were buds of a flower Romero knew as the icelight rose, but had some other common name on Palace, one she couldn't recall. The gardener was a brave soul to try to make the icelight grow in the overcast and eternally humid Palace environment. Trystvines snaked up a trellis; in twenty or thirty years, the trellis would be a glorious ladder of green and crimson, attracting jadewings and many other birds. Some moonbeam butterflies took wing at her approach, fluttering up into the night like puffs of thought. Whoever had planted this garden had an eye for beauty and the patience to guide its growth. Romero saw a saccule kneeling in the dirt. The growlight showed the saccule's great age, its throat sacs hung flaccid and ivory white with purple veins. It was extremely rare to see an old saccule on Palace, let alone Government House. Most owners had them killed the moment they slowed down, because they often lost control of their scent sacs. Romero announced herself with a soft boom. The gardener turned around very slowly, favoring the joints in its legs. Its hands were gnarled and dirty. Its face was a wrinkled mass. The saccule wore a cloth shift with the L'var gene-glyph worked into one shoulder. It nodded to Romero and let out a whispery moan and a scent that smelled to Romero like grass after a morning rain. The Itinerant crouched down, resting on the backs of her heels. The saccule's eyes, large and black, seemed to be pools of mystery. The old neuter possessed some intangible quality of peace that Romero had only encountered in the presence of very old Lifegiver monks. It reached down and unhurriedly clipped away a blossom from a kaaleni flower and handed it to her. Romero took it in both her hands and held it close to her nose. The scent was exactly the one that the saccule had given her. How could the people of this planet not see that the saccules were sapient? How could they be so blind? Romero gave a soft boom of thanks and rose up. The gardener returned to its work, the spade moving like some kind of inevitable machine of God. It was typical of Vida that she had rescued some ancient saccule from the certainty of euthanasia and found it a gentle task.

Romero continued her walk. The trouble was not so much that she knew her duty, as how many fine reasons she could come up with for not doing it. Vida L'var had the potential to change Palace, and the Pinch, for the better; she supported saccule sapientcy and relaxation of the Lep Laws. Her own genotype was perfectly clear. Romero need only keep silent and no one would ever know. Vida was the perfect leverage against Karlo; Romero could think of no other reason that Karlo would ever abandon Dukayn, no matter how hideous his crimes. Thiralo said that Dukayn considered himself blood-bonded to Karlo. Only death could separate *them*, if Dukayn had anything to say about it. So many good reasons ...

The Pope felt strongly that the L'var genes must be renewed; he believed that the L'vars possessed some gift crucial to the survival of sapients in the Pinch. He had as much as ordered Romero to approve the birth permit without further delay. But he hadn't known about Aleen Raal's deception. Romero would have liked to shift this decision back to the Pope, but it was not his to make. It was her job, as the Pope's Eye, to condemn Vida, a woman of rare gifts and uncommon courage, to- the prison of Pleasure Sect where all sapients would be robbed of her potential. Yet, did Romero have the right to break her guild's most sacred laws to benefit one sapient, no matter how worthy or important?

Sister Romero found a padded bench and settled on it, leaning against the backrest so that she could see the sky. She wrapped her cloak tightly around her and lay down on the soft bench. She held the kaaleni blossom in her hands and stared up, trying to find the still point of serenity, to pray. She had been born below the earth, to parents who spent all their brief lives as miners. God's perfect Sight found her and she had become a Lifegiver, a light in dark places. She had willingly agreed to be sterilized. She would have done anything to escape the darkness, so she knew Vida's heart perhaps as well as anyone on Palace. She had gladly given her soul to the Lifegivers and never regretted the choice.

But as the years passed, she had come to question the soundness of the Lifegivers' laws

about genetic purity. Who were they to play God over who should have children? What right had they to choose what children would be born? God put seeds of light into all living things and if their souls grew well, they must someday be reborn into the night as stars. To God, no living light could be a cull. All souls were cherished. But the genetic laws of the Pinch were the unifying force that had saved them all from the inferno of the Schism Wars. The Pinch possessed limited resources and most of its citizens could look forward to a lifespan of at least one hundred fifty years. It had been proven with mathematical certainty that only harsh eugenics could control a geometric population explosion. Could she presume to tear the master thread from a tapestry of peace over two thousand years old? Vida's children should be fine. There was no reason to expect that anyone would ever learn that Raal was Vida's mother. But what if they did? What if someone learned that the Pope's Eye had suppressed the truth to benefit one woman? Many people might lose their faith in the Lifegivers Guild itself. Romero held the trust of millions in her hands.

Reluctantly, Romero admitted to herself that she was also afraid for her own reputation. She had no need for adulation, but she took great pride in being known as an incorruptible agent of the Pope. What would other Lifegivers think of such a betrayal of their core faith? She could only imagine the look in Thiralo's eyes. She couldn't bear the thought of being remembered as an Itinerant who betrayed her vows. To have her name become a synonym for deceit . . . The very idea made her soul feel empty and dark.

A slight wind brushed her face, and high up in the sky a break in the clouds offered her a momentary glimpse of Beltair, a red star in the Vakr Constellation. Then the clouds closed again.

Romero sighed. During the Schism Wars, many heresies had arisen and taken root. One that she'd found particularly interesting claimed that each constellation possessed intrinsic meaning, depending on the season and even the time of day for a particular planet. The Vakr Constellation was supposed to be a winter herald, and Beltair at the Vakr's heart was the fire of hope for spring.

Vida's birth-permit review was tomorrow morning. Karlo would brook no further delay. What was the answer? Dukayn, or Vida? Romero brought the kaaleni close to her face. Dear God, look upon your child and help her to see time.

* * *

"Welcome to Trichan Media, the Eye of Palace, news you can use.

"Today's popvotes trend toward cybe issues. Guild-master Jons is plus nine across the spec on Map upgrades, r and d allocations and overtime for security devs.

"For the first time this cycle, relaxation of Map controls for Pleasure Sect breaks plus fives.

"Jons falls to two on the issues of hyperMap extension and Orbital cleanup.

"The Cyberguild swings to negs on the question of opening the Map to Leps.

"The popvotes demanded a report on progress of work on the Nimue Orbital by Sé Barm Jons y Macconel. Guildmaster Jons promised that as soon as Map access was restored, such a report would be Sé Jons's first priority. He addressed all other popvote questions in detail. Switch to channel three for a complete transcript.

"Tune to channel two for full graphs and analysis on all of today's popvotes and issues..At twenty-three tonight, channel two will loop all the votes and graphs.

"In other news, the Protectors report a rash of saccule disappearances, possibly the work of UJU sympathizers opposed to abolition. Time to channel two for a rebuttal by UJU reps. Leader of the Center Sect Free Saccule Party, Sé Anja le-Yonestilla, demands that the Protectors monitor saccule implants more frequently. Until the perpetrators are caught, the Protectors advise that patrons keep their saccules locked in their pens at night and keep their implants on full ping at all times. Report any strange activities in your sects to your local Protectors office.

"In InterPinch news. Souk reports a new trade agreement with Varan, Jus, and Ri that sent the stock market in Finance Sect into a fifty-point downturn.

"The Interstellar Guild met on Souk this week for their annual guildmoot. The Interstellar Guildmaster Vira denied claims that her guild is planning to increase shunt tolls this year to pay for further microshunt exploration.

"The li-ta-ri of Ri publicly protested the detainment without due process of Ty Onar Lep citizens on Palace and has threatened to bring the case to the InterPinch Court on Souk. The First Citizen's office had no comment.

"According to the weathermasters, today's sporefall will peak at the thirteens with half an inch and end by the fifteens. Keep your anti-fungals on high today.

"Pansect Media advanced to tier five in the air-ken trials ..."

Vida would have liked to skip Wan's send-off to Souk, but the popgraphs wouldn't approve. According to her pop-graph advisers, three people who spent what Vida considered an insane amount of time doing market surveys and analyzing her demographics, a lot of people had some naive romantic notions about her and Wan. If she hoped to keep her base, of support as the People's Factor, then she had to cater to her own image. She didn't have to like it, though.

It was painful for her to stand in the shuttle bays and realize that the hundreds of sapients milling around were all free to travel on a shuntjammer anytime they wanted, while she had to stay on Palace playing the dutiful wife. Wan was late, as usual, so the media people focused their handcams on Vida and Karlo. The questions came fast and furious, but Karlo's flacks took over and imposed order.

Vida knew that Karlo hated these impromptu question and answer sessions, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. The First Citizen was wearing a freshly pressed fleet uniform and a big smile. He was entitled to wear any medal of honor you could name, but he chose only a small silver spiral, pinned on his chest by Vanna Makeesa herself soon after he and his fleet saved Palace from certain doom at the hands of the Leps. People picked up on the message. Palace citizens were a peculiar combination of sophistication and susceptibility when it came to reacting to media images. Karlo had the posture and presence of a man born to lead and it came across well in the holos and in person. But he was also an able administrator and well known as an honorable First Citizen. So many of them had been incompetent fools in the past.

"Sé Vida, why aren't you accompanying Sé Wan to Souk?"

Vida snapped out of her reverie with a guilty start.

"Oh, Souk is so far away and I still haven't seen that much of Palace. I asked Wan if I could stay home this time. He was terribly disappointed, but finally agreed."

"Sé Vida, is it true that the People's Factor is going omnichannel?"

"I hope so, but that's really up to the Media guild-master. I love doing the show, but airtime is precious, isn't it?"

Vida handled a few more soft queries, then the questioning shifted to the First Citizen.

"Sé Karlo, why have you sent Sé Nikolaides to the Nimue Orbital?"

Karlo's smile never faltered, though Vida knew that he'd done his best to finesse this question whenever it came up in other interviews in the last week. She could have told him that the gridjockeys never let go of anything once they'd smelled a story. She was interested to hear his answer to this herself since he hadn't seen fit to tell her why Pero had been exiled to a useless posting:

"Nimue's a strategic point for Palace, midway to the microshunt. Whether or not Sé Barra can bring the AI back online, we think it makes sense to do a thorough military assessment of

Orbital, see if the fleet couldn't base there, instead of using up valuable lunar space. Pero's also giving the fleet a shakedown."

"Sé Karlo, do you think the Council will vote the Peronidas as permanent First Citizens?"

"Thanks for asking that question, Se. It's a tough one. Palace has a long tradition of voting in a new First Citizen when the old one passes on and I think it's a pretty good idea. When I was asked to stay on here after the war, I thought it'd be a temporary posting, then back to the fleet when you found somebody who could keep the Center Council in line." There was general laughter and Karlo milked it with a grin. "Well, you kept me on and I hear you think I'm doing an adequate job. I like it here and I'd like my family to feel a permanent part of the world." Karlo made a perfectly timed paternal glance at Vida, who smiled dutifully. It was getting to be a reflex. "But it's up to the citizens, really. I just serve at your will."

"Sé Vida, do you ever visit your old friends in the Pleasure Sect? Do they miss you?"

That question came from Suz Sivar, a malicious gridjockey famous for focusing on gossip and scandal.

"Sure I miss them. But I'm always so busy here, trying to learn how to be a good chief patron. I know how lucky I am to be here and I guess I just want to do as good a job as I can."

Another question came and another. Karlo and Vida fielded them like they had been working together all their-days. They got into a pleasant rhythm, throwing the ball back and forth, always presenting the Peronidas as humble servants of the people and Vida as delighted to spend her days learning all she could about her new home. Finally Wan and his factor, Lenobai, showed up, and Wan had to stand in a circle of holocams and answer a barrage of questions. Karlo looked tenset but he relaxed as he realized that Wan had not been drinking and he appeared to be giving all the right answers for a change. In fact, Vida noticed some difference in Wan, a sense of confidence and energy that she seldom saw. He also sounded sharp and perceptive in his replies to questions, something she had never seen before. It was another half hour before they could close off the interviews with a hint that Wan and Vida wanted some time to say their good-byes.

Out of sight of the gridjockeys, Karlo stepped up to Wan and clapped him on his shoulder. Wan seemed unsurprised by this unprecedented show of fatherly affection. Vida wondered if her surprise was visible. She'd never seen Karlo show affection to his son unless it was staged for the vids.

"Well, Sé Wan, I hope you enjoy Souk," she said.

Wan looked at her with such intensity that Vida didn't know how to react. But he only smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, I think it'll be fun." He turned back to his father. "Don't worry, First Citizen, I'll seal the deal with Abelvaas."

"Good, good. But don't stay too long, okay? We need you here."

Vida couldn't believe her ears. Usually, Karlo couldn't wait to get rid of his son.

"Right," Wan turned to his factor. "So, are we ready?"

"Yes, Se." Leni smiled, a little nervously. He never liked having any attention focused on him,

"Okay. Let's jam." Wan started up the shuttle ramp, but turned around at the landing to look down at them. Vida frowned. She didn't know Wan very well, really, but she did recognize this expression. It was triumph. Had Karlo's change of attitude made such a difference in him? "We'll be back before you know it."

Karlo and Vida waved good-bye and waited in the bay until the shuttle was railed out and launched. Karlo touched Vida's shoulder with one of his large hands.

"Look, I know you're disappointed. Dukayn told me how much you wanted to make this trip.

Just remember, I promised you your own shuntjammer someday and I'll keep that promise."

"I know you will, Sé Karlo. It's just, well, I was looking forward to it. I've never been off planet."

Karlo applied a bit of pressure to her shoulder and steered them out of the shuttle bay.

"Hey, we're related. Just call me Karlo." He leaned close to her and smiled, the lines at the corners of his eyes bunched with goodwill. "You may not believe it, but there's not much to it, Vida. There aren't any windows, you know. Vidscreens show simulations, but you can't actually see stars or anything with your own eyes. And a lot of people get sick from the microshunt translation."

"I won't," said Vida.

"No, I don't imagine you will." They boarded the Peronida airhopper, a huge luxury model with a lounge and kitchen. Vida settled into an overstuffed chair while liveried saccules bustled about with trays of food and drink. "You're meeting with Sister Romero today, right?"

"Yes, Sé . . . I mean, Karlo. You don't think she's really going to approve a birth permit for me this soon, do you? I mean, she told me when I first met her that it would be a year or more before I'd be ready to have children. I've been reading up on it, talking with people who've been pregnant, and I guess I agree with her."

"You never know," he said smugly.

Karlo plucked two glasses of *oris* from a tray. The airhopper flew so smoothly that the drinks barely rippled.

"You're ready, Vida, trust me. On Kephalon, you would have had the girl by now." He caught her puzzled look. "A mother always has a girl first, so that she can help raise and take care of the boy. My *omu*, my sister, was tough as tri-stil. She could handle a knife as well as any man. I suppose you know, being from Pleasure, that the *omu* is also a boy's first lover. Morgana taught me well. I honor her. You're a lot like her, you know, though she wasn't nearly as beautiful."

Vida covered her shock by sipping at her *oris*. Karlo never talked about his upbringing and now Vida could see why. Even as comfortable as Vida was with the array of sexual practices in the Pinch, this was a bit of a surprise. For whatever reason, Aleen had never bothered to teach her about the Kephalon rites of passage.

"Do you want to raise my children as Kephalese?" asked Vida.

Karlo glanced at her, maybe hearing something in her voice. He smiled sadly, his eyes old and weary.

"No, Vida. I know the Kephalon ways won't work here on Palace. Wan taught me that. But they will be soldiers, that much I insist on."

Vida relaxed, surprised at how tense she'd gotten.

"Good. I want my children to fit in, to be Palace citizens."

Karlo patted Vida's knee.

"Don't worry about that. Our children will be giants on this planet." Karlo saw her shock and seemed to realize what he'd said. "Yours and Wan's, I mean, though all the Peronidas will think of them as their own, of course."

"Yes. Of course."

They were silent for the rest of the trip, but Vida knew perfectly well what had been proposed to her. It was an intriguing thought, though she'd never pursue it. She loved Rico and would never betray him.

Vida arrived at her interview with Romero in a bit of a daze, simultaneously exhilarated and depressed. The Itinerant's icy manner snapped her out of that in a hurry.

"Sé L'var, come in." Once Vida entered the office, Romero pulled out a silver tube and did something to it, then she laid it on her desk. "This is a security device. You've heard of blackboxes, I'm sure?" Vida nodded. "This is a similar, more advanced version."

"I don't understand, Sister."

Romero glared at her and Vida quailed. She had never seen the Itinerant angry and now she understood why so many people were afraid of her. Those plain severe features looked like a stone of judgment.

"Oh, I think you do, Vida. Tell me, do you know who your mother is?"

Vida hesitated. She'd never been a very good liar and she had a feeling that now was not the time to test her skills.

"Well, yes. It's not Lin Smid, that much I can tell you."

Romero settled back in her chair and some of the fire died away.

"Well. I hadn't expected honesty from you, Vida, although I suppose I should have. Why didn't you tell me when we first met?"

"I didn't know then, Sister. Honestly. I found out later. A . . . friend helped me to find out."

"But you didn't tell me even after you learned the truth."

"I'm sorry. I should have, I guess. But I didn't think it would matter. I have enemies who might want to hurt my mother to get at me. Besides, you did a public gene test on me and approved me as a L'var. I honestly didn't think it was that important."

"Vida . . ." Romero started in an angry voice, then she started over, more softly. Vida was starting to get scared now. She'd thought it was possible that the truth about Aleen might come out, but what did it matter whether her real mother had been a Madam or a gardener? Aleen had promised her that she had a pure genotype. "Well, there is no point in arguing the irretrievable. I'm sorry if I'm frightening you, but the situation is very bad."

"I don't understand. What's wrong?"

"Your mother is Sé Aleen Raal." Vida swallowed and nodded. "Her genotype has a flaw, Vida. You don't have it, of course, but as you know, that doesn't matter. You are a cull, by law."

Vida sat in shock for a long moment until the full impact finally struck her.

"Oh, no . . . oh, God, no. I can't have children. I can't ever have children." Vida stared into space, surprised by the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes. She felt as if someone had told her that she must die. Then the rest of the truth hit her. "You're going to send me back to Pleasure, aren't you? I'm a cull. I'm a cull." All the times she'd heard the insult, shrugged it off, and now the truth. "A cull."

Romero came around her desk, moving quickly. She drew Vida out of her chair and into her arms. Vida clutched her. Had Aleen known? Vida's body shook with sobs. The Itinerant stroked her and made soothing noises until Vida finally got back a measure of control. Even then, Romero didn't let her go, not for some time.

"Vida, I am not, going to send you back to the Pleasure Sect."

"What?" Vida stared at her. "But you have to."

"Please sit down." Vida slumped back into her chair. The Itinerant perched on a corner of the desk. "Listen-carefully. I will approve your birth permit, but you will keep the anticonception implant. I will confer with the Pope. There may be some way to circumvent the laws. In the meantime, you must not become pregnant."

Vida frowned.

"Karlo will never stand for that. He'll have me tested if I'm not pregnant in a month."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right. But I have an idea."

"What?" Vida sat forward on the edge of the chair. Her heart was racing and she didn't like the sound of desperation in her voice. It made her feel small and needy.

"Karlo Peronida desires heirs above all else. Also, he possesses datablocks of biotech that he should never have kept. I think he will make a bargain to keep that knowledge from the public."

"What kind of datablocks could ... do you mean the Spagyra?"

Now it was Romero's turn to be surprised. "How did you know that?"

"Calios ... well, that is, I've read everything I could about Karlo Peronida and that business of the Spagyra was a big thing, when he and Roha swore to the Pope that Tura's notes were destroyed."

"That's right, Vida. They swore to the Pope. They lied."

Vida's mouth dropped open. "They lied to the Pope?"

"Yes." Romero sat back down behind the desk and gestured to her *mir*. "Now you know why we're using this."

Vida looked away for a moment. Everything was happening so fast. The whole world had changed in the last few minutes. But now she was starting to think clearly.

"Sister, why are you doing this for me? Why are you breaking the rules of the Lifegivers? If anyone ever found out . . ."

"I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, Vida. The Pope once said to me that God sees all, but does nothing, while we are nearly blind, yet have the power to make what God sees beautiful. I think you are meant to be here, now, that God has some purpose for you. It is only an instinct, but I have learned to trust my instincts over the years.

"Please understand, though. As things stand now, you will never be allowed to have children. I think Karlo can be persuaded to allow you to stay here in Government House, regardless, once he understands that I have proof of his lie to the Pope, but he will have to get his heirs some other way. The L'var name will die with you."

Vida nodded, linked her hands together in her lap. I'm a cull, she thought. Would that ever sink in?

She wondered how Wan was going to take this. He'd never wanted to marry her in the first place. Did he have to be told, though? Maybe not. What was Rico going to say? The thought made Vida sick. She couldn't bear it if he saw her differently, if he didn't want to touch a cull.

Romero was silent, too, as she gazed off into some private place. The Itinerant was risking so much, when it would be so easy for her to simply tell Roha the truth and be rid of Vida for good.

"Sister, how can I ever repay you?" Vida looked into the older woman's eyes and was amazed at the serenity she saw.

"God has a hope for you, Vida, but God will not choose your path for you. How could we be reborn as stars if we didn't choose the Light for ourselves? Try to follow your conscience, Vida. That's all I ask. That's all God asks of any of us. Be true. The Pope himself told me that you have a part to play and I have learned over the years that he is very wise."

Vida nodded and left the Itinerant's Office, still in a daze. Jak fell in beside her.

"Sé Vida, are you well?"

"What? Yeah, yeah. Thank you, Jak." Impulsively, Vida put a hand on the Garang bodyguard's upper arm. It felt like the trunk of a tree covered in velvet. He knelt down before her, there in the middle of the corridor, not paying any attention to the looks that they received from passersby. "Thank you, Jak."

"Command me, annaoiou. Our blood flows together."

Vida felt the sudden sting of tears. She didn't understand the Garang, but she knew he was speaking from his heart.

"Jak ..." She looked around them. Most people were doing their best not to stare. It was rare to see a Garang like this, but probably wise not to notice it. "I'm a cull, Jak. Romero just told me. I'm a cull." .

There was no change in the Garang's expression, at least none that Vida could discern, let alone interpret. Jak whipped his honor blade from a hidden sheath and sliced open his left palm, wiped the blade and returned it to its hiding place almost before Vida realized what he'd done. He raised the bloodied palm and Vida knelt down on one knee to kiss it, to taste the electric blood of this strange alien who had so committed himself to her. She tore a strip from her wrap skirt to bind his wound. The Garang barely noticed.

"You are the annaoiou, Vida. Our blood flows together."

She held his oddly angled face between her palms. How odd the feeling of cheekbones that rippled and a jaw-line with a double curve. It's the soul within, she thought. That's always what matters. She glimpsed an understanding of what it meant that souls are reborn as stars.

"Thank you, Jak." They held each other's gaze for a long moment. "I need ... I know you don't like it. I need Rico now. Can you find him for me and bring him?"

Jak was in the grip of some powerful emotion, but his voice betrayed nothing.

"It will be as you ask, annaoiou. I will bring him to your bed."

Vida closed her eyes and nodded. She stood up, tried to smile, and headed home, accompanied by the trio of Peronida soldiers who guarded her whenever Jak was unavailable for some reason. Every person who saw her reacted to her in some way. Many people smiled and waved. Vida responded automatically, like a machine, smiling and nodding back, sometimes even pausing to exchange a few words, amazed that she sounded so normal. She always remembered their names, their Sect, their guild, something personal.

But there were also more difficult encounters. Even with the Peronida security people around, some people felt safe in staring at her with thinly disguised contempt or envy. Many of them muttered insults under their breaths. Cull. She heard it half a dozen times. She was barely eighteen years old, not even old enough to begin the life-extension treatments, yet she had become the chief patron of one of the oldest and most famous families on Palace. How they must hate her, these people who spent decades learning their trade, currying favor with patrons, and in forty or fifty years might be raised to master status, or patron-track. Their eyes accused her. Their venom spilled in whispers. Cull. Whore. She tried to ignore them, but their stares and whispers followed her.

At last, she was back in her apartments. They seemed so unreal now. The spacious gather, decorated with such beautiful things—many of them gifts—looked alien, garish, the yearning for respectability of a fool. She shrugged off the torn and bloody wrap shirt and threw it hard to a divan.

She walked to the huge window of the far wall, ordering the glass to one-way transparency. Greenie appeared from its room in the back, carrying a tray with sweets on it. The saccule brought the tray to Vida. A smell like old moss preceded the saccule, one of its worry stinks. The poor creature had many of them, though Vida's kind treatment seemed to have made Greenie less inclined to expel them these days.

"Thank you, Greenie." Vida made a thrumming sound low in her throat and the saccule responded with a pleased that and the scent changed to daalenary, one of Vida's favorite flowers.

She smiled and knelt down to pat the creature. The scars from the microteacher implanted by the training pens had healed, but Vida would never forget that first day Greenie had appeared to her, terrified, in agony, and afraid it would be returned to the pens to be killed as untrainable.

"No matter what happens, Greenie, you'll stay with me. No matter what, I promise."

She wished she could explain to the saccule. Just how much did the little neuters really understand? Vida believed they were sapient, but she wondered if the poor little creatures would ever really be emancipated, allowed to become a peer race in the Pinch. Even Romero didn't presume that a declaration of sapiency would automatically end the slavery of saccules. That would take years of fighting in the courts. Vida felt a kinship with the small moss-green alien. They were both slaves, outcasts, victims of genetic destiny.

The saccule let out an odd moaning whistle, a sound that Vida had never heard any saccule make. The neuter reached out and patted Vida with one of its blunt clumsy hands. The hand felt like leather on her skin. She hugged the saccule, enjoying the feel of its skin against her own. How many times had she done the same with Sugar, Aleen's ancient kitchen saccule?

Greenie waddled off, carrying the torn shirt for mending, though Vida suspected that the saccule's repair work would be worse than the damage. The little neuter exuded another odd smell, a sort of musk that was familiar to her somehow, but she couldn't quite place it. Greenie often gave it off after being hugged, or when the saccule was particularly happy. It would come to her if she thought about it for a moment.

Just then, the door opened and Rico stepped through. Vida felt several things simultaneously. A rush of relief and lust, a shock of worry at his bedraggled appearance, and a clench of fear. She had seen that flush around the eyes, the twitching of the limbs, the involuntary muscle spasms. Cyberdrugs. Well, Jak must have found him walking the Map, that's all. But the thought didn't ring true. The Pleasure Sect was where addicts went to die, after all. She knew the signs of addiction better than even the guild-master of the Cyberguild. She must be wrong, though; Rico wasn't that foolish. Anyway, she didn't dare say anything about it. What if he got angry and left? She needed him so much. She hated the need, hated herself for being so weak. Aleen had never needed any man or woman.

"Vida, are you all right? Jak was . . . well, I've never seen a Garang like that." He rushed across the room to her, reached for her, and she stepped back, crossing her arms over her chest. His face was a mixture of hurt and fear. "Vida, what's wrong? What's happened?"

Her throat felt as if it were too small to allow sound. She turned around, hugging herself, and stared out the window at Center Sect, gloomy under a late-morning drizzle. The spiderweb of wiretrain tracks carried many trains filled with people. Where were they all going? Why couldn't she have been born here, lived a normal life? She started to cry. Though she did her best to hide it from Rico, he heard.

"Vida, you're scaring me."

He came up behind her and hesitantly put his arms around her waist. She relaxed back into his arms and closed her eyes. He tightened his grip and Vida realized that though he was very tall and gangly, his arms were quite strong, corded with muscle. She'd never noticed, somehow. Of course, cybes had to be physically conditioned for their Map sessions. Rico, only a bit taller than Vida, brought his lips to her ear, folded her even more securely in his grip.

"What is it, my love?"

She shook her head, feeling her hair brush across his face.

"Make love to me," she said. "Now."

He did nothing for a moment except consider what she'd said. That was so like Rico. Even in the midst of the most passionate love, there always seemed a part of him that calculated, judged. He always seemed to know when to tease her and when to simply listen. He paid attention to her, respected her in a way that no one, not even Aleen, had ever done.

Rico bent down to kiss the lobe of her ear, then, taking her completely by surprise, he lifted her up into his arms, holding her close to his chest, as if she were a lost child he had found.

"I love you, Vida. I love you. I will always love you."

He kept murmuring endearments to her as he carried her to the bedroom. He didn't even seem to notice her weight. Yes, Rico was stronger than he seemed. They made sure that Calios activated the security devices, then moved to the bed.

He eased the rest of her clothes off, then stripped himself. During all this, Vida was silent and she could tell that Rico was alarmed, but she couldn't speak, couldn't say a single thing. He stroked her body and she felt the rasp of his calluses over her skin. True desire awakened in her and she reached for him, digging her nails into his flesh, forcing him under her. She made angry love to him as if he were a stranger, a customer in The Close, a man who didn't matter. He understood what she was doing, let her have her way, gave her anything she demanded. How many men would have had that courage? Certainly not Wan, perhaps not even Karlo.

At the moment of climax, she screamed, a wail of pain and anger, and dug her nails into the muscles at Rico's shoulders. He let out a pained gasp and grunt. Rico reached up and pulled her down on top of him, holding her close to his body, keeping his sex inside her, holding her as tightly as tri-stil bands. She struggled wildly and she was not a weak woman, but he wouldn't let her go, wouldn't loosen his grip, until she tired and rested atop him, sheened with sweat. He shifted them then so that they lay side by side.

"Now." He reached a hand and brushed her damp hair from her face, cupping her cheek. She could feel his wrist implants brush her neck. She saw blood on his shoulders. "Tell me."

So she told him, leaving nothing out. She even told him about Karlo's subtle proposal and about Wan and the *jii*. Once she started to talk, every secret she'd held from him seemed to spill out and all he did was run his fingers up and down her side, stroking her like some beast from a fable. He didn't speak for a long time. He might have said a lot of things. Maybe he would be angry about her attraction to Karlo. Pity her for being a cull. He might ask her to sign his contract, again, though that argument was old and painful. He might offer to tamper with her children's birth-test data. She was afraid of that offer, how much she wanted him to make it, though she knew it was beyond even his abilities. She didn't expect what he did say.

"If you have to go back to Pleasure Sect, I'll go with you. I'm sure Aleen can use a good cybe."

Vida stared at him with her mouth open for a full minute.

"Rico, you can't. You have a life here, family. You're the heir of the guildmaster."

He kissed her lips, licked them with the tip of his tongue.

"I love you. Wherever you are, that's my guild. I'll be your shuntjammer and you can be my guild."

She laughed softly, wonderingly. "My love, you are an endless surprise. Don't you understand, though? We could never have children, no family. Your mother would have to disown you. Sé Hivel would unguild you. You wouldn't have any family."

"I thought you said The Close was your family."

"It is, but . . . Rico, remember I asked you once whether love could really last for over a hundred years? What if we fall out of love in a few years? What then? You'll have thrown away everything. I'll still have Aleen and The Close. But what about you?"

'Til have what matters. Arno and I had a phrase we used with each other, 'the Map moves.' It meant that nothing stays the same forever, and that's a good thing. Sometimes, you just have to do what feels right." Such an uncharacteristic remark from Rico, who always seemed to keep a bit of himself apart from the world, to observe and consider.

They talked for a long time, arguing, and sometimes the argument got pretty heated. Rico actually lost his temper, for once. Both of them said things they regretted. But Vida was learning that with Rico, she could say painful things and still be forgiven. That look of trust and love never left his eyes. In the end, she couldn't change his mind. If she were exiled as a cull, he would follow. She couldn't find any doubt in his decision.

Gradually, they shifted away into other things, to gentler matters. They talked about things they'd seen, things they wanted to see, of trivial matters and important. In some ways, this was the moment that Vida most loved Rico, more even than when he was declaring undying love. This felt more real to her. She seemed more herself, as if she were surrounded by her friends in The Close, as if Rico was truly connecting to the best part of her.

After a while, they made love again, slow and mostly gentle, but sometimes a flash of fierceness returned. His hands flowed over her flesh like warm air. Vida kissed Rico's shoulders and tasted his blood. She took his essence into her, as if they were Blood-bonded like Garang.

They made love a third time and it was different again, playful and kinetic. At last, she rested in his arms as Rico hummed a song that was hauntingly familiar. As she drifted into sleep, Vida suddenly recalled where she had heard the song before. It was a lullaby that Tia had sung for her when she was a little girl. Some songs even the heir of the guildmaster and a lowly cull from Pleasure Sect shared.

Pa Riva Zir crouched in the center of a circle formed by her commando force. Like her, the other Leps wore swampsuits painted to blend with the surroundings. Palace's sun had nearly set. Dusk turned the swamp into a gray dream and her strike force became shadows. Deadly shadows.

"Our task tonight was given to us by Riva herself," she said. "You all know what we must do. We must not fail! Riva has engineered riots all over Palace just to distract the military. Our people will suffer greatly because of this. We may never have another chance."

"We will not fail," said someone.

Zir's crest lifted at the pride and determination in that voice. No matter what happened tonight, the cause had brought back honor to the Leps on Palace. She had been prepared to give a speech, to go over the plan again, but abruptly she decided against it. These were the elite of Riva. They would only be insulted.

"Ti-ka mi'il-a an-ki-vak." *We will rise and rule.*

"Iyik't Lepir, Vi-Kata." *In the name of the true Lep, the Outcast One. '*

Zir could only nod, not trusting her voice. The humans had executed Vi-Kata like an animal, and they would learn to regret that outrage. Her lover would be avenged. It didn't matter that Riva herself despised the memory of the Outcast. His courage would be remembered.

The group melted into the swamp, moving swiftly to approach one of the most closely guarded and secret prisons in the Pinch—the Tomb of Ri Paha Tura.

Zir adjusted the night vision on her suit's faceplate and the barricaded clearing below snapped into a sharp chiaroscuro dotted by the red blurs of heat that signified living guards, specially trained Garang Japat warriors. The Tomb itself was entirely underground. This tri-stil blockhouse was the only true entrance, though there were many other false ones scattered throughout the swamp, guarded by identically trained guards. None of them knew whether they were protecting the genuine Tomb. Riva had located detailed plans and information on the Tomb, so that Zir knew that these Garang were the least of the Tomb's defenses, but Grandmother Riva had counters for them all.

Zir growled low and her crest lifted as she saw the red lights go out, one by one. A brief white flash from a suit light signaled that her people had neutralized all the exterior guards. While her commandoes worked on the corpses of the guards, Zir ran down to fix a device of her own invention to the shielded commsat dish atop the blockhouse. The trap would block all transmissions from the Tomb to the city of Palace. According to Riva, they had twenty minutes before the monitors in Government House detected the block. The Map connection had already been rerouted by Riva.

Zir drew a rhomboid of blueglass from another pocket of her swampsuit. It was a bit of Colonizer tech. Riva had access to a trove of such things; these gave them the edge over Karlo and his security forces. Despite her confidence in Riva, Zir was nervous as she used a

set of micro tools to cut into the door and interface this strange old device to the lock. If this key didn't work perfectly, there was enough explosive woven into the blockhouse to vaporize acres of the swamp, including the prisoner below. Zir sensed the members of her force gathering behind her. She must not hesitate or show fear. There was one bad moment when Zir discovered that the door's interface circuitry was not the same as the schematic Riva had shown her. She stared at it until she realized that it was simply an upgraded version of the original.

Precious seconds were lost as Zir closed her eyes and thought through the changes. So. The scramble circuitry was more sophisticated, but the crypto strip remained the same. If she bypassed the processor unit here and bridged the scrambler thus . . . Yes. Decisively, Zir made the final connections to the blueglass rhomboid and started Riva's codebreaker. In less than a second, it defeated the crypto strip. With a thunderous moan, the door slid away from the entrance. They were in.

The first levels were the simplest, requiring only the retinals of the dead Garang. The optic simulators carried by her strike force worked perfectly. These were another of her inventions, a legacy of her work as a researcher in the Cyberguild.

Without the detailed drawings of the lower levels, they would have been hopelessly lost in tri-stil catacombs. There were no signs, no numbers, no features at all in the twisting unlit corridors. Access to lower levels was always through multiple events timed and separated by specific distances. Sometimes, Zir felt as if she were dueling with another Lep, dancing challenge while he threatened blood strikes that just missed. Whoever had designed these security measures was no fool. But Zir was in her element. No technology was beyond her understanding and she loved solving intricate puzzles.

At last, they paused on a seemingly nondescript sub-level. The Tomb went down hundreds more feet, but it was only a facade, created to delay and trap. The prisoner they sought had been hidden here.

"Tuz," said Zir to a very tall gray-skinned Lep. She pointed to a spot on the wall.

Sar Tuz, one of Zir's hatchmates, stepped forward and focused his swampsuit's lamp on an apparently featureless section of tri-stil. He shifted the light through the spectrum until an ultraviolet frequency caused a tiny sigil to appear.

Now they had come to the moment of uncertainty. Not even Riva knew exactly how this door was opened. Precious minutes flew by while Zir and her brightest thinkers used a multitude of devices to examine the wall. None of their efforts revealed anything but that some sort of mechanism existed inside the tri-stil, probably voice-activated. They had a synthesizer with them that could generate a perfect simulation of Karlo's voice, if that proved necessary, so that was no problem. But what would the keyword be?

She waved away the others and stared at the wall, focusing on the sigil. It was some sort of ideogram, unfamiliar. It looked like a crescent moon married to a stylized half star.

"Tuz, what language is this?"

Her hatchmate knelt beside her. Even through the suit's filtration unit, she could smell his musk, so distinctive, so much like their brother Sar Elen. Vi-Kata had been forced to execute Elen, who had lost his stomach for revolution after the war memorial bombing. She hoped she wouldn't have to lose any more hatchmates to a similar cowardice. .

"Don't know. It's not Lepir, for sure."

"It wouldn't be. Karlo Peronida built this Tomb." She thought for a moment. "Could it be Helane?"

Another of her force stepped forward carrying a flat-plate.

"I think I have some lingua bases in here. Yeah. But no Helane, damn it."

No one had thought to bring such a thing. Now, of course, Zir saw the error. The Tomb was Karlo's chief concern and he was a native of Kephalon, destroyed by the Lep within. Zir's

instinct was that the sigil was the answer. Would it be complicated, or simple? Well, who could have expected anyone to get this deep, though? What if Karlo indulged himself in one small act of symbolic retribution, trusting to the impregnable levels of security above? On an impulse, Zir typed a single word into the synthesizer.

"Kephalon," said Karlo's voice.

There was a minute flash of amber light and a slender section of the wall slid noiselessly into the floor. Zir's team let out a cheer and Zir allowed herself a lift of her crest. Arrogant fool of a human.

But the door had delayed them a dangerous handful of minutes. She rushed into the chamber. There was no time now to move cautiously and watch for traps. They must hurry, or all was lost.

Inside was a circular chamber seemingly empty, though Zir knew a great deal of sophisticated equipment was hidden in the walls and floor. She had no doubt that dozens of sophisticated holorecorders and telemetry devices were tracking her and the team, preparing a record that could be used to find them anywhere on Palace or the Pinch. Zir let out a low growl of laughter at the thought.

There, on a raised black dais, lay a massive featureless box that gave off a diffuse silvery light. This was the sarcophagus that imprisoned the most dangerous Lep ever born.

The sarcophagus was a wonder, a device that dated back to the days of the Colonizers, thousands of years ago. According to Riva, the Hirrel had given the thing to Karlo, who had used it for the sole purpose of imprisoning one very special criminal. By itself, the sarcophagus was better security than anything they had yet encountered.

Zir consulted her timer. Twenty minutes had passed. They were already five minutes behind the schedule. By now, someone in the city would have received an alarm. Karlo would send every weapon at his disposal here instantly.

Fortunately, Riva had very complete information on this last obstacle and it took less than a minute for Zir to kill the AI inside the sarcophagus and manually activate the wake function. Soon, the silver glow intensified, became brighter, brighter, until it coalesced into an opaque sun, then snapped into transparency, finally dissolving into mist, screaming out a chime that shivered the walls.

The prisoner lying on the dais echoed that scream, a wail of such hatred and agony that Zir fell back in shock. She was not alone. Several of her team scrambled to the room's walls, crouched, and made digging motions with their claws, a child's sign of terror.

At last, the old Lep's wail faded to coughs and weeping.

Zir recovered her wits enough to gesture to the medic. He hesitated, but obeyed. The moment he laid hands on the wasted form of Ri Paha Tura, she lashed out, scoring his face with her claws, barely missing the man's eyes. Fortunately, the strike was weak and the medic was only scratched. Zir and two others moved in to take hold of Turn's arms. The old female struggled against them. Zir felt a surge of panic. Every second they wasted here brought Karlo's vengeance closer.

"Please," said Zir. The sound of Gen only seemed to enrage the old Lep more. "We're here to help you. Riva sent us."

"I'yik't aak'k't siik'—" The Lep stiffened. "Riva?"

"Yes."

Of all things, the Lep hissed, almost as if she were trying to mimic human laughter. It was a chilling sound, echoing in the chamber like steam under high pressure. Tura's crest lifted in joy.

"Riva! Ziiya' taiai *zhu-i* dio k'ki-va Ri?" The old Lep's accent was heavy and she spoke in a dialect that defeated Zir's grasp of the language. Also, she seemed to be speaking bits of Relzhu. Something about the "sight of God"? The others in the room seemed equally mystified.

"What? I don't understand."

Tura whipped her blind gaze toward Zir. She enunciated carefully as she spoke.

"T-ka j'Gen. J'va li-dua y' a y' Lepir?" *Gen stinks in your mouth. Are you of my race?*

Zir bit back a retort. The contempt in Turn's voice stung like acid. The expressions of the other Leps were, at best, neutral. If only Vi-Kata were here ... Zir nodded to the medtech, who gave Tura a sedative that put her to sleep in seconds.

"Let's go." At least they didn't hesitate at her command.

They rushed out of the Tomb and into the swamp. Zir looked into the night sky and saw the running lights of at least two hundred military airhoppers, very nearly Karlo's entire militia, and their angry buzz filled the air. They would have already marked Zir and her force. Missiles would be launched in seconds.

The chase was on. But Zir felt no fear. It was the Will of God. What was the Lepir, yes, I'vi'Ri. The Will of God. Zir and her team carried the hopes of all the Ty Onar Lep and the doom of the hated humans. They could not fail.

Now, the next step of Riva's plan. At least as important as freeing the prisoner in the Tomb had been drawing Karlo's forces here. Riva had known Karlo would send everything immediately, unthinkingly, in a blind fury.

Zir fixed a force belt to Tura and activated it. Only five of the belts existed in the Pinch and Karlo possessed three of them. She and Tura now wore the other two. They were the key to Riva's plan.

Zir paused a moment to gather the others. In a moment they would all be dead, except for Zir and Tura. Her team surrounded her and gave a salute. She wanted to say something to them, give them some final word, but her throat closed up, choked with emotion.

After a moment Zir detonated the Tomb. The light of that explosion turned night into day and was even faintly visible through the layers of smoked glass over her visor. The shock wave tumbled them all many hundreds of yards and killed most of her teammates instantly. It destroyed miles of swamp. Most important, the blast incinerated nearly all of Karlo's airhoppers. The First Citizen would have a fine time enforcing his law on the Leps now. Zir climbed out of the liquefied earth, dragging the limp form of the sedated Tura behind her. She growled. Fool. So predictable in his rage. Once again, Riva had proven the master strategist. Many fine Leps died this day, but the victory was Riva's.

I'vi'Ri.

Someone was shaking Rico. He struggled out of sleep to see Greenie beside Vida's bed, honking at him softly and giving off a fear-stink. Vida was snoring heavily and he grinned at the sound. According to the popgraphs, Vida was in the top ten of glamorous women, the sort of women who never had to go to the bathroom, didn't need to borrow a handkerchief to blow their noses, who didn't giggle over puns or read space opera holonovels.

"What?" He leaned toward the saccule, who tugged at his arm, full of urgency.

The saccule blatted something and continued pulling at his arm. Rico frowned and shrugged his blue work gown on. What in the world was going on? He rushed out of the bedroom to see Nju-tok, Uncle Hi's Garang bodyguard, at Vida's door, let in by Jak, who made a point of not noticing Rico come out of Vida's bedroom. Tall, lithe, with a face full of golden angles, Nju was simultaneously remotely alien and as familiar as a father to Rico. Clearly, he and his brother, Jak, had been speaking and the younger Garang had not enjoyed the conversation. Was it about me? Rico wondered. Maybe he should talk to Vida about it. It was probably asking for trouble to have the Garang in the same suite while she was making love with him.

"Hail, Nju. What is it?"

"Come with me."

"Is something wrong? Did Uncle Hi send you?"

The Garang cocked his head, the equivalent of a human's impatient shrug. It wasn't like the Garang to act like this, but Rico didn't question the bodyguard further. He wrote a quick note to Vida, who still slept, and gave it to Jak, with orders to explain why he'd had to leave so abruptly.

The two of them left Rico's tiny office and Nju led them at a jog out into the bustle of Government House. The night shift was craning on and Rico realized that he and Vida had spent the entire afternoon in bed. He hoped Hi wasn't angry. No one paid any attention to Rico, but everyone cleared out of Nju's way; a Garang in a hurry was best avoided. Fortunately for Rico, he was as tall as the Garang and was able to match the bodyguard's long strides. Nevertheless, he was out of breath by the time they arrived at an express lift booth reserved for Cyberguild use. Nju said nothing, but Rico felt embarrassed. The Garang had trained him and here he was turning into another soft-bellied clerk.

Vida's apartments were high in the inner spoke of the East Tower, far from the Cyberguild offices. Rico had heard that the twin towers of Government House were even visible from near Palace orbit, at least when the perpetual fog that wreathed the swamp planet allowed a glimpse of the surface. In any case, the vast interior hub of the East Tower—composed of the ancient blueglass of the Colonizers—was wonder enough. As the transparent lift booth descended down the outer bore of the tower, Rico gazed out at the spiral walkways and colorful facades of offices and storefronts that sparkled like a multicolored chessboard. Thousands of sapients rushed to and from every level. They wore robes of distinctive colors, cheerful bright hues, representing the twelve guilds. But a disturbing number wore the slate-gray of Security, Dukayn's forces. Rico saw no Leps at all. Things were relaxing on Palace, but it would be some time before a Lep was allowed in the East Tower.

The booth took them deep into the underground levels of Government House to the part of the twin towers that was created when the Colonizers first arrived on Palace as a research team from the Rim. Before long, Rico had guessed where they were headed, but couldn't imagine what the urgency was, or the secrecy. Finally, the booth ghosted to a stop outside the entrance to the chamber of the Calioistro AI mindcore. This level was accessible only to Cyberguild members and even they needed permission from the guildmaster.

Hi stood outside the door to the Calioistro complex.

Beside him slouched Ri Tal Molos. Rico glanced around the narrow entrance corridor. It was against the law for a Lep to even be on the same sublevel as an Artificial Intelligence, let alone at the door to Calioistro. All of them could be unguilded and imprisoned for this.

Molos, whose keen gaze missed little, chuckled softly, an odd growling sound, and shook his reptilian head. It was disconcerting to see the Lep use human mannerisms. But for many years he'd been an ambassador for his race to humans. He robbed a pinch of some foul-smelling black stuff into his throat, Geriose, a derivative of the drug used for life-extension treatments. It was highly addictive to Leps. Vida thought Molos used it too much. But then Vida came from a place where it was easy to be destroyed by pleasure drugs, so she was oversensitive to such things, in Rico's opinion.

"Relax, Rico," said Hi. He drew out a slim black card from an inner pocket and Rico saw that it was glowing red around the edges. Hi's blackbox card. Hi punched in a code on the access door and led them down a long narrow corridor lit by amber-colored striplights. A specially modified series of autogates, invisible behind the walls, would be monitoring them closely. Only Hi could override their security protocols to allow Molos to accompany them. Nju remained at the entrance on guard. As they walked, Rico spoke.

"Uncle Hi, what's going on?"

"Riva may have finally made a serious mistake." Hi's normally bland expression became feral. The amber light seemed to awaken shadows in his face.

Riva, with her hired assassin, Vi-Kata, had attempted to kill Vida, for reasons that remained unclear. The assassin had succeeded, however, in murdering Hi's son, Arno, who had also been Rico's cousin and best friend. Vi-Kata tortured him to death. Rico helped set the trap

that caught Kata, but Riva escaped capture. In some ways, she was even more powerful now than before Vi-Kata's execution.

"You're sure it isn't another trick?" Rico had rim down dozens of leads over the last weeks, all of them blind alleys. Riva delighted in taunting Hi and Rico by leaving clues on the Map.

"I think not, Sé Rico. Riva, herself, has made no missteps that your uncle and I could detect, but she does use others to carry out her will, and some of them are not so clever. We have tracked one of her agents, a Lep woman named Zir, with your excellent tracker meta."

The young cybermaster nodded, but his attention was more on the immense cylinder of blueglass that filled the room ahead of them. Within that cylinder, encoded in a complex lattice, lay technology beyond the understanding of anyone Irving. The lattice somehow formed an AI mindcore, ancient when the Colonizers arrived in the Pinch millennia ago. There were only a few functioning

AIs left in the Pinch and no one had more than a glimmering of how to restore them, let alone make new ones. Calioistro, here, had been crippled and cannibalized for centuries and still it performed miracles of administration for Government House. Next to maintaining the Map, protecting and learning about the AIs was the most important job of the Cyberguild.

"What could Riva do if she had access to an AI?" Rico murmured.

Molos let out a sibilant bark and Rico snapped out of his reverie to glance at him. The Lep's expression was very odd, unfathomable.

"My dear Rico . . . of course! She must have such access to do the things she does. Of course! Hivel, did you hear?"

Hi was a few yards ahead of than bending over an angled black table. It was an old-fashioned workstation. Rico frowned. Why would Hi bother with that when the Map access point was right there next to the mindcore assembly? Then he realized that Dukayn almost certainly had a flag set for any high-level Map activity. Hi snapped his head up at Molos's shout.

"Yes! Damn." He smiled, a slanted grin that reminded Rico painfully of Arno. "Should've been obvious. Molos and I tracked one of Riva's agents to the Calioistro mindcore with the supermeta you built—that was why we brought you here, in fact—but it hadn't occurred to either of us that Riva might have access to the mindcore itself. That'd explain a lot of things."

Rico shook his head, his mind racing through the implications, poking holes in his own theory, just as Arno had always taught him.

"But wait. There's no way for anyone to get to Calioistro via the Map. He's buffered and the only station with a connection is right here on a turnkey system, They'd have to physically come down here and manually code in their instructions every time they wanted to use him. Even a cybermaster with a portable Mapstation would take hours to do that and no one's allowed to bring a station in here. How could some Lep agent sneak in here constantly for hours at a time? I don't think Dukayn is even letting Leps into Government House itself. The re-programming would have to be integrated with all of Calioistro's admin functions, the entire suite. It'd have to be seamless or we'd catch it right away. That's years worth of work right there. No, not even the guildmaster could do it. It's just not possible. Besides, Calioistro is crippled. I don't think he could do half the things Riva has accomplished, even from here."

Hi and Molos nodded at everything Rico said.

"Everything you say is true, Sé Rico," said Molos. "But I feel in my bones that Riva *is* using an AI for her purposes, somehow. Her patterns, the things she's accomplished, the untraceable routes . . . all of them make sense if she has direct control over an AI."

"The Calioistro AI," added Hi. "No other AI has any connection to Government House."

Rico frowned and muttered, half to himself. "Well, okay, let's assume it then. How could it happen? The buffering's physical, no Map connection, no control. Where's the connection? What's the point of entry?"

Rico closed his eyes and concentrated. How would he and Arno have done it? He could see his cousin's face in his mind's eye, hear his voice. For a brief glorious moment, Rico imagined they were talking out the problem together, just like old times. The room disappeared. He was alone with the voice of his cousin, his closest friend, maybe his only friend.

How would we do it, kid? Up? No way through the security. Down? The mindcore's got no extraMap facility. Still, info goes out, right, so there's always away back in. Okay, door's closed, watched by the guild, they'd notice a knock. What other routes? Landline? Nah, bandwidth too narrow. Electromagnetic coupling? Forget it. They've shielded this place from everything below deep infra to above high gamma. Sapiient agent? How'd they get in and out every day? Possible, though. Still. Wrong angle. Assume the endpoint instead. It's being done. So, how do you set flags without a station? What works on the Map without controls? C'mon, kid, think, think . . .

Rico's eyes flew open and he snapped his fingers.

"Yeah! What about the substrate, Uncle Hi?"

The other cybermasters stared at him, uncomprehending.

"Don't you get it? There's no processed connection to the Map, right, but there's *always* a physical connection. The substrate. The blueglass itself. Government House, jeez most of the cities of the Pinch, in fact, are built on a foundation of the stuff. It's what makes the Map work in the first place—"

"But the substrate is only a quantum conductor, Sé Rico," said Molos. "You need a Mappoint for the difference of potential that makes information flow through the substrate. Without it, the blueglass is inert. The Calioistro mindcore functions only as an automatic output controller. So, you would have to have a station connected directly to the mindcore and nearby because—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Rico interrupted impatiently, hands waving, his thoughts tumbling far ahead of the other cybermaster, "the farther away from the mindcore, the more rapidly the connection deteriorates, inverse square law. Everybody knows the differentials for signal loss as a function of distance between Mappoints. But you're forgetting the hyperMap. You know how it is on that level, you can connect to any serviceable Mappoint; you can even piggyback on the shuntlines to other Maps in the Pinch. The substrate makes that possible because as long as a valid path exists, information can follow the route without degradation, the substrate itself is like a zero-loss superconductor. My mother once told me that the blueglass acts like a giant resonator, constantly oscillating. The movement of information turns the spokes of a quantum turbine ..."

Hi was nodding. "Yeah, right, I see where you're going, Rico. Huh. I never thought of blueglass like that before, but it's a good metaphor. Molos is right, though, that there's no way we know of to access data on the substrate level—you've got to have a Mappoint for that difference of potential—but Riva has already shown that she has access to some very old technology. Anyway it doesn't really matter right now *how* Riva is directing the activity. What we can assume is that there *is* a way for her to connect to the mindcore—"

"Sé Hivel, if Rico's reasoning is valid, and Riva doesn't need Mappoints to access the Map, then she could conceivably connect to *all* of the AIs in the Pinch. No defense could block her. Security is only possible at a functional node like a Mappoint. No wonder she moves on the Map at will."

All three of them glanced at the blueglass cylinder within which rested the Calioistro AI. To think of the AIs and, in essence, the Map in the grip of a psychotic Lep cybermaster was a chilling thought.

"We must warn the guild," said Molos in his slurred voice.

Hi nodded. "This is too big to keep to ourselves. We may have to shut Calioistro down. For sure, we'll have to close off the hyperMap. Damn. Well, let me finish tracing this Zir . . . what's this?" Molos joined Hi at the offMap worktable.

Rico was only partly listening to his uncle and Molos as they worked. He had already figured out in his head what they had to do to quarantine Riva. He even had an idea for providing substrate security. Sometimes, even his uncle seemed slow to grasp what Rico saw as the obvious. Only Arno had ever been able to keep pace with him. Unlike Hi and Molos, Rico was far more interested in *how* Riva was using the substrate. That seemed to him a much more compelling question than why. Neither of the other two cybermasters seemed to understand just how difficult such a feat would be. He wished his mother were here. Barra would understand right away that Riva's use of the blueglass had enormous implications. Rico blinked as a sudden realization hit him. If Riva had always known how to do this, then it was clear how the Nimue AI was shut down all those years ago, assuming that the L'vars were innocent, and for Vida's sake Rico had long ago decided that was true. In fact, now that he thought about it, Riva might still be in control of Nimue now, waiting for the right moment to bring it back online for her own uses. What would happen if Barra started working on the system? -

"Uncle Hi," said Rico. "We have to contact Mom right away."

Hi looked up. "Sure, kid, but we have a more serious problem. It looks like Zir—"

Just then, the lights in the room dimmed and an automated synthesizer spoke.

"Emergency, emergency. Explosion at coordinates twelve degrees, sixteen minutes, nineteen seconds south and minus one hundred degrees, five minutes, twelve seconds east, altitude minus six feet sea level. Seismic data to follow . . ."

Molos dug the air with one of his claws.

"By the Sight of God," he murmured. "That is the Tomb."

Hi glanced at the other cybermaster sharply. Molos didn't appear to notice.

"The Tomb?" asked Rico.

"It is where Karlo imprisoned the most evil and dangerous Lep who has ever lived." Molos made a soft low growl in his throat. "It is the Tomb of Ri Paha Tura, the planet-killer, the murderer of Kephalon."

Karlo Peronida stood before the Center Council and judged their mood. The people here were the representatives of the oldest and richest clans on Palace. All of them were at least a hundred years old with decades of experience as chief patrons or guildmasters. They knew their value to him. Of the one hundred voting members, he had the certain personal support of only a handful, while his wife Vanna controlled better than a third. He glanced at Vanna, who had just finished establishing connections to the satellite councils on the two smaller continents of the planet. Her tattooed features twitched slightly, but a new radical course of treatment seemed to have quieted the awful spasms that extreme age under life extension had brought to her of late. She nodded to Karlo.

"The riots that began this morning have been contained," said Karlo. "The current unrest is dying down, despite the fact that the Riva cult has attempted to whip up hysteria. Riva's chief terrorists move from Sect to Sect easily, but they are receiving less support from the citizens."

"We have authorized the construction of new auto-gates at all entry points." The plump, usually placid Countess of Motta spoke sharply.

"Yes, Sé Olletta, and we are certain that they are working properly, but somehow these Riva Leps have found another means to travel between the Sects." Karlo hesitated, considering whether to tell than that Dukayn suspected the use of Colonizer technology, perhaps even teleporters. No, better to hold that information in reserve, until they had an answer for it.

"In any case, the terrorists have struck at a number of points today, but our security forces have prevented attacks on any essential services. Riva's uprising is a failure. She has gambled and lost. We have over a dozen of her most important people in Deeplock being

closely questioned. Soon, we will know everything necessary to annihilate the terrorists."

Several Council members paled. The stories about Deeplock under Dukayn were terrifying.

"Most Lep citizens did not join in Riva's attacks," said Karlo. "It may be time to show good faith. I suggest we relax the Lep Laws, even open the Map back up to their cybermasters."

The Council, composed of old and experienced politicians, still uttered a collective gasp of astonishment. Karlo Peronida, speaking up for Lep civil rights? Impossible. Karlo gave no sign that he noticed this reaction, but inside it amused him. Maybe it had been worth bargaining with the Pope just for this moment. He felt strangely calm. Perhaps it was time to let Kephalon rest in peace. He had seen Wan off on his trip to Souk and the two men had actually shaken hands. Karlo couldn't remember the last time he'd touched Wan without anger.

Suddenly the entire chamber rocked and furniture tumbled about sending most people into a sprawl. Karlo kept his feet, but only barely. The commlink implant behind his ear spoke within seconds. Dukayn's distinctive voice rapped out information.

Sé Karlo, the Tomb has detonated. There are considerable casualties. Dukayn quickly gave him the numbers and what he was doing to recover the remnants of the airhopper fleet. His security chief had also developed a cover story for the media, though there was little hope it would last long. He was leaving the city immediately to investigate personally.

At once, Karlo understood the whole of Riva's strategy, and he, like a fool, had performed exactly as required, cooperating in the destruction of most of the Protectors' fleet. Useless to waste energy on self-recrimination, though. He must respond instantly, and correctly. Karlo began to formulate a plan. But his mind kept wandering into rage. The Tomb had been breached! What about Tura? He must know what happened to her. He should have executed her when he had the chance. Fool! Fool! Karlo's temper, always near to hand, flared.

He had, against his better judgment, treated the treasonous Leps like citizens and the uprising within the laws of Palace. But now, well, this was war and Karlo Peronida was a soldier. Riva was about to learn what that meant. All the Leps would learn. And if Tura had somehow survived the Tomb explosion ...

"First Citizen, reports are coming in that—" Karlo glared at the Council member and he fell silent.

"As of this moment, I am invoking the full provisions of martial law and recalling the fleet. The Protectors will be augmented by my troops and we will not be using stun-sticks." Karlo glanced at Vanna, but his wife said nothing, though this was unprecedented. "Here is what you will tell your Sects ..."

Immediately after addressing the Council, Karlo left to join Dukayn at the ruins of the Tomb.

Karlo could ill afford to be away from Government House at the moment, but he could no more have stayed away than denied the existence of Kephalon. From an airhopper, the First Citizen surveyed the damage caused by the destruction of the Tomb. It looked too much like the steaming magma that covered much of Kephalon after the hellbombs. He had dropped some of those bombs. There was no other way to ensure that the plagues would never spread from Kephalon to the other planets of the Pinch.

Dukayn was personally supervising the installation of a gas chromatograph and other testing devices. The security chief joined his patron. Karlo didn't like the grim look on his old friend's face.

"Well?" Both knew Dukayn's only purpose for being out here.

"First Citizen . . . Karlo, we haven't found the trace. It's doubtful that Tura died here."

Karlo clenched his fists and spun on the balls of his feet. Lord how he wished he were still a young street fighter. There was always someone to take a challenge. He couldn't contain it, the old serpent was moving through his veins. Karlo let out a roar and swung at Dukayn, who ducked the blow and struck one of his own; Karlo felt a rib crack. It was a good feeling, he'd missed it. The two men circled warily. Dukayn had studied on the Garang Japat homeworld and

he was fast and precise. But Karlo had fought many more battles and he was much the stronger.

Dukayn tried a leg sweep, but Karlo kicked his calf with the sole of a boot. Another man would have been disabled from the blow, but Dukayn only shifted his stance and drove with his hands to the high line. Karlo had never been good at pure defense, reacting to attacks. He went on the offensive, slamming the insides of Dukayn's forearms with his fists and head-butting his factor in the face. In the fraction of a second that Dukayn was stunned, Karlo broke his nose with his forehead and used his elbows to strike twice at the man's collarbone, driving for a crippling blow. Part of him realized that he had lost all sense of who or where he was and he was doing his best to kill Dukayn. Every blow they exchanged was meant to kill, eye strikes, throat blows, fist to the groin and kidneys. The battle took on its own time, separate from any reality. Karlo had ceased to think, but just let his body strike without thought, without plan, unerringly finding the weak points in the other man's defenses. At each successful strike, he smelled blood. His own body took punishment that he catalogued in some deep place: two broken ribs, a cracked sternum, shattered eye socket, perforated eardrum . . . nothing serious. It went on, at close quarters, where Karlo always fought best.

"Ki-cha!" Dukayn cried out, the ancient Kephalon call of surrender, probably the only thing in the universe that could have gotten through to Karlo at that moment.

Karlo dropped to his haunches, a rare sense of peace filling him. Dukayn's mouth poured blood. He had a broken nose and his right arm showed bone out of flesh. Dukayn grinned.

"Thank you, Master."

For once, Karlo didn't feel the unease that Dukayn's worship usually gave him. He lifted his friend up, and called over a medtech, whose expression was a mixture of fascination and disgust. Another medtech worked on Karlo, pumping him full of painkillers and repairing the worst damage.

While the medtechs worked, Karlo looked around the encampment. There was a bewildering array of emotions out there, but at least some of the people were glad to see Dukayn get a severe beating. Karlo sighed. Much as he loved him, Dukayn's ... weaknesses were becoming too noticeable. He'd given the man too much power. It wasn't safe to have a security chief who was this much hated and feared. But no man on Palace could begin to understand him as well, or give him this release. They were brothers in blood, never to be sundered.

"Sé Dukayn, please continue the search. I'll be interested in whatever you learn."

"It will be as you say, Master."

Dukayn, still in the throes of his ecstasy, so far forgot himself as to give Karlo the Japat bow of love. No one else seemed to understand the significance, thank God. Karlo squeezed Dukayn's shoulder. He was a precious fragment of Karlo's childhood, one of the last survivors of Kephalon. He would never abandon him, no matter what. The broken and bloody face looked up at him with absolute adoration.

"Don't stay too long, though. I need you in the city, old friend."

Dukayn nodded, still overcome by emotion. But some sanity returned to his eyes and he returned to supervising the work. Karlo got back in the airhopper and looked around. Miles of swamp leveled. His eco advisers told him that it would be decades before this area recovered.

He should have executed Tura when he had the chance. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

The trip back to Government House was a very tense one. No one spoke, though Karlo could guess their thoughts. The street fighter of Kephalon has finally shown his true nature. The First Citizen is nothing but an animal in fine clothes. Karlo kept clenching his fists, helpless to stop himself, though he knew how even the smallest gestures on this world implied volumes. He was so tired of trying to be a Palace citizen. What was the use of it? Every man and woman in this airhopper would live at least a hundred fifty years, while he might survive to eighty, with luck. Did he want, to live those years as an imitation of a man? Karlo linked his

hands together and managed to relax his face. He had to regain control. He must be the master of his rage, not the servant. But it was so hard. So hard. Every time he thought of Tura, he felt a need to break something. Riva had made an enemy beyond her imagining. He had reined Dukayn, tried to find a path to peace with the Leps. But now ... he would find Tura if he had to kill every Lep on Palace with his bare hands.

In his office, he tried to cancel all his appointments, but Sister Romero wouldn't be denied. She strode into his office like the wrath of God. Had she learned already about Tura? No, that was impossible. Though Karlo stood, Romero took a seat. She wouldn't be rushed. He shrugged and sat down, too, favoring a bruised hip. "What is it, Sister?"

The Itinerant studied him with her cold eyes. He hadn't liked her from the first day they'd met. She was unpredictable and too independent. Her bizarre bid to have the saccules declared sapient had generated all sorts of problems. Naturally, she wouldn't have to deal with the consequences. These religious zealots never cared about the fallout from their high-minded schemes.

"I will come directly to the point, First Citizen. I know that you lied to the Pope about the Spagyra."

Karlo reacted with guilty shock, and cursed himself for it immediately. His emotions were too raw. He was in no condition to match wits with the Pope's Eye right now. He wished he had postponed this meeting. Too late.

"I hope you have proof of that charge, Sister."

"I do."

She linked her hands together and rested them in her lap. Considering that she had just accused him of a crime that could lead to excommunication and imprisonment, she seemed awfully relaxed. Romero was supposed to be incorruptible, but Karlo had a nose for the smell of a bargain. The Itinerant wanted something from him.

"Well, bring the charges, then. I'll be glad to fight this lie in court."

"You'll lose," she said. "I'm not recording this conversation, Sé Karlo. May we speak honestly for a moment?"

"I always speak honestly."

"Yes, I'm sure. The Spagyra must be turned over to Retreat. There can be no negotiation on that point. However, there needn't be a public scandal:"

"All right. Let's say for the sake of argument that the Spagyra is given to the Pope. What is it you want in return for your silence?"

"I want Dukayn arrested immediately and remanded to the Pope's custody."

"Why?"

"Dukayn is guilty of a multitude of crimes, First Citizen. But, for the moment, I am only concerned with the worst. He has been torturing Leps, Sé Karlo." She paused and studied him. He felt like a germ under a microscope. "I hope you didn't know about this."

"His interrogations in Deeplock are harsh, but he would never torture a sapient."

Romero shook her head.

"You're wrong. I have proof of what I'm saying, First Citizen. Your factor is insane."

Karlo lowered his head and rubbed his brow with one hand. It disturbed him how little he was surprised by this charge. What could he do now? Dukayn was like a brother to him. He needed him to find Tura. When he raised his head to speak, he saw that the decision had been taken out of his hands. Dukayn entered his office with three fleet officers, all carrying perseps. He should have guessed that Dukayn would have this office monitored.

"Sé Karlo, I have evidence that Sister Romero has committed treason with Riva. With your

permission, I will arrest her now."

Sister Romero didn't bother to turn and dignify the charge. She simply stared at Karlo, waiting. He hated that look of patient wisdom. Now was the moment that Karlo had always feared must come, a choice between his honor and Dukayn.

"Do your duty, Sé Dukayn." The man smiled, but-before he could move forward, Karlo raised a hand. "Mark me, Dukayn, No harm must come to the Itinerant. Do you understand?"

His factor showed a rare moment of confusion and hurt, but he recovered quickly.

"Of course, First Citizen."

"God Sees, Karlo," said Romero.

"I know," he replied.

Dukayn and his guards led the Itinerant away in restraints.

"It's eighteens and this is Tarick Avon reporting for Pan-sect Media from an airhopper a few miles to the southeast of the Motta Farms.

"One hour ago, an explosion destroyed miles of swamp and left the devastation you see on your vid-screens. According to the office of the First Citizen, this material is from a pre-war munitions dump that contained a cache of unstable fissionable material. The radiation levels are too high to approach the site until morning, but the Protectors' Guild assures the citizens of Palace that there is little danger of fallout. The half-life of the radioactive materials is very short and the Service Guild has assembled a team to begin emergency cleanup efforts. Weathermasters have determined that the wind patterns will carry any residual radioactive gases away over the southern ocean. Please tune to channel ninety-one for a looping vid on the prevailing wind patterns for our hemisphere and how they will work to eliminate any risk of contamination.

"How did this happen? Here is footage taken from a Pansect satellite during a routine meteorology pass of the southern hemisphere. The dark red tint you see was an attempt by the satellite to filter the intensity of the light. There was no warning. Notice the torus of light that followed the initial detonation. Our experts say that this is an antimatter shock wave. The subsequent stream of high energy particles may interfere with normal Map access, tune to seventy-six for a guided lecture on quantum physics and substrate theory,.

"Miles of swamp are now a bubbling cauldron of mud and lava. How will this affect the ecosystem? Weather patterns? The wild saccules? Are there any other forgotten dumps buried in the swamp? And, most important, what triggered this explosion?"

"Stay tuned to Pansect's fifty channel for an exclusive on the disaster. We'll interview seismologists, weathermasters, and ecologists to determine the ramifications of the explosion. We will set aside one through twelve for direct citizen access and emergency bulletins. Don't forget to tune your holoplates to the simulcast on the Map, where you'll see a detailed simulation of the blast and a round-table discussion of the history of weapons in the Pinch.

"First Citizen Karlo Peronida will address the city on all channels very shortly.

"This is Tarick Avon for Pansect Media. Stay with us through the night for breaking news."

Jevon moved down the ladderway to a cul-de-sac below the wiretrain track. If anyone had managed to follow her this far, they would soon be lost. She moved through a maze of cables and scaffolding in near total darkness without hesitation. She was late for the rendezvous. The cold night air seemed to knife through her, despite the sealed swampsuit she wore for disguise.

She paused to check her electronic sniffer. She'd lost five pursuers over the last two

hours. Dukayn had left the city immediately to investigate the explosion in the swamp. Whatever had happened out there was more important to him than anything, even Jevon. She didn't intend to waste the opportunity. Jevon nodded with satisfaction. The sniffer showed nothing.

"Jewie?"

Jevon spun around and saw a short man wearing a black skintight and a gray overwrap step from the shadows bearing a shuttered lamp that cast more shadows than light. He was stocky with broad shoulders. His hair was cut very short and dyed gray and his face was as smooth and untroubled as an angel's. He hadn't changed at all in twenty years.

Behind the one-way glass of her faceplate, Jevon smiled for the first time in a long while.

"How did you know it was me, Garis? I used scrambles and blinds to contact you."

The man cocked his head and shrugged.

"The heart is an eye of God," he murmured, quoting a poet they'd both liked. Then he added, "Who else would know about this place?"

Jevon rushed to him and hugged him fiercely. He seemed startled, but after a moment, he hugged her back and Jevon couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so safe. At last, he let her go and the two of them hunched into a niche under the track, one that only the two of them knew about. Garis popped the tab on a safelight and a dim green glow, burned at their feet. Jevon unsealed the faceplate on her suit and pushed the hood back to her shoulders.

"You've changed," he said.

"You haven't she replied. "Except the hair. Why gray?"

He brushed the bristles with one gloved hand, smiling self-consciously.

"Unguilded men have a hard enough time as it is, worse if they don't look old enough to be a Not-child."

"Oh, Garis." She touched his knee.

His face closed up and his voice became brisk. "Well, you didn't come looking for an old Rumble-mate to talk about fashion. I've got what you asked for." He lifted a corner of his overwrap and took out a small black pouch. He opened the pouch and inside Jevon saw the weapon she had desperately wanted, which could mean her execution if she were caught with it. Considering the things Dukayn had made her do, getting arrested was the least of her worries.

Jevon didn't take her hand from his knee. When had she last felt safe, loved by a normal man? Not since Arno's murder, and even Arno had been a mercurial force at times. With Dukayn around, her life had become a horror. She was more afraid of Dukayn than even he imagined. But she hated him in equal measure. That was her only hope of courage.

"Thank you, Garis. I brought the access chips. Unmarked." Jevon drew a purse from inside the suit. She'd had to empty her savings, even borrow against, her earnings, to buy Map access chips that could be used by an unguilded person. But there was nothing more valuable on Palace. With Map access, Garis could get work, secure an apartment, buy clothes. Without access, he was like a jadewing locked away from a room full of food. It would have been far simpler to copy off Hivel's credchip, but the idea sickened her. All of her troubles had begun with betrayal. She was done with that now. She prayed it wasn't too late. Jevon tried to hand the purse to Garis.

He waved it away. "Forget it. The price was before I knew who you were."

She shoved it into his hands. "Don't be silly. Take them. You're a good medtech. I'm sure you can get work once you have access."

He cocked his head again, smiled sadly, but didn't argue further. The old Garis would have. There was such weariness and defeat in him. Jevon remembered the two of them rumbling

together when they were wild children on the street, swinging from the chains and holding then-flank, laughing, fearless. She felt her eyes sting and leaned over to kiss his cheek.

He took her in his arms and held her. She felt his warm breath on her neck and stiffened. He let go of her instantly.

"Sorry, Jev, I'm unguilded, I had no business—"

"No, it's all right, Garis. I was ... I ... if you can wait, just-give me a moment ..."

She wanted to tell him about Dukayn, about how she'd spent a day in bed recovering from his attack, folded into a ball, bleeding, crying. She wanted to tell him about the things he made her do. But she felt such shame. Garis said nothing, simply fell into that calm stillness she remembered so well. Arno had been edgy, full of energy, always in motion, and Jevon had loved that. But she missed this peace, this serenity. It seeped into her like a prayer. Minutes passed in silence, with Garis merely present, stolid, and receptive. Jevon's heart settled, some missing bit of courage regrew in her heart.

"I was raped, Garis," she whispered.

Garis said nothing, but she felt him tense. He bowed his head and waited, sparing her the look that must be in his eyes. Eventually, Jevon told him everything, her involvement in UJU, betrayal of her patron, the murder of Arno by Vi-Kata, everything. The last thing she told him was about the actual rape and it felt as if she were reporting it to Hi, as something regrettable, a broken vase maybe. She couldn't tell Garis about the games Dukayn made her play now, though. They were too terrible.

"I understand," said Garis. When he raised his face and looked into her eyes, there was a shock of recognition.

"You?"

"Unguilded children don't have any rights, Jev."

Without thinking, she reached out and folded him into her arms, held him tight. He was broad and hard-muscled, but she felt the tremble in him that must be worse than death to his pride. But he let her know it. It felt so good to give comfort to this man. This is what she believed in, not UJU, not Dukayn's games of pain. Hot tears that she'd refused to shed in front of Dukayn came burning down her cheeks. She touched her lips to his neck.

Then, under the wiretrain tracks, in a part of the city where only the empty lived, Garis and Jevon tried to fill each other's desolation.

Later, Jevon made her way back to Government House. She went straight to Hi's office, intending to confess everything, but Hi wasn't there. The outer room was filled with cybes working the night shift. Jevon went to her desk. At any moment, she expected Dukayn to summon her. It felt like standing on a scaffold with a noose around her neck. She tried calling Hi on his implant, but he'd turned it off for some reason. She couldn't wait for him. Dukayn could return at any moment.

While she pretended to update the Hernanes y Jons house accounts on the surface of her desk, she downloaded all of her secret journals about UJU, including recordings of conversations with the others of the First Step, especially Dukayn and UJU Prime, whom she was certain was actually Cairdinal Roha.

Her mind was still with Garis, though. The memory of being held by him, kissed, caressed, burned in her like a fire. She had already decided that if she couldn't get him guided and hired by the Medguild, then she'd leave to join him. Nothing had ever been clearer in her mind.

Nju entered the office and came to her.

"Hail, Nju," she said, surprised. She seldom saw the Garang at all, let alone without Hi or Rico.

"Hail, Sé Jevon. I come with an urgent message from Sé Hivel." The Garang handed her a flatplate with a request scrawled on it in their private code.

Jevon frowned and nodded absently. This was odd. But she often performed puzzling tasks for Hi and this time, at least, she had decided that UJU would know nothing about it. She opened an account and named it as Hi directed, then dumped in a coded database that her patron had clearly prepared for this purpose. When she was finished, she looked up.

"Where's Rico?" she asked. He'd left several messages for her earlier in the evening.

"I do not know."

"All right." Nju started to leave, but Jevon had a sudden thought. "Nju, before you go, if you're not too busy, could you do me a favor?"

"Of course, Sé Jevon." The Garang sounded startled, though his features were, as always, perfectly composed. The Garang was used to the politics of Government House, accustomed to keeping secrets well. On the other hand, Jevon had never asked him for a favor before.

"Would you go with me to see Sister Romero in a few minutes?"

Now the Garang's expression did show a change, though a slight one. She couldn't read the expression. She didn't know anyone who could read a Garang's face, except maybe Dukayn.

"In what capacity?"

"I'm afraid . . ." But she couldn't speak freely here. She made a Garang gesture Hi had taught her. Nju nodded, a minute movement of his head.

"Yes, I understand. These are fearful times. I will remain here until you are ready to go, Sé Jevon. I'm sure Sé Hivel would approve."

Jevon felt as if wires in her veins had loosened. Not even Dukayn would dare threaten her with Nju around. From things he'd confided in her, she knew what a holy regard he held for the Garang race and their Japat warriors. She returned her attention to the hypergraph. A counter showed that her download was finished.

Nju and Jevon were on their way to Sister Romero's quarters when the Garang stopped dead to listen to a message on his implant.

"Ni! O-tu! Wualannaio—"

Jevon had never heard the Garang speak in his own language. She had understood it was taboo for them to use their tongue in front of non-Garang.

"Nju, what is it?" She put a hand on his arm and she felt extreme tension, his muscles jumped under her hand. The old bodyguard visibly settled himself to a semblance of calm.

"Sé Jevon, I am told that it was the Tomb that exploded earlier."

"The Tomb?"

"The Tomb of Ri Paha Tura, the Lep who loosed plagues on Kephalon. Our most honored Japat guarded her and now all are dead."

"But why—"

"We cannot speak here." Nju scanned the walkway. Several pedestrians abruptly realized that other routes to their destinations would be preferable. "I am summoned to the Japat hall. Shall we continue your errand?"

Jevon felt the cool edge of the slipdisc in her pocket. Dukayn would be back soon, if he wasn't already. He would want to see her, to question her about leaving Government House without his permission, if nothing else. Now ought be her only chance to talk to Romero.

"Yes. It's important."

The Garang studied her for a moment. He nodded, but increased their pace. He drove through the crowds with his stunstick out. They arrived at Romero's quarters in minutes. But the sister wasn't there. Her factor Thiralo greeted them. Thiralo was a stocky dull-looking man, but with a penetrating gaze. He wore his Lifegiver robes and the mantle of factor, but no

other decoration or embellishment. In this, he was the mirror of his patron.

"My apologies, Se. The Itinerant is meeting with the First Citizen She should be back, momentarily."

"It's vital that I talk to her right away, Sé Thiralo. We're both factors. You know I wouldn't waste your patron's time if it weren't a truly serious matter."

Thiralo frowned at her. "Sé Jevon, are you here on behalf of your patron?"

"No."

Just then, a wallplate came on in Thiralo's office. The dark angled features of Dukayn appeared. His face was a mass of bruises, cuts, and dried blood. There was a light of joy on his face that terrified her. She had only seen it when he was bringing a Lep to near death.

"An, Sé Jevon. There you are. May I trouble you to meet me in my office now." It wasn't a question and he didn't stay to hear her answer. Jevon felt the blood drain from her face. Too late. She would have to give the disc to Thiralo and hope that Romero would know what to do.

Nju moved, instinctually, between her and the wall-screen. Thiralo hesitated a moment, then drew out a slender gray tube from an inner pocket and activated it.

"I wasn't aware that Dukayn could override my primary security protocols, but he may find this second level a bit more inconvenient." He put the device away again, but Jevon noticed Nju's intent look. She wished she knew the Garang better, but she could swear that he was pleased. "You can speak openly for the moment Now, Sé Jevon, by the look of you, you are in fear for your life. Knowing what I do of Sé Dukayn, I can understand why. Do you ask for the Pope's protection?"

Many things rushed through Jevon's mind. Everything was happening so quickly.

"No. If I don't go to Dukayn now, he'll arrest all of us and this"—Jevon drew out the slipdisc and put it in Thiralo's hands—"must get to Sister Romero, no matter what. Nju, you must go with Thiralo and make sure he gets the disc safely to the Pope's Eye."

Nju let out an angry hiss. "No, Sé Jevon. I will not leave you to face Dukayn alone. I failed to protect Arno. I will not leave your side in this life."

Thiralo nodded. "I agree. Don't worry, child. I'll do as you ask. But you must not go to Dukayn. Go to Roha. Demand sanctuary."

Jevon smiled mirthlessly. "The cardinal won't give it. He is UJU Prime, or at least I think he is. Even if he isn't, he agrees with what they're doing. You see, I was a member of the inner council."

Nju stared at Jevon.

Thiralo clutched the disc. "You mustn't go to Dukayn." The Itinerant's factor thought for a moment. "Go to the Interstellar Sect. It's sovereign territory. Not even Karlo has authority there, even under martial law. They can protect you from Dukayn."

Privately, Jevon thought that no one on Palace had that power, but for the sake of the factor she agreed. They were about to part when Thiralo stiffened, clearly receiving a message on his comm implant. His bland pleasant face became pale as smoke.

He shook his head as if to clear it, then stared at Nju and Jevon. "Karlo has arrested Sister Romero. We have to leave Government House immediately. They will come for us, too."

"She went to him about Dukayn, didn't she?" Thiralo nodded. "If Karlo has sided with Dukayn against the Itinerant, nowhere, on Palace is safe. If I go to him, you might have time to get off planet with the evidence of his crimes. The Pope could raise a fleet—"

Nju growled deep in his throat She had never heard him make that sound.

"There is no more time for talk," said the Garang. "We will all leave now, together."

He led them out of the offices and into the corridors of the West Tower at a dead run.

"We're . . . not . . . headed for . . . Interstellar?" gasped Thiralo.

"No," said Nju, who was obviously eager to move much faster. The Garang glanced at Jevon. "Sé Jevon is correct. No Sect will be safe from a man of Dukayn's determination. He is a Japat, almost Garang. He will not be denied. I have another plan. Now, silence. You will need all your strength."

Nju led them down a corridor to a seeming dead end, where they paused.

"Sé Thiralo, the device you used earlier, it is *amir*, yes?" Thiralo, still gulping air, nodded. "Excellent. Then Dukayn will not be able to monitor our movements."

While Thiralo and Jevon took the precious moment to catch their breaths, the Garang Japat warrior moved to a corner and popped the cover off a small circular opening. He waved them over.

"This is part of the saccule conduits and leads to a variety of places in the East Tower. I disabled the lock mechanisms on the covers at several points some weeks ago, when I first came to Government House. One should always have escape routes. This conduit leads to the roof park. From there, we will steal an airhopper and leave the city. Sé Thiralo and I will not fit into these tubes, but you, Sé Jevon, should have no difficulty. He and I will take another route to the roof park and meet you there."

Jevon looked dubiously at the small hole. It would be a tight fit and she hated close spaces.

"Why can't I come with you?"

The Garang cocked his head and his voice took on an edge.

"It is you whom Dukayn seeks, but you will never escape if he is allowed to concentrate on tracking you. I intend to divert his forces and his attention."

Jevon nodded, hesitated, and drew the package from Garis out and handed it to Nju.

"It's a weapon. A nervedicer. You may need it."

Nju took out a glove and studied it. He gave Jevon a considering look.

"It is brave of you to offer, but you will be alone and in greater need of this weapon."

"I don't know how to use it My . . . friend was going to teach me."

Nju hesitated. "There is no time to teach you now. Very well, I will take it for now. This improves our odds against Dukayn's forces. Thank you."

"I wish I could go with you."

"I agree. But this is the better tactic, I think." Jevon knelt down and wriggled into the saccule conduit. As she'd feared the fit was very tight. She heard Nju reattaching the cover behind her. The tunnel was total darkness. It was cold and Jevon smelled the sweat and stink of saccules. She started to crawl, using her elbows and knees to move forward.

Very soon, she was slick with sweat and her elbows and knees ached where they scraped against the material of the conduit, some sort of rough version of tri-stil. Sounds came to her, saccule booms and moans. She could tell they were coming from offshoots of the tube and kept worrying that a saccule would block her passage coming in the opposite direction.

As she crawled, Jevon kept motivated by thinking about how much she hated Dukayn. Because of him, her whole life was ruined. She would never be able to return to Palace, not as long as Dukayn was Karlo's second in command. She could never see her mother again, or any of her friends. Sé Jons would surely fill her job with some other ambitious factor. She'd used up all her savings to buy the nervedicer, so she had no money. How was she going to survive?

It occurred to her that she had no idea when Thiralo and Nju would arrive at the roof park.

Why hadn't she asked for a time? Stupid, stupid. If they got there ahead of her, would they wait? Thiralo might, but she wondered about the Garang. What did he care about her life? She hadn't missed his tenseness after she'd confessed to betraying Sé Jons. Under other circumstances, he might even be the one sent to find and bring her to justice. In fact, what if this was just a trick and he had no intention of helping her escape from Dukayn? Maybe he and Thiralo were leaving without her. Maybe he'd even tell Dukayn where she was and now she didn't even have the weapon for protection. Dear God. She tried to remember how good it had felt to hold Garis, how right it had felt, the first good thing she'd known since Arno's death.

Soon, her mind fogged and she ceased to think about anything but crawling as fast as she could. This tube went on forever. Surely hours had passed since she'd entered the conduit. Thiralo and Nju must have left without her: The eerie echoing booms and squeals of the saccules moving through the conduits like rodents in a maze made it hard for her to concentrate. A wheezing whine grew louder and louder and she wondered what it was, until she realized that she herself was making the sound. She sounded like some wounded animal, but she couldn't help it. Several times she was confronted with Y corridors and chose randomly. She hoped she'd come out at the right exit.

At last, she rounded a bend that required precious minutes to contort herself through—saccules must have much more flexible bodies than humans—and she saw a blinding light the size of an eye far away. She found reserves of strength and began wriggling frantically forward, convinced that Dukayn knew where she hid and was preparing to flood the conduits with one of the nerve toxins that he liked to use on the Leps. Please please please, she heard herself muttering in a desperate mumble.

The light grew. The conduit took an upward slant and Jevon panted with exhaustion as she worked herself up the angle toward the light and safety. The muscles in her forearms hummed with the strain. She'd been an athletic girl and even years as a factor hadn't completely robbed her of strength. Moreover, Dukayn had insisted that she exercises regularly for the training sessions. But still, she could feel weakness spreading through her body. Sweat slicked her skin so much that it actually made her slide back a bit as she moved. It seemed to take forever to work up that lasts few yards to the opening and at the end, she had to stop and rest at the lip.

The blinding light she'd seen was no more than the weak amber glow of growlights in this patch of the roof park gardens. The conduit opened into a small room with a bench and some gardening tools on hooks. Jevon worked herself out of the tube and slumped onto the bench. The amber light showed her hands and clothes covered with fifth and she saw blood streaks from innumerable little cuts and scrapes. She dipped her head between her knees gulping-air.

She sensed a presence and whipped up her head casting around wildly for some kind of weapon. But it was only an old saccule peering at her from the entrance. The saccule wore someone's livery and was carrying a sack of what looked like dirt. The neuter was very old, the oldest saccule Jevon had ever seen. It glanced to Jevon's left where she saw a commpad with a panic button. It could reach and press it before she could get up from the bench.

"Please don't," she said, amazed that she was even attempting to talk to a saccule.

But the creature seemed to understand. It puffed out one of its small, heavily veined throat sacs and let out a soft purring boom. A smell like the morning after a rain filled the little room.

"Have you seen, um, a big Garang, white hair." She gestured with her hands, feeling foolish. The saccule squinted at her with its old weak eyes. "He's with the Itinerant's factor, a tall human with curly black hair." If she'd told any of her friends in UJU about this they would laugh themselves sick. Describing someone to a saccule wasn't much more ridiculous than eating dinner with a Lep.

The saccule hesitated, then nodded its old head, kept up the humming purr, dropped its load, and shuffled out of the room. Could it possibly know where Thiralo was? She didn't have any option but to assume it did. Jevon scooped a hoe off the wall and snatched up several mouth filters from a rack. The swampsuit on a hook was clearly made for a saccule. She

caught up with the creature and it led her down a narrow footpath into a part of the roof park she'd never seen, though she'd been up here many times since moving to Government House with Hivel Jons. This area was well out of the main walking paths and very little light shone. The saccule seemed to know its way without hesitation, though, and she heard it snuffling as it walked. Occasionally, it would let out some smell, usually a pleasant odor that made her feel a little better. Was it doing that deliberately? No, that was impossible. Very soon, she was completely lost and couldn't even have found her way back to the equipment shed. What if Nju and Thiralo were there now, waiting for her? Had she been foolish to follow this saccule?

Anxious minutes passed while they wandered, seemingly at random. Jevon wanted to shout at the saccule, scream at it, but she was too tired and too afraid. Dukayn would find her here. He would find her and take her to Deeplock. If she was lucky, he would only imprison, torture, and kill her. He might decide to make her completely his mate and Jevon had learned to fear the possibility of his touch more than death.

They rounded a corner and Jevon saw Nju drag a man wearing the gray of Dukayn's security force out of a black military airhopper. He used his left hand, the bare hand, instead of the one wearing the nervedicer glove. Where was Thiralo? Wait, she saw him now. He was inside the airhopper, doing something. She started to rush forward, then stopped and looked back at the ancient saccule, who just gazed at her placidly.

"Thank you," she said. Had she ever in her life *thanked* a saccule? She knelt near it. Tears sprang to her eyes. "Thank you."

The saccule sighed, patted her knee, and turned around to leave. She watched it go, with mixed feelings. She owed her life to a saccule.

"Sé Jevon! Thank God!" That was Thiralo, who had just seen her. "We waited at the exit, but Dukayn's forces were already there. We thought you'd been caught. You must have come out at a different point. Hurry. You have mouth filters! Thank God. The airhopper has swampsuits, but no filters. God guided your sight."

Jevon ran to them and they piled into the airhopper. Nju had it up and running in moments. As they lifted up in a vertical explosion of air, Jevon glanced down at the roof park and saw Dukayn arrive with a score of security people. In person, his face looked much worse, a bloody mass of cuts and fractures and one of his arms was strapped to his chest in a makeshift sling. Their eyes met over the few yards distance and he mouthed some words that were lost, in the backwash of the airhopper's rotors. He swatted down the weapons of his security people, not allowing them to shoot.

Later, as they skimmed out away from the city of Palace toward the great dark oblivion of the swamp, all lights off and radar cloaks activated, Jevon puzzled out what it was that Dukayn had called to her.

"I love you."

"Sé Barra?"

Barra glanced up at the silver-haired cybe who'd entered her work tent. It took her a moment to remember woman's name, Joklay. She could tell from the woman's expression that there was yet another crisis. Since her team had arrived on Orbital months ago, Barra seldom got an uninterrupted sleep cycle and she never had the luxury of working without constant distractions. "Yes?"

She tried to keep the exasperation out of her voice. She had almost figured out why Orbital's Map connection kept crashing. Once they got the access working properly, their work up here would go much faster. Besides, Barra wanted to talk to her son and check in with Hi. It made her nervous to be so out of touch with Palace.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Se, but Control is reporting an incoming fleet of ships from Palace and they won't identify themselves."

Barra frowned.

"What does Colonel Patri say?" Patri was the military liaison Karlo had sent along to Orbital, supposedly under her command.

"Well ... we can't be sure, but we think Patri received a secret message from the fleet, but he won't discuss it."

Barra leapt up from her seat, wincing from a variety of aches that she blamed on Orbital's decrepit gravity generators.

"Why didn't you ... oh, never mind, is Patri in Control?" Joklay nodded. "Good."

They hurried out of the work tent. Even preoccupied, Barra took in the tense atmosphere of the compound. Most of her work teams were gathered in groups, whispering. How long had this fleet news been circulating? She needed to be a little more approachable, even if it did mean that she'd get even less work done. Barra noticed Damo in a corner playing with some odd device he'd built. Damo was Karlo's youngest child and he'd been sent with Barra to Orbital as a favor to the First Citizen. Originally, Barra had assumed that he was sent to spy, or just to get him out from underfoot, but over time it had dawned on Barra that the boy had the makings of a brilliant cybe and Karlo had simply wished to send him where his gifts might be appreciated.

He was a strange child, even for a cybe, but most of Barra's people had come to regard him as something of a team mascot and he had proven adept at any of the little tasks he was set.

The boy seemed oblivious, entirely focused on whatever mysterious game he was playing. On impulse, she veered to him.

"Damo?"

He looked up, his expression remote and cold. But after a moment, he smiled tentatively at Barra, as if half expecting a scolding. Poor kid. Karlo had the boy afraid of his own shadow.

"Yes, Sé Barra?"

"Would you like to come with me?"

His flickering grin became a genuine smile and he rushed to her. The three of them continued out of the makeshift compound set up in the vast docking dome and walked into the interior of Orbital, a hollowed-out sphere of Blueglass that had once been the nerve center of an enormous defense network.

In the control room, they found a crowd of people. The tension was palpable. Two of Barra's team leaders were flushed and glowering, while Patri and his small cadre of military folk looked grim.

Barra glanced at the grids and sensors and saw that the approaching fleet of ships consisted of hundreds. Her mouth dropped open. This looked like most of Palace's defense forces, all headed for Orbital. But why?

"Colonel Patri; what's going on? Who's out there?"

"I am not at liberty—" He quailed at her glower, gulped, and went on in a conciliatory tone. "I suppose there's no reason not to tell you now. The fleet has been, um, redeployed to Orbital, with Sé Nikolaides in charge. They will arrive in about a week."

It was on the tip of Barra's tongue to ask how long Patri had known about this and why it was being done. But why would he know? Patri was a low-level officer sent along as an afterthought by Karlo. Besides, they'd all know soon enough.

The Hirrel at the controls of the shuntjammer was singing to herself and it was getting on Wan's nerves.

"Can't she be quiet, Ket?" he snapped to the captain of the shuntjammer, a dwarfish man covered in elaborate tattoos.

A tall woman laughed, a jarring sound like stones in a can.

"Relax, Peronida," she said. "You'll get used to Marie's poetry eventually. Why, she's famous for her sonnets."

Wan grimaced at her. "Is that what that is, Jale? It sounds like a jadewing being strangled."

The Hirrel's singing never missed a beat, but Ket frowned at something the pilot sang.

"Please don't annoy Marte, Wan," said Ket, his deep voice booming in the tiny control room. "She's the best pilot in the Interstellar Guild, maybe the best that's ever lived."

Vida would have been shocked at what happened next. Instead of acting like a petulant boy, Wan nodded. For a moment he was the image of his father. Cool, unruffled, in command.

"My apologies, Ket. Marte. Excuse me, I have to prepare for planetfall. Let me know when our escort arrives." Marte sang something out as Wan rose to leave. The handsome Peronida heir looked a question at Ket who was chuckling.

"Ah. She wished you a fair wind."

Wan frowned, but chose to let the comment pass.

In his room, Wan's factor Lenobai waited. The young man, pale and blond, seemed very nervous. Not unexpected, of course, since he and Wan were in the midst of committing high treason against his father. Wan smiled slightly.

"How long do you think it'll be before Dukayn finds out we left Souk early?" Wan asked.

Leni shrugged. "He's got no real reason to check up on us. This so-called diplomatic mission was just Karlo's way of getting you off planet for a while. Maybe he wants to sleep with your wife."

Wan growled at the mention of Vida. The girl from Pleasure Sect, whom everyone assumed would be a naive and biddable pawn, had become a political force in her own right. Wan had no intention of giving her children, of augmenting her power further.

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Wan. He reached out and idly caressed Leni's cheek. The younger man looked up at him lovingly.

It was such a relief to be able to show his true affections. Karlo came from a world that prohibited love between men, while Dukayn despised the concept of sex itself. Ironic, considering the bond between those two men. The Interstellar Guild had very different ideas about the matter. Wan knew some things about Vanna, for example, that Karlo would find very surprising. The alliance he was about to forge would put an end to Karlo and Dukayn; Vanna would be no trouble. She was the ultimate pragmatist. She would side with the winner, especially since Wan would soon have a very important bribe for her. About Vida, Wan wasn't yet sure. At first, he had hated the little, bitch. His ex-fiancee, Anja, had understood how things were with Wan. They would have made a perfect match. But as time went by, he had come to reluctantly admire Vida's intelligence and fire. He also liked her kindness to the saccules. The pouchy little natives had depths no one suspected and it angered him to see them abused. When he was master of Palace, emancipating the saccules would be one of his first acts.

Anyway, it was becomingly increasingly difficult for him to play the perpetual drunk for her. She was too sharp, too perceptive. Eventually, she would have realized he was acting a role. If his plans went well, she would be free to go back to the Pleasure Sect and be a happy little whore, if she wished. Or she could sign a contract with that gawky little cybe she thought he didn't know about. He dismissed her from his thoughts. She didn't matter. Only Karlo and Dukayn mattered.

He almost laughed at the memory of the air-ken trials he'd attended with Karlo. The man had actually thought he was bonding with him. That had been a severe test of Wan's acting ability. Did Karlo really believe Wan was that stupid? Apparently so. He shook his head. The famous street fighter wasn't as good a judge of his enemies as he thought.

"Have you confirmed that the datablocks contain the Spagyra?"

"Yeah. I still can't believe that Karlo never destroyed the things, though. If the Pope ever found out—"

"He'd be excommunicated. How are you coming on breaking the codes?"

"Not very well. This thing was encrypted by an AI."

"Well, keep trying. I don't like the idea of handing the thing over to our allies without being able to make a copy."

Just men, they were called to the bridge of *Ket's Ribbon*. The crew of the shuntjammer, only nineteen people, were all crowded on the tiny bridge speaking their guttural, glottal tongue to each other. The place sounded like a convention of geese to Wan, though he spoke a little of the language himself. Samante had once told him that the language of the Interstellar Guild was the only true Creole in the Pinch. Wan wondered idly what Pero saw in the interpreter. A cold and boring fish, in his opinion, and Pero usually had better taste in his bedmates.

Wan looked at the wallscreen that showed a constructed simulation of the planet generated by telemetry data from the probes stationed outside the microshunt. The planet was a brilliant blue-white marble against the black of night. It was surrounded by a fleet of a hundred ships, visible only as shadows against the stars, and this was the merest fraction of the forces on their way. One immense vessel drifted slowly across the field of stars toward the shunt access point to meet them. Its massive front flashed a series of lights, the signal language of Interstellar Guild.

"Welcome to Tableau," translated Ket. "Susannah sends her greetings."

Wan clasped his hands behind his back. Karlo's precious fleet was about to get a rude shock. Soon, he would have Karlo on his knees before him. Perhaps they'd spend some time in Deeplock together, just the two of them. Yes, that had a nice poetic ring to it. The image made him laugh out loud.

Marte sang out a liquid warble.

"What did she say?" asked Wan.

"She said, "The river is rising, " replied Purser Jale.

Wan smiled. "Well said. The Hirrel have such a way with words."

Part 2

A FIRE IN THE BLOOD

Imagine, for a moment, what it must have been like for the people of Palace when the macroshunt closed and they lost all contact with the Rim, all hope of returning home. Think how you would feel if you were cut off from the Map, or stranded off Palace forever. Fortunately for us, the Colonizers put aside their fears and worked together to build a new and shining home in the swamp . . .

— Palace: World of Promise (Zinn: L3 Reader)

The city of Palace burned. From her vantage, the roof garden of the East Tower, Vida saw the fires raging below, like a terrible constellation on the earth. The night air carried faint cries and the cough of explosions. Roiling clouds of oil smoke from the refineries mingled with Palace's perpetual overcast to blot out the stars. The smell of burning plastocrete filled the air. The teardrop-shaped flailtowns lay shattered and burning. Military airhoppers, dead black and bristling with weapons, laced the sky, flying support to hundreds of drones that dumped powder on the worst of the fires and coma gases on the rioters.

The riots started at dawn in the Service Sect but swiftly spread to all the Sects on Palace. Since the Tomb bombing only a week ago, followed by the mass jailings of Leps, riots were becoming a daily occurrence. It was frightening to see the fleet airhoppers out there, a dark reminder of martial law.

"It's almost time for the broadcast, Vida," said Samante. Vida glanced down at the shorter woman. "We don't want to be late."

"Has Karlo given me my script?"

"Yes, Se." Samante's tone was a warning. Both of them knew that Dukayn had ways of eavesdropping on them, even here on the roof garden. Nowadays, not even Karlo's lawdaughter dared criticize him, even privately, even obliquely. Sister Romero had approved her birth permit, but not even that victory appeased Karlo Peronida. He had become implacable and remote.

The two women locked gazes for a moment, but Vida was the first to look away, back to the fires. How many were dead? Hundreds? Thousands? More people had died on Palace in the last several hours than in the entire Pinch over the last decade. Karlo's only answer was to invoke martial law, to suppress revolt with weapons. Soldiers should never enter politics.

Samante passed Vida a flatplate and the tall red-haired woman took a moment to memorize Karlo's script for her. Typical propaganda. While she read, Vida absently twisted the bracelet on her wrist. It was a sophisticated finder, not that different from the one she'd worn as a child growing up in the gilded prison of the Pleasure Sect. She hated wearing the thing, but her lawfather insisted Karlo had become very security conscious of late, despite the fact that no one had made any assassination attempts after the Tomb explosion. She was no longer permitted to leave Government House for any reason. Vida's mouth twisted and she suddenly flung the flatplate over the edge of the roof garden and watched with satisfaction as it skirled down and out of sight.

"Vida!" If her mood hadn't been so dark, Vida might have laughed at the shock in her factor's voice.

"Don't worry, Samante, I never forget anything I've read. I never forget anything." The image of Lep children burned alive rose in her mind. Retaliation for the war memorial bombing, or some other Lep atrocity. Lately, it was hard to keep track of the justifications for brutality. Before the Tomb explosion, things had seemed to be improving. Now . . . would there ever be peace again? "I wish I could forget," she whispered.

"Sé Vida, Dukayn wishes to speak with you." Jak stepped close and offered her a commplate.

Vida hesitated, then accepted it.

"Yes?"

The narrow dark features of Government House's feared security chief scowled at her. Vida was one of the few people who could provoke an expression from Dukayn. It was one of her rare satisfactions, though, these days, it wasn't safe to annoy Dukayn. Karlo had granted him vast powers under martial law. Dukayn was still spending part of every day out at the Tomb wreckage, though you wouldn't know it by the way he kept his nose in her itinerary.

"Sé Vida, you were due at the studio five minutes ago. Is there some difficulty?"

"No, Se. I was just practicing Karlo's speech."

"It is *your* speech, Sé Vida. You are the People's Factor." Dukayn smiled, a slash of malice.

With an effort, Vida managed to return the smile.

"Yes. Of course. We will be there in a moment."

Vida handed the commplate back to Jak and led them out of the roof garden and into the majestic blueglass corridors of the East Tower. It was odd walking down the mazelike halls of Government House without crowds of media people hounding her. That was one small benefit of martial law, she supposed.

The studio bustled with activity. TeeKay rushed up to her. The girl's features were snarled in a frown, a far too common expression these days for all of her friends.

"Where the hell have you been? We're live at six-teens."

Vida nodded absently, but her attention was on the wallscreens with their perpetual ever-changing graphs of the opinions of the citizens of Palace. The polls were the only counterbalance to Karlo's power under martial law. At the moment martial law was overwhelmingly popular. The Leps were still voting, though there was sentiment to disenfranchise all nonhumans. That's UJU's work, Vida thought. From a fringe group of racists, UJU had become a potent force in Palace politics, almost entirely as a backlash to Riva. According to Tarick Avon, the official Peronida media rep, UJU was even gaining a foothold on other planets of the Pinch with majority human populations. She saw Avon now in a corner of the studio listening to one of Dukayn's security people. He looked tense. Avon acknowledged her wave with a nod and a vague smile. Something was up, something serious. She made a mental note to meet with Tarick in private.

"Okay. Sorry I'm late. Let's do this," said Vida.

As Vida settled into a formfit chair in front of a wall of cameras, Greenie scurried over to her bearing a sash in its arms. Its leathery veined body was covered with a tunic bearing the L'var gene-glyph and Vida's personal crest. The pouchy creature exhaled a scent like peat moss as Vida took the sash and adjusted it over her blouse.

"Thank you, Greenie." Vida added a small low moan that seemed to ease the nervous young saccule. Greenie honked happily and waddled back out of camera range.

"Ready, Vida?"

"All right, TeeKay."

Abruptly Vida saw herself projected in three dimensions on a massive holoscreen, while fancy graphics and bright music introduced her as "The *People's* Factor! YOUR voice speaking YOUR concerns!" Vida hardly recognized herself. The famous L'var red hair framed a face that was narrower than she remembered and the eyes were dull green stones sunk into hollows. She would have to take better care of her appearance. Her mother, Aleen, would have something to say about that, she was sure, in her weekly letter-critique.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Vida L'var y Peronida, and I'm here for *you*. I'd like to share a few thoughts with you about the Lep situation. But first, what's on *your* mind?" Calls flooded the studio. TeeKay and her staff went to work screening them. Those who got through would be very carefully selected. One of Dukayn's pet spies monitored every call to make certain of that Vida smiled for the cameras and wondered if anyone anywhere believed the smile was genuine.

After the broadcast, everyone waited anxiously to see what the popgraphs would say. TeeKay and her boyfriend, Dan Motta, were having a high decibel argument about something trivial, while Vida occupied her time by dealing with what seemed like an endless stream of administrative details from members of her entourage. Her legal advisers were moving a half-dozen lawsuits forward and it looked like tomorrow they would actually get a chance to resolve one or two of the major ones. That would mean a large chunk of money and land would become available. She would have to start thinking about how to adopt people into the L'var clan as patrons to manage her properties. As chief patron, this was where her true power lay.

Vida's protocol officer, an elderly woman who was easily the most placid woman Vida had ever met, drilled her on an upcoming state visit with a cultural delegation from Varan. Dukayn's security officer kept poking his nose in to approve Vida's itinerary.

At last, the popgraphs stabilized and everyone paused to stare at the wallscreen to see the results. There were at least a hundred different demographic and graduated graphs—Vida had three people on staff whose only job was to analyze and study the details of her popgraph results—but the general summaries clearly showed that Vida's popularity was strong across the spectrum. Most important, to Vida at least, her popularity among the Leps was stable, despite the propaganda that Karlo forced her to deliver.

The crowd cheered. People kept coming up to congratulate her and it took some effort for her to match their enthusiasm. The Pleasure Sect wasn't nearly as dependent on popvotes as the other Sects and she still didn't quite understand the subtleties of them, though she was learning fast how to use them as leverage with Karlo. Which reminded her that she was supposed to meet with the First Citizen in a few minutes about finalizing the birth permit. With Sister Romero gone to the swamps, Vida hadn't broached the subject of the Spagyra with him yet. She was starting to get worried about Romero. It was odd that the Itinerant had left so suddenly without saying good-bye to anyone. Roha had told her that the sister had left to start her saccule; survey, but it seemed odd that she'd done so before getting things settled with Karlo.

Samante gave her a significant look and Vida realized that everyone was staring at her. She flashed her smile.

"TeeKay, why don't you take everybody down to the Station and get the party going? I'll join you in a little while."

"You got it, boss."

The crowd rushed out. The Station was the hottest club in the West Tower and no one wanted to get stuck at a table far from the holobell dancers at the front. Vida was amazed at the number of people who had become attached to her. Besides her working entourage of fifteen, there were at least twice that many hangers-on, like fungus that grew on a healthy tree. Still, it was fun to have lots of people around who were really only there for the parties. She had never been alone growing up and she enjoyed dancing and playing games with lots of friends. If only she didn't have so many responsibilities, and enemies. She wondered, though, what these people who acted as if they admired her so much would think if they knew she was a cull.

"Hey, save a table for me, TeeKay, and don't hog all the klos!" she yelled after her friend.

Samante gave her another look and Vida rolled her eyes and sighed. If it were up to her factor, Vida would spend all her time meeting with boring guild reps and planning her itinerary.

As the two women, followed closely by the ever dour and alert Jak, headed for the First Citizen's offices, Vida's saccule waddled up to her, honking loudly.

"What is it, Greenie?"

The saccule made vague gestures and sounds. Vida stared uncomprehendingly at the little pouchy slave, then looked up at Samante helplessly.

"I believe Greenie wants to go to your apartments to prepare them."

"Oh." Vida patted the saccule. The skin was warm and leathery. "Yes, please, go to the apartments."

The saccule bobbed and nodded, honking and bleating at Vida from its array of throat sacs arranged like a necklace around its large thick neck. It also let out a puff of odor that was neither unpleasant nor sweet. The saccule waddled off at high speed on its errand. Vida smiled after it. She was growing very attached to the little neuter.

They were met at Karlo's outer offices by Cardinal Roha. He drew out a handkerchief that gave off a sweet perfume and dabbed at his nostrils. Vida realized that the cardinal must smell

Greenie on her. He despised the smell of saccules. She had to control an urge to sneeze at the smell of his perfume, though. It was far too heavy.

"Sé Vida, how pleasant to see you again." The cardinal smiled at her warmly. He was always so sincerely pleasant to her, so why did she feel wary around him? "I wish you would come by my office more often to visit."

Samante and Jak edged away respectfully. The two began to speak in low voices, probably arguing about Vida's agenda. Jak wanted her to do all of her business by directed holo in her apartments where he could control the security completely, while Samante felt that Vida's charm and charisma worked best in person and that she should make as many political allies as possible.

Roha's smile became slightly fixed and Vida realized that she was just staring at him like an idiot.

"I'm sorry, Your Eminence," Vida said, reaching out to touch his hand lightly. "I'm just so worried about everything lately. I've become as dull as a door."

The cardinal warmed back up instantly, grasping her hand in his own, which were surprisingly strong and warm.

"Don't give it a thought, child. But you must come and see me more often so that we can sit and talk. Your father and I used to have wonderful talks. We were going to discuss the Schism Wars, remember?"

"Of course, Cardinal. I'd love to."

A man in Peronida gray stepped into the anteroom.

"Sé Vida L'var?" Vida nodded, trying to suppress any visible annoyance. As if he didn't know who she was. "Please come with me."

The cardinal bowed to Vida and strolled over to Samante and Jak and engaged them in conversation. He spoke in Palais, the human tongue, which was a clear insult to Jak, who only knew the common Pinch language of Gen.

"Sé L'var?"

Again, she'd been caught in distraction. That wouldn't do. Some people in Government House might regard it as a mortal insult. Too much time alone had allowed her to slip back into bad habits like daydreaming.

She turned on her smile and followed the man inside, making a point of finding out his name and birth Sect.

Karlo's office was austere and tasteful, decorated with flatpics of various Palace Sects and a huge holo of a starry sky behind a large autodesk made of the rare white metal icelight from Tableau.

A figure strode into the room out of the holo of stars. But it wasn't Karlo. Instead, Vida faced Vanna Makeesa, Karlo's wife and, arguably, the most powerful woman on Palace. Without question, she was the oldest woman on the planet, nearly two hundred years old, in fact, at the absolute limit of what the life-extension treatments could do, though you wouldn't know it from her lean and classic beauty. She wore a sheer smartgown of glittering azure. The material displayed her veined and muscular figure to advantage while revealing many of the fanciful tattoos that covered most of her body. Those tattoos were the sigils of the Interstellar Guild and no one knew what they meant or why Vanna hadn't had them removed when she left the guild. The designs were delicate and asymmetrical, the sort of art that is both familiar and striking. Vanna slid into Karlo's massive datachair behind the desk. She seemed perfectly at ease.

"I was expecting Sé Karlo," said Vida.

Vanna smirked at her.

"You're in no danger here, little whore." Vida had heard the insult so often that she didn't even react. Nor did Vanna seem particularly malicious as she said it. "Have a seat."

The Second Citizen gestured to one of the office's formfits. Vida considered refusing, just on general principle, but she was tired of standing and Aleen had taught her to reserve her acts of rebellion for the moment it mattered. The chair was surprisingly comfortable, actually.

"What can I do for you, Second Citizen?"

Vanna leaned back in her husband's chair and pulled a tiny disc from an inner pocket. She slipped it into the datachair's holoplayer and a moment later they were watching four recordings running in real time in four quadrants of the desktop. Two of the recordings were of Vida and Rico, meeting clandestinely, kissing, talking. One was of Vida and Wan, making love in his apartments. The last was of Vida on the roof garden talking alone with Ri Tal Molos.

Vida settled into her formfit and realized that the chair was probably hooked up to send biodata directly to Vanna. She wasn't too worried. All of Aleen's charges received extensive training in controlling their breathing, heartbeat, and blood pressure, similar to the training for cybes. As long as she was alert and concentrating, it would be hard for Vanna to deduce much from such things. That didn't mean she wasn't in trouble, though.

The sex holo was no big deal. Vida had assumed that she and Wan were being monitored. The heirs Karlo desperately wanted were too important to him. She was surprised that Vanna had bothered to get copies, but the Second Citizen had a reputation for snooping into such things. The rendezvous with Rico was mildly problematic, but as long as they were discreet, Vida didn't think anyone, even Wan, would really care. There would be no holos of them making love, though. She and Calios had seen to that. It was the conversation with Molos that could cause trouble. Broadcast to the populace, it might seriously damage her ratings in this explosive atmosphere. The other holos were window dressing.

"I have a proposition for you, Sé Vida," said Vanna. As she spoke, Vanna's neck jerked and her features spasmed. These twitches were the result of the nerve degeneration caused by pushing the life-extension treatments to dangerous limits.

"You'll have to talk to my Madam first."

"You filthy little whore." Vanna's voice was low and venomous, much more than the casual retort deserved.

"Sé Vanna, I apologize. It was a stupid thing to say. I guess there's still a lot of the Pleasure Sect in me."

Vanna nodded, still struggling to regain her composure.

"You are more L'var than you can possibly imagine." Vanna let out a nasty laugh. "You're just like your father. I knew him, you know. Knew him well."

Despite herself, Vida was intrigued. "What was he like?"

"An arrogant populist. A vulgar fake. His mother Izela did most of his thinking for him. She would have killed him if she'd known he fathered a cull."

Vida felt a real flash of hatred for Vanna for the first time and the look of undisguised satisfaction on the old woman's face just made her more furious. Vanna couldn't possibly know what Sister Romero had told her, or she would have used that knowledge to do more than merely needle her enemy. Vida breathed deep and tried to relax. She couldn't afford the luxury of lashing out. That damn holo of her with Molos was still running on the desktop.

"What did you want, Second Citizen? We're both busy people."

"Don't take that tone with me, girl. I've unguilded people for less."

Vida just stared at her. Vanna waited a moment longer, but Vida simply worked on her breath control and heart rate and let herself picture Rico, with his cockeyed grin and gentie hands. It calmed her down.

"Karlo believes you are an asset to the Peronidas."

"I *am* an asset," said Vida quietly. Surprisingly, Vanna didn't contradict her.

"Then start acting like it First, and most important, you must never again meet with Molos; it would damage the Peronidas seriously if you were revealed to be a friend to the brother of Vi-Kata. Molos is tolerated here in Government House for his role in ending the Great War, but you must avoid him at all costs. I will have your word on that."

Vida tensed, but what else could she do? "All right, you've got it. For whatever the L'var word is worth to you."

Vanna smiled. "You'll keep it. Your kind always make such a show of keeping promises. Second, you are to end your affair with the Jons boy."

Vida sat up straighter in the formfit, helpless to control the storm of emotions that Vanna was undoubtedly monitoring. Suddenly all her good intentions about keeping her temper and being a cool politician vanished in a fire that felt good and hot.

"Sé Makeesa, my affairs are my own business. You and I are joined by marriage and I have to go along with you where the Peronidas are concerned, but keep the hell out of my private life. Or may the Eye of God protect you."

Vanna's eyes widened. She started to speak, but Vida rushed on, putting as much force as she could into her words.

"Don't press me on this, Makeesa. Don't ever think that I care so much about fancy smartgowns and expensive dinners that I wouldn't give it all up to bring you down. And I could. I know a few secrets about *your* family, too."

That last was a lame shot into space, but Vanna lived with constant paranoia and the gnawing fear that one of her many enemies would find a flaw in her defenses. For the first time, Vida saw a fleeting glimpse of fear touch the old woman's eyes.

"Well, well. The little cull has teeth."

"And resources. Don't test me."

"Hm." Vanna smiled. But then she continued, and for whatever reason didn't bring Rico up again. "There is also the matter of your seat on the Center Council. I understand you have made your application."

"So? Karlo was the one who insisted I do it."

"Yes. But Karlo doesn't truly understand the machinery of the Council. Before you take the L'var seat, you must have an heir, though the birth permit from Sister Romero should serve to begin the process. More important, you must be a member of a guild."

"But ... I thought that the L'vars were always Cyberguild."

"The L'vars were unguilded before they were tried and executed." She paused to grin wolfishly at Vida. "That guild is closed to you. On the other hand, you can pick any other guild you like. Karlo and I will see to it that you are accepted. I'm sure you would be an *asset*."

It was on the tip of Vida's tongue to say Interstellar, but that was impossible and would only be insulting to Vanna, who had left the guild reluctantly so long ago to take over as chief patron of the Makeesa. Karlo would never allow it. But it was so tempting. To be free to leave Palace, to travel the microshunts and visit dozens of star systems. She could never live again on a planet's surface. But to be free ...

"I'll have to give that some thought," she said.

"Do. And now, the proposition." Vanna settled back in the datachair, studying her young adversary through narrowed eyes, perhaps bracing for another retort. But Vida said nothing, still caught by her longing for the stars. "This legal battle for the L'var holdings is becoming costly to both of us. I suggest we move to arbitration-by-three and put an end to it."

On this subject, Vida felt she was on firm ground. She had spent many hours studying the web of lawsuits surrounding her estate and she had paid particular attention to memorizing the intricacies of the probate courts.

"Arbitration *vas tri*? I could agree to that, as long as the Bel Statutes remained in effect. The Souk holdings make it necessary to file *in per*, unfortunately, but we can agree to a binding sever. Naturally, the judges will have to be approved by both of us." Vida suppressed a smile at Vanna's discomfiture.

"Yes, of course. My factor will be in touch. Give some careful thought to your choice of guild. Such decisions always have implications."

The tone seemed to imply an end to their conversation and Vida stood up.

"Oh, one last thing, Sé Vida. Because of Sé Wilso's passing"—Wilso, Samante's tyrannical uncle and a high official in UJU, had been killed in the Lep bombing of the war memorial weeks ago—"the Center Council has approved a new chief patron for the Dinisa clan, Sé Esteban, an old friend of mine."

Vida's mouth dropped open, but her mind went utterly blank.

"I'm afraid he has already indicated that Sé Samante's skills, would be better suited elsewhere than as your factor."

Vida sat back down.

"He can't do that. I need her... I mean, she's bonded to the L'var clan."

"Well, perhaps I can help. Sé Esteban owes me a favor."

Vida frowned, thought hard, then smiled tentatively.

"I think I get it. You've got some specific guild in mind for me and you want to trade favors."

Now it was Vanna's turn to look surprised. She even looked pleased.

"Well done, L'var. I thought it would be some time before that occurred to you. Yes, I do have a guild in mind for you. Bio."

"Why?"

"Never mind that. Will you trade?"

Interstellar, Vida thought, with a pang of almost physical pain. Interstellar would take a cull. They'd take anyone who was properly sponsored and trained. She would never have to worry about the truth coming out, never have to fear that Sister Romero would suffer for her kindness to her. How many times did a person on Palace get the chance to choose their own guild? But no. Every time it looked as if the stars were within her reach, someone nailed down the sky.

"Agreed."

Vanna nodded. "I've arranged a Bio orientation for you for tomorrow afternoon. Your factor . . . Sé Samante . . . has the details."

Vida had to laugh at Vanna's presumption. "It's too bad we're enemies, Vanna. You remind me a bit of my ... of my guardian."

"I suppose that's meant to be a compliment," the Second Citizen said. "Please send in Roha on your way out."

Vida was in no mood to attend a party at the Station. It was weird. The longer she lived in Government House, the more she came to prize time alone, though she would have leapt instantly at a chance to sit and chat with her friends in The Close of Pleasure Sect. She wondered if they still thought about her as much as she thought about them. Did Tia miss her? Was Lera still a giggly kid? What would they think if she was exiled back to The Close as

a cull? Would they welcome her home?

Vida took a new route back to her apartments and she wait alone for once, except for her constant companion Jak. The Garang was perfect company in her present mood; his scowl and air of paranoid edginess matched her feelings exactly. Also, unlike Samante, Jak never thrust flatplates in her face and demanded she "firm up her schedule."

Moving through the halls of the Peronida quadrant of Government House was a lonely experience these days. The twin towers, composed entirely of blueglass and housing all of the most important people on the planet, represented the most valuable real estate on Palace. Yet, here in this wing, entire suites lay empty and open. Also, Dukayn had installed a formidable array of security devices, so the lovely intaglio designs on the blueglass walls were obscured everywhere by squat black devices whose purpose only Karlo's security chief knew. Still, the designs *were* interesting, what she could see of them, and she liked to follow them with her eyes as she walked. They looked like braidwork, or a mural.

Rico thought that they were some architect's idea of a map through the labyrinth of Government House. Wishful thinking. Poor Rico still got lost with regularity here, even with a portable map. Vida thought it was funny and inexplicable, though she knew better than to let him know that. She, herself, hadn't ever been lost, at least anywhere that she had visited once and had a chance to memorize the route.

Thinking of Rico brought a warmth and a tingle, mixed with the ember of rage at Vanna. How dare she try to interfere in this. Rico would be livid when she told him. He was to meet her today because Wan was gone to Souk. And good riddance, as far as Vida was concerned. The man was a drunk and a menace. His popvotes were higher in his absence than when he was around to make a fool of himself. In a way, she was relieved that she could never have his children.

Vida arrived at the door of her apartment humming Rico's lullaby under her breath, but she frowned at the entrance.

"Trouble, Sé Vida?" Jak had noticed the slight change in her expression and was instantly beside her. "No, no, Jak, it's okay."

But it wasn't, Rico always left her a little gift outside her door when he visited, sometimes a daalenerry rose, or one of the space opera holonovels he knew she loved, many times just some odd thing he'd picked up in his travels that they would talk or laugh about when she came in. There was nothing today. So, he wasn't here yet. He's running late, that's all. With Wan gone to Souk, she'd become too used to having regular trysts with Rico.

Greenie rushed to meet its mistress at the door. The saccule carried a tray with a glass of wine and an iced klosk.

The small creature was giving off a multitude of fear-stinks.

"What's wrong, Greenie? Are you okay?" Vida spoke gently and softly. Greenie often lost control when questioned roughly and the stinks lingered in Vida's clothes and furniture for days.

"Shorry, shorry. Shorry." Greenie held the sheer sleeping gown that Vida usually wore when Rico came to visit and the saccule was wrinkling it in its hands.

"Ah. Rico isn't here?" Again, she was careful to keep her voice soft and level.

The creature blew out a rumbling happy blat from its big front throat sac and its odor lessened. Despite her disappointment, Vida kept her smile and patted Greenie.

"That's Okay, honey. Why don't you go clean up the kitchen now. Yes, clean kitchen." She boomed out the series of sounds she must have used a thousand times in the kitchens of The Close in Pleasure Sect to Sugar, her mother's old kitchen saccule.

The saccule waddled away exuding a perfumey scent of simple delight. Vida wished she could be as easily soothed. "Jak, I don't want to be disturbed for a few hours. I'm going to . . . I'm going to take a nap, I think."

Jak knew Vida's moods very well by now and said nothing to her as Vida took the tray with her into the back bedroom. The big Garang remained in the darkened foyer, silent and unreadable, like some stone guardian out of a myth.

Vida activated her privacy curtain and slumped into a formfit chair. Her restless movements kept the thing whining to match her until she switched off its autofit feature. She felt a pang of guilt Aleen would have told her that a woman in her position had to learn control, especially of her body.

"Calios."

"At your service, Veelivar."

A hologram appeared before her, a revenant. It bowed and smiled at her. It looked like a Black-skinned young man with mischievous features, augmented by facial implants. In the past, it had worn silver clothes reminiscent of fashions from eons ago, but nowadays it wore contemporary beaded slit skirts and braided its hair in trendy ringlets. Its mastery of modern language, especially Gen, was perfect now. In fact, Calios liked to practice its slang on Vida, a trait she found either endearing or annoying, depending on her mood.

According to Rico and Hi, the revenant was an artifact of an older age, an agent that did many of the simple tasks that were automated on the Map now. Personally, Vida thought the revenant was more than just a simple agent. She remembered their first meeting, before she'd learned of her genetic heritage as the last of the L'vars. The revenant had saved her life by decoying an assassin. She felt a strong affection for Calios, a friend who never failed her.

"Can you locate Rico for me?"

"Sure," said Calios. After a barely detectable hesitation, the revenant frowned. "That's loath. Rico's last known location was a lift booth in the East Tower, but now he's *unbrekt*."

Vida sat forward, her wine sloshing a few drops on her pants. She dabbed at the stain absently.

"I've never heard that word. What does it mean?"

"Hm. Hard to translate into Gen. The Hirrel have a good metaphor. Do you speak Relzhu?"

"No."

Damn. Again, she wished for Samante. The interpreter spoke a dozen languages fluently. One of these days Vida would have to sit down and really learn some languages; it was becoming clear that it was the one area of her education that Aleen had seriously neglected. Considering her eidetic memory, it shouldn't be that hard, but she found the process tedious and had never gotten around to doing it.

"Eh. Well, *unbrekt* is a portmanteau, a kind of kelling. It just means that Rico isn't accessible to the Map right now. Maybe he's using some kind of tech to shield himself from surveillance, probably his uncle's blackbox."

Vida let out a breath. Calios could be so casual about these things.

"Calios, you understand that the blackbox is an important secret? You must never let anyone know that Hi has one."

"Jeez, Veelivar. Do you think I'm sloppy?" The revenant's expression took on an injured air. The agent was becoming amazingly lifelike. Rico assured her that this was only an illusion based on the revenant's sophisticated heuristics. But she wondered "By the way, Rico left you a message."

"Really? Why didn't you tell me right away? Oh, never mind, just play it."

Rico's image appeared instantly as a hologram. Vida was startled into noticing how haggard he looked. His eyes, always dark and deep-set, seemed hollow and black now. There were lines on his brow and around his eyes that she didn't remember seeing the first time they met, was it only months ago? His voice seemed older now, too.

Somehow, when she saw him in person, she didn't notice these changes. She marked the flushed cheeks, the twitching muscles. He was overdoing the cyberdrugs. She was going to have to say something to him about it, though she dreaded the conversation. Why wasn't Hi on top of this?

"Vida, sorry I can't make it I'll call when I can." He smiled briefly and vanished.

"Is that it?"

"There is an attachment"

At Vida's nod, the revenant played a different image of Rico, one he had obviously recorded for her at some earlier time. He gazed out at her with a complex expression. She had often seen this troubled and stricken look on his face, especially after she had been with Wan. It always made her feel simultaneously loved and guilty. They never talked about Wan anymore, but she knew how much he hated to think of her sleeping with him, whether or not he was her legal husband and designated father-to-be of the Peronida heirs. When she'd told him that Romero approved the birth permit, his face had crumpled as if she'd told him she didn't love him, until she explained the truth about Aleen's recessive. Then, he'd been so supportive. But how much of his understanding about her being a cull was relief that she wouldn't be bearing Wan's children?

"Vida, my love, my love." He murmured and lifted a hand toward her. The glint of his Wrist implant caught the light. "Can't leave a present by your door today, so I've written a poem for you. It's not very good, I'm afraid. I'm no Hirrel minunim . . . but, well, anyway, here goes—

*Looking in the opposite direction
Into your eyes I think I see the same light
That I feel for you. You are my star, My fire, My love.
Look into me And we will be The eyes of God.*

"By the way, my shoulders still hurt, love," he concluded with a wicked smile.

"End attachment," said Calios.

"Save, Calios," murmured Vida. "Please save this."

"Done, Veeliyar."

Vida lay back against her pillow and shook her head ruefully. Aleen would laugh to see her daughter and star pupil, groomed to be a heartless calculating whore, lying in bed alone dreaming of a man who could offer her nothing but his love and a sweet simple poem.

Barra checked the seals of her iso-suit one more time, then entered the main chamber of the Nimue mindcore. She was trembling with emotion.

The Nimue mindcore lattice filled the inside of an immense cylinder of blueglass isomer. The cylinder was opaque, about twenty feet in diameter and twelve feet high, featureless. To enter the cylinder and access the mindcore lattices inside, they would have to cut through this barrier. The thought troubled her more than she had expected. To a cybe, such a violation was more than merely taboo, it was sacrilege.

Barra had never been inside the interface cylinder of a mindcore; no one alive had ever seen a mindcore lattice with her own eyes. The faint electromagnetic field generated by most sapients was sufficient to degenerate a working mindcore lattice and no one had yet designed a method for isolating that field, at least not with enough certainty that they'd risk damaging an irreplaceable AI. Not even the Colonizers had anticipated such a need; in the Rim, AIs were healed by other AIs who specialized in the field. No one imagined that the macroshunt would close, ending all contact with the Rim. The degeneration of a mindcore had happened only once in the millennia since sapients came to the Pinch and the horror of it still resonated. Poor Caliostro. The cybe who had made the most terrible error of his life had committed suicide.

Few people knew the truth about Calioistro's crippling—the Cyberguild had successfully buried the facts—but the citizens honored the AI's memory just the same with festivals and by making Government House the seat of power for Palace. Perhaps, with years of study, the Nimue mindcore might teach them a way to restore Calioistro. It was every cybe's dream and hope of redemption.

Barra intended to have her team take a week's worth of extremely detailed holos before doing anything else. But today, for a few minutes, she wanted to be alone with the mindcore! Had Hi asked her, she might have admitted that she felt as if she needed permission. The old writings said that AIs were partners to humans in the Rim. The neutrino shock wave generated by the closing of the macroshunt that sealed off the Pinch from the Rim ended that partnership. No AI ever spoke afterward, though some continued to function after a fashion. Cybes were forced to maintain the Map without truly understanding how it worked. Hivel thought that the loss of the AIs was probably one of the biggest reasons for the Schism Wars. The calm ageless wisdom of the AIs was lost. The Lifegivers took over much of the role that AIs once filled, but the balance was gone.

She put her gloved palm flat on the cylinder.

"Sé Nimue, we've come to help," she said, feeling a bit foolish.

The cylinder didn't change. Barra didn't feel the mindtouch that ancient texts said that cybes once enjoyed with AIs. But she felt a sense of peace and purpose. We were partners once and will be again.

"Sé Barra!" The commlink implant fortunately modulated the voice, or it would have damaged her cochlea.

Barra spun around to see Joklay standing just inside the entrance in an iso-suit, sloppily sealed. Even through the duck glass of her faceplate, the other woman's face showed all of her panic.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"The fleet sent some shuttles to the docking bay. Pero Nikolaides has relieved Colonel Patri of command and he's brought lots of troops. Sé Barra, they have real weapons! And Nikolaides is acting like we're under his authority now."

"We'll see about that."

Barra left the mindcore chamber, stripped off her suit, and rushed to the main bay where most of the dwells had been fabricated. There she saw Pero Nikolaides and half a dozen fleet officers, all armed with killing weapons, herding her people into a small group. She didn't see Damo anywhere. The boy had taken to wandering around the Orbital on his own, despite Barra's stern lectures.

"Sé Nikolaides, what, under the Sight of God, are you doing?"

The man returned her scowl with a mild look. There wasn't a hint of deference in him. He held a golden gilded flatplate in one hand.

"Sé Barra, I am only following orders. The First Citizen, with the permission of the Council, has invoked the full provisions of martial law." Casually, he passed the gilded flatplate to her. It was much heavier than the usual sort, probably to accommodate additional security and coding devices. Barra only glanced at the screen, which showed the Seal of Polis, which she had only seen twice before in her life. "I was about to address you and your group to explain what that means."

Barra glanced around the bay. It was a chaotic scatter of tons of specialized equipment combined with the domestic details of a community that expected to be here for some time, perhaps years. As she swept her gaze over them, she saw that they were terrified. It was the weapons these soldiers carried. None of them had ever seen anything more deadly than a stunstick in their lives. She caught Colonel Patri's eye. The man looked pale and sick. There would be no help there. This was the crucial moment that would determine all that followed. Eye of God how she wished Hi were here.

"Sé Pero, this is not Palace. The Nimue Orbital isn't even a territory of Palace. Do you understand anything about Interstellar law?"

"Pero smiled slightly. His lantern jaw and homely features would never be attractive, but they were arresting and they communicated intensity and humor very well.

"Oh, I believe I may have browsed a screen or two on the subject once."

"Well, maybe you'll recall that under the provisions, of the Souk Accords, Nimue is under the direct authority of the Cyberguild. I don't give a damn what Karlo or the Council thinks. You are here on *my* sufferance, Sé Pero, and if you don't tell these men and women to return their weapons to coded lock, then I will have to ask you to leave Orbital. Now."

The soldiers behind Pero started laughing, but Pero didn't. He raised one finger and received instant silence. The bay full of civilian work teams started muttering and Barra did nothing to stop them. She would either win this battle now, or be a virtual prisoner for the years they stayed here. She met Pero's gaze without flinching.

"Sé Barra . . . may I have my flatplate?" Startled, Barra handed it back. He said nothing for a long tense minute. Then, finally, he bowed. "I acknowledge your authority. Now, if I may have a moment of your time, we need to discuss the situation back home and how it affects us."

Barra clasped her hands together to keep them from shaking.

"The weapons must go into lock. Right now. Sé Sabel will go with them to apply the code."

Pero's blue eyes never changed and his expression remained polite and unthreatening. But Barra had the very clear sense that she was pressing a dangerous man. Finally, he nodded. He turned and snapped out a series of orders, all in the language of Kephalon. His soldiers seemed reluctant until Pero rapped out a few words so sharp that had they been metal they would have drawn blood. The soldiers all gave the Peronida salute. Barra blinked. These soldiers were all personally loyal to the Peronidas, and Pero wanted her to know that fact.

"-Shall we?"

Pero gestured to his command fab. He'd only been here minutes and he already had an infrastructure established. Clearly, Pero was a man in a hurry. It occurred to Barra that it would be psychologically better for them to meet in her fab, but perhaps it would be best to avoid further heightening the tension.

"Everybody, go back to work," she said. "There has been some trouble on Palace, obviously, and I'll let you all know the details as soon as I can. But right now, everything's fine."

By the looks on their faces, no one believed her. If the trouble was back on Palace, why were all these- ships stationed around Orbital? But the lockup of the weapons was definitely easing nerves. Barra nodded and followed Pero into his dwell. The fleet captain waved away his aides, though he did pause to lightly grasp the shoulder of one woman and murmur a few words in Helane to her. She gave a bark of laughter, glanced at Barra, and headed off.

As She'd expected, the interior was spare with a field cot, an angled Map table with a larger than normal disc tray, and not much else. She was surprised, though, to see the walls covered with precise topo maps of Tableau. Were they Pero's idea of art? Barra knew that his mother Susannah lived there, but by all accounts there wasn't much love lost between the two of them.

Barra settled into a chair, automatically reaching for nonexistent formfit controls. She hated rigid chairs. They were hard on her back.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Pero. He tossed the heavy gilded flatplate to a table. There was a liquidity to his movements that reminded her strongly of Nju. All the Peronida men shared this sense of physical prowess and grace.

"No, thank you."

"Well, I'm going to have a bit of that *grappa* that your brother is so fond of. The taste kinda grows on you, like most stuff from Palace."

Barra didn't care for the idea that Pero knew so much about the personal habits of Hivel. He watched her as he poured and Barra had the sense that he was playing some game with her, testing her. This was the first time she'd had any real contact with the man, but his reputation didn't do him justice. He had the controlled physical power of his father, but was far more subtle and perceptive. There was also no hint of that edge of violence that Karlo projected, only competence and grace. He dropped into another chair and put his feet up on the Map table, crossing his legs at the ankle.

"Why did Karlo and the Council declare full martial, law?"

Pero sipped his wine. "It's all in the plate. There's a sealed packet from your brother on the shuttle, too. You want me to send for it?"

Barra shifted in the chair. God, she hated these things.

"Whatever is going on here, I doubt that Hi knows as much about it as you do. Come on, Pero, what is it? Obviously, there's more here than the Lep uprisings."

He nodded. But he still just stared at her calmly, drinking his wine, as if he was waiting for something specific from her. Barra was irritated, uncomfortable, and worried. As usual, that just made her impatient and blunt.

"Look, we're going to be stuck together here on Orbital for a couple years at least. Either we trust each other, or it's going to be an unpleasant situation."

Pero gave a rueful laugh. He seemed to reach some decision. "Well, actually, we may not be stuck together here as long as you think."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to tell you something that Dukayn would kill me for revealing, and I'm not exaggerating for effect. But since evacuating this place is going to take your cooperation, I don't see any way around it. At least, not without those persepes." Pero took a deep swallow of wine. Barra had to struggle to keep silent. Evacuation? "Dukayn's been keeping Tableau under watch for a long time. Just recently, his spies found out that Susannah is building a fleet to attack Palace."

"A fleet to attack Palace? But why?"

"I have no idea. Maybe my father knows, but he hasn't seen fit to tell me."

"She hasn't got a chance. Karlo's fleet will wipe her out."

"Yeah, under normal circumstances. Dukayn thinks she's got her hands on some new sort of military tech. He also believes that Susannah may have recruited allies."

"The Leps?" Barra felt a cold dread. The wounds from the last war had never really healed. Would humans and Leps ever be able to live in peace again?

"No, Sé Barra. Dukayn thinks she's made an alliance with the Hirrel Nomadia."

"The Hirrel?" Barra leaned back in her chair, astonished. "But that's impossible. They've never been involved in any of the conflicts in the Pinch, not even the Schism Wars."

"Well, somehow Susannah changed their minds about that and last time anybody counted, they have a couple thousand ships. Nobody even knows what their full military capability is, but I can tell you that nobody's ever gone up against the Nomadia and lived to laugh about it."

"When is she planning to attack?"

"Not even Dukayn is sure about that. But the Nomadia is definitely on the move. Their matrix has been heading for its microshunt for the last several months, doing it slowly to avoid notice, but it's obvious if you know what to look for. Dukayn has been monitoring the Nomadia

for years, so he picked up on it a lot quicker than they'll be expecting. I've got to hand it to Dukayn, sometimes his constant paranoia pays off."

"Eye of God," Barra murmured.

"So, Sé Barra," said Pero. "Unless you can get Nimue back online in a couple weeks, you and your team will have to return to Palace. Not that Palace is going to be much of a refuge."

"But what about you?"

Pero leaned back in his chair with a look of amused resignation.

"Oh, me and the fleet will stay out here, I think, to greet Susannah and the Nomadia. My father will be joining us just as soon as you and your group are back home. Apparently, there's been some serious trouble on Palace, but he thinks he'll have it under control soon. Too bad Wan isn't back from Souk yet, He might be a drunk, but he's pretty handy to have around in a fight."

Barra fell into silent thought and Pero didn't rush her. Finally, she nodded.

"All right. I guess we have no choice."

"A friend of mine is fond of quoting the Hirrel saying, 'Sing, or do not sing.' Choices are funny things."

She nodded and gave a rueful laugh.

Suddenly Pero's door flap flew open and a cybe stumbled in.

"Excuse me, Sé Pero. Sé Barra?"

"Yes, Joklay?"

The woman glanced nervously at Pero and scuttled over to hand her a sealed flatplate.

"This came on one of the military shuttles.- It's marked 'Extremely Urgent' and 'Open Immediately.' I thought I should bring it to you right away."

Barra frowned at the flatplate. It had both Hi's and Rico's glyph-codes on the seal. She nodded and dismissed the older woman with a wave. Joklay left at a toot.

"Please don't mind me, Sé Barra. We can meet later, if you wish."

Barra looked up and studied Pero carefully for a moment. Again, she had the impression that Pero was teasing her.

"You've been honest with me, Sé Pero, so I'm going to do you the same honor. We'll share this information. Just give me a moment." Barra broke the seal and keyed up the contents. She read the material twice.

"What is it, Sé Barra?"

"Did your communique inform you that the Tomb of Ri Paha Tura exploded?" Pero nodded. "Well, my brother seems to think that Tura survived. He sent this packet immediately after the explosion, so we won't know for sure until the next packet shuttle, or when we get Map access up."

Pero scowled. "How could Tura have survived? The sarcophagus would have killed her the moment it sensed anything."

"The sarcophagus was given to Karlo by the Hirrel, wasn't it?"

"You don't think they planned this?"

"I don't know. But there's no question that Tura is Karlo's deadliest enemy and it certainly is convenient that her Tomb has been disturbed just as we hear of the Hirrel joining a fleet to attack Palace."

"Hm. Good point. Anything else of interest in there?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact My son, Rico, has included a very interesting theory about Riva's use of substrate on the hyperMap level."

Pero looked blank. "Is that important?"

"It could be, if Rico is right." Barra smiled grimly. "He thinks Riva was the one who shut down Nimue, not the L'vars, and that means that she can turn it right back on again anytime."

"That's impossible."

"I would have said so, too, but Rico's reasoning is awfully persuasive. I'm going to have to look at his theorem more carefully. In the meantime, we better not mess with the AI."

"Sé Barra, if this is true, then Nimue could be used against Karlo's fleet and the. Leps could just move in and take over with a small force. *This* has to be Riva's master plan, though she must not have known about Susannah. We have to do something to confirm this. If it's true, then we'll have to disable Nimue permanently somehow."

Barra was only half listening to Pero while she puzzled through Rico's notes and equations. She had a sense for these things, though, and her instinct was that what Rico postulated was possible. Thank God he'd warned her in time. What would have happened if Barra tried to work on Nimue with Riva able to control the AI? She didn't want to find out Who could have ever guessed that a cybe might discover a way to walk the Map without a Map-point? It was as counterintuitive as building substrate without blueglass. The Colonizers had certainly never hinted at such a thing. Clever, Rico. Who *was* Riva, anyway? If she had worked out a way to do something like this, what else could she do on the Map? Pero's words finally penetrated Barra's musings:

"Shut her down permanently? I could never allow that, Sé Pero. The AIs are more precious than who is ruling Palace. They're worth more than any fleet."

Pero glared at her, then chuckled.

"Cyberguild," he said indulgently. "Well, before we get into an argument about this, let's work together on a way to confirm it. And I'll want your cooperation in preparing for an emergency evacuation."

"All right." Barra massaged a crick in her neck. What she wouldn't give for five minutes with a masseuse. "You know, I believe I'll have a cup of that *grappa* after all."

Rico was working with a team of cybes to repair a library destroyed by one of Riva's candles. Twenty-three cybes floated in a dynamic Mapspace that looked like a sun spitting off flares and prominences to the blueglass substrate. The cybes were split off into teams constructing elaborate icons that would be welded together by specially written metas and activated in sequence. Some of the icons were deliberately made to be visually cued so that library patrons would know what section of the database they were accessing. Rico saw a tower that was meant to be the entrance point to the library. It looked like a gigantic rectangular block of tri-stil with square windows spaced at perfectly regulated intervals. Most of the modules were like that, unambiguous and uninspired icons to represent functions.

Rico found the process agonizingly slow and frustrating. It was maddening to waste time here on this tedious and simplistic repair job when he could be working on his ideas for a substrate security protocol. The team leader, Pukosu, liked to do a job in modules and triple check everyone's work, running pretty much every test meta ever written. Rico's three-person team had already finished the most complex module—an integration icon for searching out and consolidating information queries—but Pukosu wouldn't accept the work until it had been slotted into the other twenty-two modules, which could take hours. He was itching to sign off and get busy hunting Riva. The other members of his team, however, considered the lull as a Chance to take a break and chat. Rico hated small talk with other cybes. Their interests were always so dull, mostly guild gossip and pointless debates about arcane technical questions that few of them understood as well as they thought they did. These three were members of Arno's old patron-track transition team. Arno had liked them all, though Rico didn't know them well.

"Sé Rico, when are you going to announce your doctoral project?"

"Soon, I guess," said Rico absently.

That was Sygel, a nice guy who got along with everyone. Steady and reliable, he was the sort of cybe that Hi considered me backbone of the guild. Sygel, Tonus, and Juqa had all written Mapbodies that were rough caricatures of their offMap selves. They looked like stick figures. whose hands had dozens of fingers for manipulating icons, a cliché on the Map.

Pukosu's Mapbody, on the other hand, was clearly masterwork, detailed and fluid. He kept thinking of how much fun he'd had with her at the Hirrel club. He wished he could take Vida there. She would have loved it. Would they always have to sneak around like thieves? Rico suddenly realized that someone had asked him a question.

"I'm sorry, Sé Tomas, I was ... I was checking my mail. What did you say?"

"I was just wondering if you've picked out your transition team for the patron-track."

Rico floated and stared at the other three cybes. That was a very improper question, almost a breach of the Protocols, but it was easy to forget the formalities while walking the Map and interacting with cybes who looked like an artist's drafts of a sapient. Besides, these three had been with Arno for years and they were almost family. Tomas realized his error quickly.

"Oh," said Tomas. "I've done it again, haven't I? I'm sorry, Sé Hernanes." Voices in Mapspace were uninflected, except under special circumstances, but even so, Rico thought he heard the embarrassment. Tomas was famous for stumbling over the Protocols.

"Don't worry about it, Sé Tomas. To answer your question, I haven't chosen a team yet. Sé Jons has been keeping me pretty busy lately."

"May I speak freely, Sé Hernanes?" That was Juqa, a usually timid woman who had been laboring as a journeyman for years. Her family had gotten on the wrong side of a dispute with the Makeesas some years ago, so she'd probably never get confirmed as a patron-track, or even master, which was a shame. She had a knack for developing durable and flexible icons that didn't degrade and integrated seamlessly with the work of other cybes. Rico suddenly remembered that Arno had had some sort of idea about how to get her career moving again. He couldn't recall the details, though.

"Sure, Sé Juqa. What's up? And just call me Rico, okay?"

Juqa's Mapbody was the outline of a woman, but she'd added the mildly whimsical touch of a shimmer of iridescence that flowed constanuy around her, like a ripple of rainbows.

There was a pause and Rico, who had an instinct for Map activity, thought that she'd just exchanged underMap messages with the other two cybes. Damn. Were they going to try to involve him in some trivial journeyman politics? He didn't have the time or interest for such nonsense.

"We don't want to offend you, Rico, but Arno was not only our patron, but also our friend, and he liked you a lot, so we need to tell you something."

She went silent again. This was getting personal. Rico tensed. He'd never been good at this kind of thing, not like Arno was.

"Well, go ahead. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Well, a few of us have noticed that you seem to be overdoing the cyberdrugs. I mean, we all know how much pressure Sé Hivel is putting you under."

Rico was glad that he was having this conversation in a Mapbody that couldn't show the flush of embarrassment and anger that burned his face off Map.

"Well, I guess we've crossed the line, Sé Rico," said Sygel. "We just thought you should know what everybody's saying."

"I mean, everybody knows how good you are," said Homas. "Nobody minds that Sé Jons

promoted you to master already. We just don't want to see you get burned out."

"The thing is, Sé Rico, a few people have complained to the Commission. Mostly, just cybes who are jealous of you," said Juqa. "The Commission didn't even record the complaints. At least that's what my brother in the main office said."

Rico couldn't think of a single thing to say. People were complaining about his drug use to the Oversight Commission? Talking about him behind his back? Here he was spending six hours a day on the Map, three times the recommended norm, hunting-Riva, working for Hi, plus doing all his guild chores, and a bunch of sniping cybes were trying to get his rating trashed just because he was a little over the norm on the drugs.

Rico was furious, but also a little scared. *Was* he overdoing the drugs? These cybes were all old friends; they'd risked a lot to broach the subject with him.

"Look, thanks for the warning. Maybe you guys are right. Things have been so crazy lately. Who's been complaining?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. Finally, Sygel spoke up.

"Well, Pukosu for one."

"Pukosu?" So. Maybe that "chance" meeting at the Hirrel bar hadn't been an accident. Was she investigating him? And if so, what was she reporting, and to whom?

Just then, Pukosu and her team came up to them.

"Sé Rico, is your team ready for me integration test?"

He found he could barely control his anger at her. He had to get out of here right away.

"The module's been ready for an hour. Look, I have to take care of something immediately for Sé Jons. The rest of my team can stay and fine-tune."

Rico shut off all access to his account in the under-Map and, without waiting for Pukosu's reply, signed out and logged off the Map. He whipped off the full-face Mapstation and just sat in the datachair, trembling with anger. His heart was beating way too fast and his breathing was shallow. He was having a bad reaction to the drug mix thanks to the adrenaline in his system. He lay back in the datachair with his eyes closed and tried to calm down. At least he still had good friends On the Map, people who were looking out for him.

Several minutes later the dizziness and heart palpitations diminished, though his breathing was still labored. This was ridiculous. He shouldn't let his upset affect him like this, but his emotions were raw. Too many hours on the Map were taking a toll. He'd have to talk to Hi about letting him shunt off this routine stuff so he could concentrate totally on Riva. He was sure Hi would agree. Once they caught Riva, he really would cut down on the drugs. In the meantime, Rico took a double dose of frulose and tried to rest until the drugs settled his system.

Rico decided to go for a walk, to do some thinking. If only he had someone to talk to who would understand. He couldn't turn to Uncle Hi. Rico was a cybermaster now, expected to deal with this sort of thing on his own, certainty not bother the guildmaster with such a minor problem. Vida wouldn't be able to help him with this. She was so good with people, she probably wouldn't even understand the difficulty. His mother was on Nimue, accessible via the Map, but they couldn't really talk freely over such a public connection. Rico realized that, with Arno gone, he didn't really have any close friends among the cybes. Was that such a bad thing, though? As heir and patron-track, Hi had often said he needed to keep a professional distance from the journeymen Now that he was a master, the pressures were even greater.

Rico took off his blue work gown and put on a brown kilt and wrap shirt He put a portable Mapstation and a few technical flatplates into his shoulder-sack and headed out. He'd thought, vaguely, of going to the roof garden, but abruptly changed his mind. Vida often took strolls up there and he wasn't in the mood to run into her.

It had been weeks since he'd been back to the family compound. He could think of several legitimate reasons for spending an afternoon out there, if anyone asked He started to make a

comncall to Jevon to let her know where he was going, then remembered Jevon, an embezzler! And according to Dukayn, she was a member of UJU, too. That had really stunned Uncle Hi, Rico knew. But why had Nju gone with her? Hi wouldn't talk about it with him, but Rico found the whole thing incredible. He had a feeling that the cascader he'd found in the itinerary could be a clue. If Jevon was a member of UJU, why would she have a cascader? That was more Riva's style. Maybe the thing wasn't hers. Hi was right that someone else could have planted it.

Maybe there was some clue- in Jevon's things back at the compound. Doing a little investigating might take his mind off his upset at being criticized by Arno's old friends. Which *one* of them could have made a cascader go absolute? Yet they had the nerve to make him feel like a jerk for not responding right away to their mail. He didn't like to think what Arno would have said, though. His cousin always went out of his way to help out journeymen.

Rico left a note for Hi letting him know where he was going, then he left a message for Vida. He just couldn't face her tonight, even though he'd promised. With Wan gone, this was their chance to spend extra time together, but in his present mood, he'd be lousy company. He sent a poem that he'd written a few days ago along with the message.

The steps outside Government House were clogged with people going in both directions, their shoulders hunched against drizzling rain. A work gang of saccules scrubbed at the steps and Rico detoured around them, but a trio of Bioguild journeymen running up the steps into Government House kicked the little neuters out of their way. Since he'd been in Government House, he'd seen this sort of thing a lot, but it never failed to anger him. Rico opened his mouth to say something, but they were already through the massive arch of the autogate and what good would it do anyway? Instead, Rico went to the neuters. One of them lay on its side, orangish red blood oozing from its temple. The other two kept working. But even through the rain, Rico smelled the stink of fear from them. Rico took his master's sash off and used it to blot the blood. The saccule's heart beat in its temple, slow and fluttery. The neuter twitched, and after another few minutes, it struggled up, found its scrub brush, and went back to work, without acknowledging Rico.

He watched them for a while longer, ignoring the glances and stares that the sapients going to and from work shot him. How would these people act if saccules were accepted as fellow sapients? Would it ever be possible for them to be considered equals? What sort of work could they do? How could a neuter ever compete for a guild job? The idea of a neuter trying to use a Mapstation was inconceivable.

Rico sat on the stairs until he was sure the saccule was going to be okay. He and Vida had talked a lot about saccule sapiency, but this was the first time he'd really considered what it might mean for the neuters to be reclassified. Rico had seen Sister Romero's speeches, but even she didn't talk much about that part of the question. The next time he saw Vida, he was determined to ask her what she thought. Vida always seemed to have a way of clarifying his thinking. They made a good team.

By the time he found a platform for a wiretrain headed for Tech Sect, the drizzle changed to a serious rain. Drenched, he sat by a window, traveling south at high speed above Center Sect. In the daylight, not even the gray sheets of rain could disguise the damage caused by the fires and riots from a week ago. A flailtown with its massive teardrop-shaped living quarters had collapsed and the rubble covered several blocks. Smoke hung over much of Center Sect. Everywhere, Rico saw fleet airhoppers and ground vehicles patrolling. It was bad, but at least some order was restored. It was hard to believe that Palace was under martial law when you worked and lived in Government House. Everything there went on pretty much as it always did. The Daabs Level had just as many parties, maybe more. Rico had never watched much vid and with his current workload, he had no time for it. But even he had noticed that most of the public channels were showing old stuff on loop and the news feeds were all repeating the same vague news.

The wiretrain was packed with commuters, most of them concentrating on flatplates or, like him, staring out the windows. One couple was sharing a music hood and making out to the tunes. A little girl with auburn hair was engrossed in a holobook of Jeri the Jadewing. Rico smiled. He'd loved that one when he was a kid. The girl looked up and grinned widely at him,

then returned to her serious study of Jeri's adventures in the swamp. Looking at the little girl, he almost felt that he was seeing Vida herself as a child. What would it be like to have a daughter? Rico turned to stare out the window again. Anonymous dwells, mossy and old, blurred by: As Hi's heir and a patron-track, he was likely to be granted a two or even three child-birth permit. But Vida was a cull. Even if she was ever free to sign his contract, they couldn't have children. It hadn't seemed to matter when she told him. He could only think about how much he loved her and the terrible pain and shame she was feeling. But now ... didn't he have a responsibility to his clan? And how would his mother feel if he renounced his family? How would he feel in a year, ten years, fifty? Would he regret not having children of his own? Rico knew how much his mother missed her other children, all three of them dead in the Lep-Human War. Rico had never even known them. She wanted grandchildren. He knew that. Rico had planned to study on the ride south, but instead he spent most of the trip simply gazing out the window into the drowning world, thinking, worrying.

The Jons clan compound, which sheltered its employees and retainers as well as the family, stood on the high point of a hill with a southern view of Algol River. From his bedroom window, in fact, Rico could see the river, if he leaned out just right to catch the view between the trees. From the street, however, where the robocab deposited him, he could see nothing but spear trees and the walls of his family's compound, as well as the high fence of the Sanchis compound a mile or so to the east. The Hernanes y Jons compound looked so much smaller to Rico now, small and shabby. Partly, it was the miserable weather, but there was also the ragged grounds, weed-choked garden, and all five of the main buildings of their compound were streaked with gray-green moss and a variety of fungals. Rico frowned. If Jevon were here, she'd be livid at how poorly the grounds were being kept Rico shied away from the thought of Jevon for the moment. He still wasn't sure how he felt about her now that he knew she was a thief and a racist.

Rico ducked into the pedestrian gatehouse, pressed his thumb on the ID plate, and spoke to the gatepost.

"Send a passenger cart down." There was only silence. Rico stabbed the ID plate. "This is Rico. Is anyone there?" Still no reply. Rico tapped a code into the box below the ID plate and sent a typed command directly to the compound's house control. That, at least, acknowledged his command.

Overhead the rain lessened a bit and a double rainbow appeared in the sky. Rico leaned against the pillar and stared at the rainbow until he heard the cart crunching up the side path on the rails set in the gravel. When he clambered onto the front bench, the cart sensed his weight and trundled back up the drive. Around him fern trees drooped under the weight of the rain. He heard songflies humming from somewhere.

The main house loomed at the top of the rise, a bent spiral of wings and corridors, dappled with streaks of moss and fungus. This was ridiculous. It looked like no one had cleaned these walls in weeks. Rico glanced around, but saw no saccules anywhere. Hi had reduced the staff here once they'd moved into Government House, but he would surely have told Jevon to leave enough to take good care of their home. Barra would be furious. On either side were the gated and barred compounds of their neighbors. On the right was the Sanchis compound. Rico wondered idly if Jodi was still there. He'd had such a crush on her. Now, he could barely remember what she looked like.

At the front door, Rico had to type in the family code to get in. Inside, the foyer was dark and the place smelted musty and stale. There were other odors, too, even worse. The place stank.

"Lights." Nothing. There was something wrong with the voice-rec program, apparently.

It took him a few minutes to remember where the manual controls were, but finally the main meeting hall lights came on. What he saw stunned him.

The gather was filled with rotted food. Most of the vers dashed away at the light. Some of the rodents just stared at him. Rico found the housekeeping controls and set the cleaning bots to work. The mechanicals hummed out of their little houses in the corners of all the rooms and buzzed over the floors and walls giving out shocks to the vers if they had to.

Feeling a bit spiteful, Rico cranked up their voltage as high as it would go. It wouldn't take long to drive out this vermin.

He couldn't believe that Hi's staff had just taken off and left the compound, days ago, by the look of things. Jevon's office was the logical place to look for answers, but Rico found that he wasn't in a hurry to figure it out.

Partly, he was still confused about Jevon and he felt guilty about rummaging through her office. Mostly, he was just weary of solving problems all the time; Uncle Hi, as guildmaster, had so many demands on his time that it was rare that he could spend any of it dealing with the mundane details of the Hernanes y Jons clan, and with Barra gone to Nimue, much of it fell to Rico as heir. Rico remembered asking Arno once what it felt like to be a patron-track and heir. Arno had given him that crazy cocky grin and said that the expectations were worse than the work and the work was impossible. They'd laughed, but now Rico wondered whether his cousin had been half-serious. What if Sygel, Tomas, and Juqa were right to criticize him? Now that he'd had a chance to calm down and think, Rico realized that his reaction to their comments had been out of proportion. They had a right to expect his patronage and help. He could blame the cyberdrugs for some of that; they cranked up his emotions on the Map to a dangerous degree. Neither Hi nor Vida had said anything to him about it, but he knew perfectly well that they both disapproved of all the drugs he was taking. Rico jiggled the leather pouch containing a dozen vials in his gown's inner pocket. Part of him wanted to take another shot of frulose right now, even though he didn't really need it. *Was he becoming an addict?* That would be ironic. Arno, who'd never abused the drugs in his life, had gone undercover as an addict and died with the reputation of a useless head,

The foyer and gather were already noticeably cleaner and the smell better. The vers and such were gone Rico moved out of the foyer and strolled down the main hall. On either side were the unmarked bronze doors for various rooms and offices. The bedrooms were up a level. Rico hesitated outside his mother's office. He wondered how she was doing, whether she missed him as much as he missed her. Rico thought of his father, Madia Hernanes. He'd died when Rico was very young, only six, but he had clear memories of him: thin, dark, and always laughing. Rico had seen many holos of his father as he grew up, so he knew that Matha was shorter than average and had a pleasant voice. But to Rico, his father was a giant, with the voice of thunder, who knew a thousand jokes and games. Arno had adored him, too. Rico put a hand on

Barra's office door and walked up the spiral stairs to the living quarters. Soon, he was in his own bedroom.

Nothing had changed. He had three Mapstations in here, all in various stages of disassembly. His bed was blanketed with tools, equipment, and flatplates. He vaguely remembered that he'd been working on some project just before Hi took him to Pleasure Sect for the first time and everything changed. A memory of The Close and the Marked girl, Darla, who had eased Rico through his first act of intercourse came to him. He sat on the edge of the bed feeling suddenly sad and alone and obscurely ashamed. His mother hadn't liked that outing to Pleasure and now that Rico had found love with Vida, he guessed he knew why. To share that sort of intimacy with someone you didn't know or care about was only playing at something that was meant to be taken seriously. Matha and Barra had often held hands at dinner, the six-year-old Rico remembered that very well and the laughter. That was what he wanted from a marriage partner, too. He could see Vida there very easily. Children or not, she was the one he wanted to share his life with. His mother and Hi would just have to accept it...

Rico poked through his room for a while, picking out one or two flatplates and a slipdisc of notes he'd made about a possible postdoctoral thesis to bring back with him to Government House. He sat at his old Mapstation, got it running, and spent a long time thinking before he typed a note of apology to Sygel with clones to Tomas and Juqa. He told them what his postdoc would be and he asked them to join his transition team. When he was done, Rico was smiling and he felt better than he had in days. He felt like a real heir for the first time.

When he was done he lay back against the pillow in a corner of the bed and gazed out his bedroom window with his hands clasped behind his head. If he twisted his head just right, he

could see the silver ribbon of the Algol River arcing down in a meander to the edge of one of the Motta Farms. The big tender towers were visible and he could even see tenders cycling around on guide wires spitting out anti-fungals and pesticides. What he couldn't see were any saccules working in the fields. That was strange, almost disturbing. The field saccules were as much a part of his childhood as Barra's old kitchen neuter Gran, who Rico had known all his life. There had never been a time when he couldn't see dozens working out there. Rico frowned. He guessed that the answers might be in Jevon's office. Like it or not, he supposed he better get to work.

In Jevon's office, Rico found part of the answer. Jevon was the one who made regular trips here to keep an eye on things and apparently she'd been in the process of replacing the house staff with caretakers, but hadn't got farther than releasing the sapients who weren't family. Clan members had been transferred to other related compounds. Jevon had left a skeleton staff of saccules in place to take care of the compound, while she took bids for caretakers; Rico saw the skims in one of her in-boxes. It was barely possible that the saccules had run away, though Rico had never heard of so many taking off at once. Also, that didn't explain where all the Motta saccules had gone.

Rico continued methodically searching through Jevon's desk. He found, hidden in a locked drawer, a folder full of UJU literature with comments and critiques. Rico's stomach did a twist when he realized that Jevon was helping to write and revise this propaganda. Rico wanted to throw it away, but suddenly he was also curious about it all. Had Arno agreed with her? He couldn't believe that of his cousin, but the two of them had almost never discussed politics.

Most of the literature was just vague propaganda, filled with a lot of data about how Leps and Hirrel were given preferential treatment for guildwork. Rico paused, powered up Jevon's Mapstation, and used the offMap controls to run some analyses and information searches. It only took him a few minutes to disprove most of the statistical information supplied by UJU. The figures were distorted by being taken out of context. In one case, UJU used a percentile from a single Sect, the Service Sect, and suggested that this was true for the whole Pinch. Clearly, Jevon didn't believe the figures either and she had made notes on the fliers to correct them. One of her notes said "Who will believe a liar when she tells the truth?"

There was one tract that wasn't inaccurate propaganda. It was a closely reasoned religious argument, several pages long. This tract had been put in a flapcase to protect it, but the well-thumbed pages and many highlighted passages showed clearly how often Jevon consulted it. Rico read through it carefully. It was a technical discussion of something called Perfect Separation and Rico didn't understand much of the terminology. He had never been very religious. But by the time he was finished, he did see how even an intelligent person might be persuaded, if they were deeply religious. There was no author listed for the tract.

Finally, in a special locked flapcase, Rico found many letters and testimonials from regular citizens about being beaten out of a job by a Lep, cheated by Hirrel, mugged by Garang. To Rico's shock, one of them was signed by Jevon herself and Rico read through her story several times, becoming more agitated with every reading. He hadn't known how desperately poor her family was, or that Jevon herself had been in a street gang for a while after her father died. He found it hard to picture the groomed and efficient factor as a wild child in the streets. Her story of a brother killed by a Lep for his credchip was so full of anguish and rage that Rico felt tears sting his own eyes.

When he was done, Rico took all of the material and stored it in his shoulder-sack. He wanted to read through it again, but at least he was beginning to have some idea why Jevon had become a member of UJU.

Rico looked at Jevon's Mapstation, thinking hard. The truth was, he didn't believe that Jevon was an embezzler, no matter what proof Dukayn had shown Hi. Rico chewed on a corner of his lip, then scooted the datachair up to the gap in Jevon's tiny autodesk. It was the work of just a few minutes to crack through her security. As Hi's heir, Rico had special codes for complete access to all the Hernanes y Jons accounts. Also, Arno had taught him a few tricks for shortcutting through Map security.

Rico moved smoothly and easily through this level of the Map. It was here, in a two-dee representation of databases and Mappoints that most citizens of Palace interacted with the

Map and two millennia of constant work had made this facet of the interface almost as fluid as a neural connection. It was slower than he was used to, but more relaxing. He didn't have to concentrate on his metabolism, or worry about biofeedback spikes and transients, He also didn't need the cyberdrugs. This was pure calculation and voice-typing. As a child, before he'd become a journeyman, Rico had often played on the Map this way. It was almost restful.

Two hours later Rico had learned three important things. One, if Jevon was an embezzler, she was awfully clever about hiding the money she'd stolen and she'd never used any of it to actually buy anything for years, until just a week ago, when she'd emptied her accounts and used every cred she could scrape up to do some offMap transaction. The amount in her account was pitifully small; even so. It hadn't taken him long to confirm that most of her salary went to her family in Service Sect, to her mother Mag. It was possible that all of this information was a facade. Only a trained auditor would know for sure, but Rico had a sense for the integrity of data on the Map and Jevon's accounts had the right feel. Her transactions over the years had a rhythm and an unconscious truth to them that he didn't think even a master embezzler could have faked.

The second thing Rico learned was that the tract about Perfect Separation was written by Cardinal Roha d'Tele-Tres. He found this out by borrowing parsers from an interpreters' lingua-base and using them to run syntactical analyses on all published material about Perfect Separation available on the Map. Then he collated everything and sifted it. He was surprised that no one else had thought of this. It seemed obvious to him. Maybe nobody else cared enough to investigate.

The cardinal of Palace was a secret member of UJU. Rico was sure of it. What might the Pope make of this? Vida had often told Rico how kind the cardinal had been to her, but even she felt uneasy with him and his veiled suggestions that she avoid nonhumans. This was potentially explosive information. Sister Romero should know this. She would want to investigate. Vida knew the sister well. Rico decided to tell Vida what he'd learned the next time he saw her.

Finally, Rico discovered that Jevon's station in Government House, remotely connected to this one, had been cleared of a substantial portion of diaries and private journals on the day of Jevon's disappearance from the city. The section had been wiped and double wiped after being emptied.

Rico leaned back in the datachair. He had once told Vida that information couldn't really be destroyed on the Map, only altered, at least until new information overwrote it. Jevon hadn't had time to do that. He had a feeling that those journals might answer a lot of questions, and given a little time, he could retrieve most of them.

"If Jevon isn't an embezzler, then Dukayn faked that evidence," Rico murmured aloud. "But why?"

Hi needed to know all this, but it wasn't safe to contact him by implant. Everyone knew that Dukayn had ways of monitoring conversations over implants because they had to pass through the Map for retransmission. Rico got up from the autodesk. What would Arno have thought of Jevon being falsely accused of embezzlement? Without even thinking about it, Rico knew that his cousin would be furious and would work like hell to get her name cleared. About the racism, he was now more confused. He wished he could talk with her about that.

The mystery of the missing saccules could wait. Clearing Jevon's name was more important. Rico contacted one of his relations, Aunt Lytha, and asked her factor to take care of staffing the compound and finishing the cleaning. They fell all over themselves to accommodate Hi's heir.

Afterward, he hired an aircab for the journey back to Center Sect to save time. He glanced back at the compound once. It looked empty and forlorn. Would he and Vida ever live there? He had a sudden premonition that he'd never see the place again.

It seemed to Jevon that there had never been a time when she wasn't trudging through drifts of gray-green vegetation, breathing through a mouth filter, and sleeping in a swampsuit.

Nju and Thiralo were ahead of her, breaking the trail, but Jevon was too weary to even raise her head to see how far ahead they were. She had never understood the value of long legs before. She had to take three steps for every one of Nju's.

They had been out in the swamp for a week, although it seemed like months to Jevon. Raised in the city, she had never even been outside the walls and had never cared to be. The outside world was a haven for insects, snakes, rodents, and about a thousand kinds of moss and fungus, most of which was poisonous. If not for Nju, she was quite certain she would have been dead within the first hour of their escape.

Bad enough for her, but poor Thiralo was truly suffering. He was allergic to something that was getting through his mouth filter and the allergy was making his life a misery. She could hear him coughing up ahead. He also had hives and a painful inflammation around the eyes and she knew all his joints hurt terribly by the delicate way he walked, though he didn't mention it. Nju located herbs and plants that he turned into a salve that gave the man some relief, but there was no cure. With all that, Thiralo still managed to be the most cheerful member of their group. Nju would only speak to Jevon when necessary. Her confession of betrayal of Hivel Jons had created a chasm between them that she had no idea how to cross. Her friends in UJU would have been disgusted that she valued the opinion of a nonhuman so highly.

She stumbled over a hump of roots, too tired to lift her feet high enough to avoid them. Something small, brown, and very quick darted across her path. She barely registered it. A few days ago, she would have jumped six inches. It took all her concentration now just to keep on walking. Her mind slipped into a familiar daze as she dreamed of hot food, a bath, clean clothes, and a bed. She would have kissed Dukayn in return for an hour in her own bed. She thought constantly of Garis. Was he all right? Had Dukayn traced him to her? Was he worried about her? Did he miss her?

"Jevon? Jevon. Jevon. Jevon."

She paused, confused. Was Garis calling her name, or was she dreaming? She looked up to see Thiralo's face close to her own. The swampsuit's faceplate was smeared and the factor's puffy and red features squinted at her through the blur.

"Huh," she grunted.

Thiralo was holding her arms and talking to her. She made an effort to concentrate.

"Jevon, we thought we'd lost you. Off sightseeing again, eh?" Thiralo laughed, but she heard the edge of concern. He started to say something more, but a fit of coughing overtook him and he bent over with his gloved hands on his knees.

She took the moment to massage the muscles of her neck through the fabric of the swampsuit. She'd been staring at her own feet for the better part of half a day and her neck felt as if it had frozen in that position.

They were on some sort of trail and Jevon felt a flash of fear. Nju had told them that a trail in a swamp or jungle was the highway of a predator, usually the most dangerous and fearless. The Garang had the weapon Jevon had bought from Garis, but what could he do if they were attacked by more than one hungry animal? Jevon gave a tiny snort. She was so tired that her only hope would be that the predator would smell, her body odor and look for a less stinky meal. She blinked. It had just now occurred to her why the sacculs had developed the ability to expel all those awful odors.

Thiralo's coughing fit subsided, but when he spoke, his voice was little more than a whisper. "Someone told me that people on Palace come out here for fun. I should like to kick them, if I had the strength."

Jevon managed a ghost of a smile. It was impossible not to like Thiralo.

"Where is he?" she asked.

Thiralo shrugged. "Off scouting. Well, exploring, really. He likes it out here, damn him. You know, he's never been outside the city of Palace. Yet, he seems completely at home in this wilderness."

"The Garang homeworld is a jungle planet, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I believe that to become a Japat, a Garang spends some time in survival framing."

"We spend a year in the jungle, alone."

Nju appeared before them, silent as a revenant, out of the tangle of vines and trees beside the trail. She would never get used to how easily he moved through the undergrowth. She couldn't seem to walk five steps without tripping.

"I don't think I could last a day out here by myself," said Thiralo. "God may have perfect Sight, but I'm afraid I still can't see the difference between an edible and a poisonous rollworm."

"It is in the skin pattern. I will show you again tonight." Nju was proving to be amazingly patient. He had shown Jevon at least a dozen times how to crack the shell on a *dus* to get at the meat, but she still didn't have the hang of it. She felt like an idiot child, though the Garang never gave a hint of condescension. "Rest for a moment. I must tell you what lies ahead and we must make a true plan."

Jevon collapsed to the ground, not even bothering to clear a space. Thiralo settled beside her and the two humans leaned together while Nju crouched before them on his haunches, apparently as fresh as the day they began their flight from Dukayn. Something about the Garang's joints was very different from a human's because his knees extended almost vertically in front of him and they were in constant motion as he adjusted his position. If he were human, Jevon would have thought he was fidgeting.

"We have traveled only a hundred miles and we have left a trail that a talented tracker might follow. I must tell you that Sé Dukayn was much admired among the other Japat for his skill in tracking."

Jevon felt a clutch of terror. After all this, was there no hope?

"I wonder why he hasn't found us already then," said Thiralo.

Nju made an odd motion of his head, what Jevon had learned to equate with a human nod.

"I, too, wonder. Though I believe that I have done what can be done to mislead him. Cutting our implants out and attaching them to native animals will not deceive him for long, even if we are fortunate. I would not be fooled by such a tactic and we must assume that Dukayn is at least as cunning as I am. Perhaps the First Citizen has other more important tasks for him than tracking down three fugitives."

"Maybe," said Jevon. "But he'll come eventually, as soon as he can. He'll come for me. He thinks I'm his . . . mate, or something."

Nju's slitted eyes fixed on her. "Impossible. You and he have not, that is, eh . . ."

Jevon would have laughed at Nju's prudishness under other circumstances. But the subject was too painful.

"He, well, he raped me." The others went very silent. "And he keeps, I don't know, training me, making me do things, testing me. He's been teaching me to fight, too. It's strange."

Nju let out a low keen and for the first time in all the days they had been together since escaping the city, she heard genuine distress in his voice when he spoke.

"Sé Jevon, it is a blasphemy, what he has done." Again, he made the keen, low and mournful. It knifed through Jevon, as if she were hearing the death cry of some animal. "On behalf of all Japat, I beg your forgiveness."

Jevon stared at Nju. The Garang was perfectly serious. After a silent moment, she spoke.

"I'm the one who needs forgiveness, Nju," she said in a whisper, not able to look at him. "I betrayed my patron. Maybe God is punishing me."

"Sé Jevon!" said Thiralo. "God doesn't punish. That's Roha's teaching. God only Sees, Jevon."

That's all.

And transforms our souls into stars. God loves truth because it's so much like the pure fire of a star. It makes all the darkness shine."

"Dukayn said that the Japat don't care about truth or God," said Jevon. "They only care about promises."

"Dukayn misstates the core of the matter, as might be expected of such a man." Nju's voice, usually soft and placid, took on an edge. The alien rose up in a liquid motion and walked a step or two away, as if he couldn't be near them while he spoke of these things. "We Japat do not speak much of our Way, but you have been *huyiu*, marked, by him. It is your right to know what this means."

Jevon didn't like the sound of that.

"Should I go?" asked Thiralo. "So you can have some privacy?"

Nju was quiet a moment. "Yes, Sé Thiralo, if you please. Just a few steps down the trail should be sufficient. Call out if you see or hear anything odd."

Thiralo rose up. Before he shuffled off, though, he leaned over and put a hand on Jevon's shoulder.

"God is the true Witness, Jevon. God has seen your repentance and your courage, just as your lesser acts were known."

After Thiralo was out of sight, Nju drew out a knife and drove it point first into the ground before Jevon.

"You have been wronged by a Japat. I offer you the *uaino vinji*. My life for all."

"I don't know what that means, Nju. I don't know what's going on here."

The Garang lapsed into silence for so long that Jevon thought that he wouldn't answer. Then, finally, he spoke, with more emotion than she'd ever heard from him.

"Do you know why the Garang came to the Pinch? No? I will tell you. The Way of Japat had become an inner struggle for Garang of the Rim. That is an honorable path, but a few among us desired the old Way, the physical testing that leads to *vinj huyiu*, the soul marking. We don't have the time for me to explain all that this means or why it led a few thousand of us to beg the Hirrel to ferry us to a world they found for us in the Pinch. When the macroshunt closed, most of us considered it a sign that we had chosen correctly.

"Because there were so few Garang females among us, the Lifegivers exempted us from most of their laws and we won further concessions as a reward for our efforts during the Schism Wars." Jevon nodded. Everyone knew the story about the Japat Legion who, among other legendary acts, saved the Pope and the world of Retreat from certain destruction. "We males choose our own mates, sometimes from other species. We do not perform genetic screens. We have as many children as we can, which is few, so few. We are still a very small population in the Pinch. The Lifegivers have even helped us make interspecies reproduction possible, so that the Garang do not vanish utterly from the Pinch."

"I thought Garang were forbidden to talk about these things with non-Garang."

Nju let out a sound, cousin to that low keened. It frightened her. .

"Dukayn is Japat, that is, he has been trained as a warrior and follows our religious customs and laws. He, himself, can never be Garang, but he is permitted to mate with our women, to mark them, and if he chooses, teach them the Japat Way."

Jevon blinked. "Are you saying that because he raped me, *I'm* a Garang? That's crazy."

"The situation is more complicated than that, Jevon, although I must tell you that you would not be the first human woman to be so adopted. Only women may be so adopted and only a Japat warrior can do so. Dukayn has committed a very terrible crime, but our Elders do not punish a woman for a man's crime. Should you *wish* to become Garang, then they would

welcome you. You might even become Japat, though you are much too old to compete in the trials and few of our women choose that path."

"I'm human. I can't be Garang. I don't want to be Garang."

"Yes. Being human is so important to you, isn't it? You are a follower of UJU." He leaned close. "Jevon, do you know what UJU means?"

"What? Of course. It's a Palais word that means 'one.' "

"It is also a Garang word meaning 'none.' We have always found the irony amusing. You do not have to become a Garang, Jevon, but it is not such a terrible thing to be a woman among us. Someday, if you wish, I will introduce you to my mothers and sister."

Jevon couldn't tell from his tone whether Nju was joking, but she had to admit that she was curious. No one she knew, except for Dukayn of course, had ever even seen a female Garang.

"Well, what am I going to do about Dukayn?"

"I have an idea about that—"

"Hey, help!" shouted Thiralo, followed by a cry of pain.

Nju spun and ran back up the trail. Jevon pulled his knife from the ground and followed after. Dukayn had spent some time teaching her how to fight with a knife, but she couldn't imagine actually using such a thing on a living creature. She heard something behind her and turned around to see a pair of dirty wild saccules come out of the brush. They were carrying some sort of weapon like a sling made out of vines. These saccules were very different from the neuters that Jevon saw every day. For one thing, they were about twice as large and they exuded a much heavier smell. Their bodies were covered with keloids that snaked over much of their callused skin. The taller of the two, wearing some sort of skullcap of feathered flesh, let out a boom like a hammer on sheet metal. She pointed the knife at them, but the saccules didn't appear to take any notice though they didn't move any closer.

A few moments later voices and a rustling sound warned her that someone was coming back down the path. She shifted her gaze from the wild saccules to see Nju and Thiralo approaching, followed by another three wild saccules. Thiralo limped ahead of Nju, his swampsuit ripped at the leg. He was speaking to the Garang as they rounded the corner.

"... cartographers, perhaps."

"Cartographers?" Jevon stared at the other factor. "You're joking."

Thiralo looked at her with an expression that was equal parts amusement and tolerance.

"The saccules aren't wild animals, Sé Jevon, no matter what they told you in school. They have a society, though it's very different from our own. Navigating the swamp and establishing territories is a big part of it. True, they don't have language as we understand it, but they are capable of communicating among themselves and with other sapients."

Nju had not relaxed and Jevon found that significant. The Garang spoke in a low voice. "Why did they attack you, Thiralo?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I think I managed to convince them that we're harmless, though."

One of the saccules who had confronted Jevon began to moan and thrum rapidly at Thiralo who frowned.

"This is strange. Those are the sort of sounds that gendered saccules make to their neuters. I'm not sure, but this saccule seems to think we're, well, human neuters."

"What does that mean?"

Thiralo chuckled softly. "Well, he, this is a male, would consider us the property of the tribe."

"I can kill these three behind us, but the two near Sé Jevon may escape, or kill us. What is

your counsel, Sé Thiralo?"

Thiralo looked shocked. "My goodness, no! Aside from the fact that these are innocent sapients, you would create a blood feud between their entire tribe and us. I doubt we would survive a night out here with the saccules seriously hunting us. I'd always assumed that they would just ignore us, as they've ignored most humans who travel through their territories in the swamp. It's very unusual for them to attack a human. They certainly understand reprisals, since it's a major feature of their own society. I wish that Sister Romero were here. She's the one who has studied the various tribes and customs of the gendered saccules."

Jevon wondered why the saccules were just standing around, listening. Surely they couldn't understand what was being said? She saw that one of them was wearing something, a human device made out of blueglass. Were these saccules someone's property? But no, these were gendered saccules. Still, something was odd about this situation. She wasn't sure she completely believed what the saccules had told Thiralo. Strange. A day ago she would have laughed at the notion that a saccule was smart enough to form an idea, let alone subtle enough to lie.

"Nju, what is that?"

Nju and Thiralo followed her gesture.

"I do not know," said Nju. "Some trinket it found?"

"I don't think so," said Thiralo thoughtfully.

He stepped forward with a questioning boom and amazingly, the saccule wearing the device came right up to him and boomed back, showing no fear or suspicion. The factor examined the device for several moments and the saccule made no objection. Finally, he laughed ruefully.

"Hmph. This is a commlink of a very old design. I've seen its like in museums on Retreat. It's not active, I don't think. It's been on solar recharge, I would guess. There is a counter next to the recharge gauge with a date/time window. Let me see if I still remember the old conversion formula."

Thiralo bent his head in thought for a minute or two. Jevon saw how all the saccules had become very excited and pressed closer, though none made any threatening move. Nju had the nervedicer glove ready to strike. Thiralo knelt to the ground and scratched out some numbers and worked out a calculation. He kept brushing out the result and starting over. Finally, he stood up.

"My figures must be wrong. But if they're not, this device has been dormant for centuries, maybe as much as a thousand years."

"Interesting," said Nju.

"Can you activate it?" asked Jevon.

Thiralo looked at her in surprise and shrugged.

"I don't know. It looks simple enough. There's a reset button next to the solar recharger." Thiralo stepped up to the saccule and made a rumbling sound that was clearly a polite request. The saccule raised his, or her, hands away from the body, palm out. The factor nodded and bent over the commlink. After a short time, he made a sound of satisfaction and stepped back from the saccule.

The blueglass commlink let out a squeak and rumble, then spoke in stilted Palais, a language that of the three of them, only Jevon knew.

"Map access initiated. Lingua bases active. Greetings, user. Enter meta."

Jevon translated for her companions. Nju and Thiralo stood dumbstruck, but Jevon worked with such things all the time. This was some sort of agent, she was sure, and she knew how to handle agents that were made for specific functions, or demanded priority metas. Arno had taught her the trick.

"I am a priority deen, override code *treise*. Code me as meta Jev and open all accounts."

"Done. How may I assist, Citizen Jev?"

"Who are you?" she asked. "And what is your function?"

"I am a Calioistro remote observer. My function is to monitor saccules and process statistical data. Are you here to downlink, Citizen Jev?"

Jevon translated for Thiralo and Nju.

Thiralo laughed.

"Sister Romero is going to love this."

Nju stepped close to Jevon and spoke low. "If this truly is one of the legendary research remotes, then it will have a base station not far away."

Jevon nodded.

"Yes, we will want to downlink. Can you direct us to your, um, home?" She couldn't remember the Palais word for "base."

"Home is Rimsekt Firw. Directions require holo-access."

"No, you're, uh, place of study of saccules."

"Base station located one *siv* northeast." *Siv*? She hoped that wasn't a large measure of distance because she was tired enough to collapse already. "Can you have these saccules guide us there?"

"I do not know."

The device began emitting booms and rumbles and moans, like a symphony of various thunders. The five saccules rumbled back and there was no missing their ecstatic delight. They all hugged and touched the three companions so much that Jevon felt as if she'd been mauled by vakrs.

"Are you actually communicating with them?" Jevon asked.

"No, Citizen Jev. I am simply repeating some of their basic phonemes."

The sounds clearly delighted the saccules, whether they meant anything to them or not. Finally, the creatures calmed down enough to line them up to guide them off the path and into the swamp. -

Thiralo leaned toward Jevon. His features were a blur behind the smeared and dirty faceplate, but he was definitely grinning.

"I've seen this marching configuration before, Sé Jevon. It would seem that you've been elected to Mother. Nju and I are now officially Fathers. Congratulations. What do you think of our children?"

Jevon gave him a sour look.

Vida and her entourage entered the courtroom. Vanna's legal team was late, as usual. The autojudge noted the L'var presence and while Vida's lawyers fed it a series of briefs regarding the L'var holdings, Vida leaned over to whisper to her factor.

"So, Dukayn will be out of the city all day?" Vida asked Samante.'.

By now, everyone knew that the Tomb of Ri Paha Tura had exploded, no matter how hard the Peronidas tried to cover it up with the lame story of a weapons dump accident. Naturally, Dukayn was spending every spare moment there. Karlo's hatred of Tura was legendary. All the survivors of the genocide on Kephalon had an obsession with the Lep who killed a world with plagues. Dukayn was no exception.

The other woman gave her a sharp look.

"I know that tone, Vida. Whatever you're thinking, just remember that Dukayn *will* be back soon and he has a long memory."

"Just a quick trip out of Government House, Sam. I want to be the People's Factor for real. I want to meet with people without Karlo's security drones monitoring every word. Things are so tense. I have to try and find a way to build bridges."

"Vida! What about the Leps?"

Vida tapped the force belt around her waist. Karlo had given it to her on her wedding day.

"This will protect me. Most Leps are opposed to this terrorist Riva. Someday, maybe even Karlo will be their friend."

Samante looked at her skeptically. Vida laughed.

"All right, I'm not that naive. But the Leps *do* need a voice, a real voice. Otherwise, there is no hope at all of healing this civil war. I don't think Karlo understands just how important the media is to the average citizen. They won't stand for this blackout much longer. Even the Marked citizens of Pleasure Sect have a vote on the Council, after all."

If Vida had her way, that voice would someday be Aleen Raal. Once Vida took her seat on the Council, she would have considerable personal power and she planned to use it to help her friends and family back in Pleasure Sect. One thing at a time, though.

"Vida?" She turned around to see that Tarick Avon, Pansect Media's lead intake and the official voice of the Peronidas, had joined them. "I need to speak with you. Privately."

Vida nodded to Samante, who moved away. "What is it, Tarick?"

The man was whippet thin, balding, with piercing blue eyes. She'd liked him from their first meeting. He had worked his way into an exclusive contract with the Peronidas by offering them a conduit to the media, but he retained his independence and he refused to report outright propaganda. He walked a thin line these days under martial law, but Vanna liked him, so Karlo gave him latitude. She knew he was upset over being used to pass on the bogus story about the ammo dump.

"I have some information that I think you should know." He glanced at one of his wrist implants, some sort of electronic sniffer. He seemed satisfied that their conversation wasn't being monitored. "Your husband left Souk days ago."

"What? But . . . what happened to him? Why isn't he back?"

"No one knows. Some people think that Dukayn may have had his shuntjammer sabotaged."

Vida frowned. "Well, I know Dukayn doesn't think much of Wan, but I don't think he'd let any harm come to him, at least until after . . . um . . . Karlo gets his heirs."

"That was my thought, too."

"Does Karlo know?"

"Not yet."

"But he will soon. I'm not sure it'll matter much to him. He and Dukayn are so focused on the Tomb explosion. Anyway, Pansect is going to feed this tonight. Thought you'd like a bit of advance notice."

"Thank you, Tarick. Please let me know if you hear anything else, okay?"

"Sure." He glanced over at Samante, grinned, then leaned close to Vida. "She doesn't trust me much, huh?"

Vida shrugged. "She respects your work, but she's also paid to be suspicious."

"Give her a raise."

So saying, Tarick gave Samante a friendly wave and took his leave. Samante came to her. "What was that all about?"

"I'm not sure. I'll let you know when I find out," said Vida.

Just then, Vanna's legal team showed up, but the Second Citizen herself had not.

"Damn it! I wouldn't have wasted my time on this except that Vanna was supposed to be here to start the *vas tri*." In fact, after their little chat in Karlo's office, she would have bet on it.

"Take it easy, Vida. I'm sure Vanna had a good reason for not being here. Besides, her absence is going to cost her in the judgment." Indeed, the autojudge was already weighing precedents and Vanna's inability to provide interactive depositions was losing her key points in the case. Vida's choices for the judges were accepted by default, a significant victory.

"Well, this is loath. I'm not going to spend the rest of my afternoon here, that's for sure. Do you want to come with me into the city or not?"

Samante looked very unhappy, but she nodded.

"Okay, great. Let's go."

Predictably, Jak fought Vida over the impromptu outing. In the end, she won the battle, but only after agreeing that the party would be a small group—Jak, Vida, Samante, and Greenie—and that they would all wear disguises designed by the Garang himself. Also, Jak made certain that Vida's force belt was operating perfectly. It was weird and a little unsettling to have the Garang attack her in a variety of ways to test the belt, but he seemed to enjoy it so much that she didn't have the heart to cut it short.

They left Government House by wiretrain, just like any gang of commuting workers, and traveled into the downtown nexus of Center Sect through a driving afternoon rain. By the time they arrived at the main transfer station for wiretrains, the rain had slackened to a light drizzle.

Vida felt every nerve come alive and she was humming with energy. This is what she'd been missing. She'd spent all of her life wandering the streets of Pleasure Sect, poking her nose into every niche and longtube. She'd forgotten how good it felt to climb out onto a buttress with no railings far above the street and just watch the world roll by. The sky was, as usual, a dull gray, but Vida found herself looking up into it again and again. How had she forgotten her dreams of the stars? Government House was numbing her soul. She was turning into just another sedentary politician. She wished Rico were with her. He spent too much time cooped up indoors. He should be with her now.

Samante followed her patron everywhere with the wounded air of a martyr, while Jak seemed to pick up the same charge of energy that Vida felt. Greenie waddled behind them all as fast as it could, but the small saccule was often left far behind while Vida and Jak raced along the streets. Samante hung back with Greenie. Vida heard them honking, to one another like old friends. Considering that Samante had once thought the saccules deserved to be enslaved, the change was startling. I've had one good effect since I've been here, thought Vida, cull or not.

Finally, Jak and Vida calmed down enough to organize their travels. Vida's original plan had been to interview a cross-section of citizens in the public square of Center Sect, where the public holo podiums were supposed to give every citizen an uncensored soapbox to speak to the media. But she hadn't realized that, with martial law, no one was allowed to congregate there. Even in Pleasure Sect, Vida had known about the Voices of Center Sect and watched discs of some of the famous speeches, including Karlo's acceptance speech when he became First Citizen by acclamation. It was chilling to see them silenced.

It was weird to see so few saccules, too. The neuters were usually everywhere performing a thousand small tasks, cleaning, running errands, scrubbing the endless spores from the streets and walls, which, come to think of it, looked like they hadn't been cleaned in days.

Vida managed to chat with a few people here and there and no one appeared to see

through their disguises. Vida pretended to be an intake working for Pansect Media; Tarick had even supplied her with the proper documents. It was fun to play at being someone else. Jak and Samante were not public figures and few people gave them more than a glance. But the conversations were all short and superficial. No one wanted to talk about politics, or anything else for that matter. Before martial law, you couldn't stop people from offering a hundred opinions on everything from the First Citizen's heir to Hirrel poetry. How could Palace work without the Voices?

As the afternoon wore on, fewer and fewer people could be found on the streets of Center Sect, one of the busiest Sects in Palace. Other than small groups of workers scurrying to and from wiretrains and aircabs, they saw very few citizens at ease anywhere. Protectors traveled in pairs. It was Jak who pointed out that they weren't carrying stunsticks.

"Those are perseps," he said.

"What's a 'persep'?" asked Samante.

"It's a personal epicannon," answered Vida. Jak looked at her with his features tangled in an alien expression that she'd learned to interpret as surprise. She grinned. "I guess those holonovels are good for something, huh?"

Jak turned his gaze to Samante. "As Sé Vida says, they are epicannons, highly lethal weapons, specially coded to the user so that they are useless without their owner's brain pattern to activate them. They were once common on Kephalon."

Samante seemed shocked. "But weapons aren't allowed on Palace. It's a capital crime for anyone, even Protectors, to have weapons that can kill."

Vida looked at her friend with an amused expression. "Funny, Samante, but Riva's Leps don't seem to have heard of that law."

Samante was in no mood to be teased.

"You don't understand, Vida. After the Schism Wars, it was the one thing everyone agreed on. No matter how bad things got, no killing weapons, ever. Too many gene-lines were ended. Martial law is one thing, but people will never accept—"

Suddenly there was an enormous honk, a boom that sounded like thunder. The powerboom of a saccule. A terrible smell like rotting moss filled the air.

"Greenie!"

Vida whipped around and saw Greenie fling its small body at a trio of Leps encased in swampsuits who hastily drew out oddly shaped weapons. The Leps killed a pair of Protectors; their bodies were torn apart as if bombs had exploded in their stomachs and skulls. One of the Leps swatted the saccule aside and fired its weapon, a flash of light and no sound. Jak's hands moved so swiftly that they were a blur. Edged weapons sprouted from the throats and eyes of two of the Leps. The third one, however, managed to fire his weapon before he died. Vida felt the impact of the weapon's charge. It slammed her off her feet and against a wall so hard that she blacked out. Every bone in her body felt as if it had been broken. Her skin was on fire and she felt like a cold stone.

When she opened her eyes, the world had become a too bright blur. The force belt. Why didn't it work?

"It did work, Sé Vida," said Jak. She hadn't been aware she'd spoken aloud. "You have been badly hurt, but without the belt, you would be no more than dust now."

Dust? Vida tried to blink away the blurring, to no avail. Greenie?

"Greenie is dead, Vida," said Samante.

Dead? How could that be? Her head hurt and a word kept echoing over and over while the light faded. Shorry. Shorry. Shorry . . . The light died.

Ri Tal Molos met Rico at the door to the Cyberguild offices as Rico arrived. The old Lep limped up to him. Rico wasn't sure, but he got the impression that Molos was upset about something.

"Sé Rico, I'm glad I found you."

Rico didn't really want to talk with the Lep cybermaster at the moment, but couldn't think of a way to brush him off. He needed to talk to Hi and he wanted to see Vida. He waited impatiently while the Lep caught his breath.

"Your uncle has asked us to meet him in his office in an hour to discuss our . . . project. I hoped that you might be free to spend that time with me in my office. I have something I'd like to share with you."

No way to refuse.

"Sure. That'd be great," Rico said with no particular enthusiasm. "Just let me leave this stuff in my office."

Rico left the material from the compound next to his station and took another minute to record a quick message for Vida. Then he rejoined Molos outside the Cyberguild offices.

"Okay, let's go."

"Splendid. Follow me, please."

Molos was careful to keep his hood up at all times. Still, the Lep's broad shoulders, wide hips, and distinctive limping gait would normally have made him a target for scrutiny by Dukayn's forces. At the moment, however, Dukayn was gone from the city and his people were hard-pressed to maintain order. Come to think of it, they probably had orders to leave Molos alone. Karlo wouldn't want to upset Palace's uneasy truce with the Lep homeworld by harassing the legendary Ri Tal Molos.

Molos soon lapsed into a forbidding silence and the two cybermasters walked together without speaking. At last, after traveling deep into the less fashionable quadrant of the West Tower, where none of the lift booths worked properly, they climbed up a seemingly endless ladderwell to an unmarked niche in the midst of a row of legal offices. Rico was out of breath and his heart was pounding. It didn't make him feel any better to see that Molos wasn't even winded by the climb.

The office was a miserably small place, windowless, quite a comedown for the famous Lep who had once been an ambassador for an entire world. Still, considering how Dukayn and Karlo felt about Leps, especially after the attack on the Tomb, Rico wondered how Molos had managed to keep an office in Government House at all. He must be the only Lep on Palace working here. Perhaps Dukayn wished to keep the old Lep close by under surveillance.

The Lep's office was a bizarre place. It was filled with green and silver nets and hammocks that doubled as decoration and furniture. There were mementos of his distinguished career. Rico saw the golden web medallion given to Molos after his triumph in negotiating the terms of peace at the end of the Lep-Human War. Currently, it was in service as a paperweight. Typical of Molos to brush aside symbols of fame, Rico thought. The walls were mottled with some sort of gray moss that smelted of damp earth and flowers. It was odd to see a Mapstation cradled in an intricately woven web instead of part of a datachair. Molos slumped into a websling and his head, still hooded, dropped to his chest. He neither spoke nor moved. Perhaps he was more tired than he cared to show.

Rico stood awkwardly for some moments, but the Lep didn't budge. Was he even awake? Rico went over to the Mapstation with the idea of checking his mail, perhaps even sending a note to Vida, but he was soon engrossed in studying the console. It had been modified in an odd, yet familiar way. After a few moments, Rico realized why he recognized the mods. Arno had worked on this station. As if the Lep had read his mind, Molos spoke.

"Do you know, Sé Rico, how very much I admired your cousin?"

Rico turned around. Molos had tucked his feet up under him and his websling rocked gently

around him.

"I didn't know that you even knew Arno. He never mentioned it."

"Oh, yes," said the old Lep with a guttural sigh. "We corresponded often when he was a young apprentice. You two have much in common. The other day, when you were making your astonishing deductive leaps regarding Riva, I felt almost as if Arno were present with us. What a surprise and joy to be again in the presence of genius."

"He helped me to regain access to the Map." Molos gestured to the reconfigured Mapstation. "Even as an apprentice, he never hesitated to oppose a guild rule that he disapproved of. I cannot tell you how grateful I was to him. He did it as a favor, never asking anything in return. He did it partly because he knew how painful it is for a cybe to be sundered from the Map, and partly—"

"For the challenge," finished Rico.

"Yes. For the challenge. What a remarkable man he was. Full of energy and ideals and good humor. I will always remember his laughter. And I will always bear the shame that it was my own brother who tortured and killed him. He was an idealist. It is good for old cynics like me to be close to idealists. Until Arno and your uncle entered my life, I had lost faith in humankind. I was resigned to the alone, disgraced."

"Disgraced?" Rico climbed into one of Molos's web-slings. It took more than one try and he kept feeling that he was about to fall out. But there was also something restful about the gentle swaying motion. In a short time, he wondered how he'd ever managed without a websling. "But you're one of the most famous Leps who ever lived."

Molos wrinkled his lips into the grimace that passed for an imitation of a human smile.

"To humans, perhaps. My own kind has little use for me, or my family Line. It wasn't always so, you know. The Tal Line traces its lineage back six thousand years. Back in the Rim, it required a dozen mahtis just to keep track of our *li'ya*, our life-knots of Moments. Now I alone represent the last of our Line. Nalet, who you knew as Vi-Kata, should have been the father of a proud family. You cannot imagine how much he desired to be the respected father of a great family. I believe that Riva offered him such a life, a Standing, and the hope of many children."

"What about you? Why didn't you have children?" Rico blushed. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

Molos made a dismissive gesture.

"Hmph. I have had my share of bed-mates, it's true. But I have a . . . damage in my genotype. The Lifegivers permanently denied me the privilege of children. My wife left me." He spake casually, but denial of a birth permit must have been a crushing blow. Rico knew people who had been denied. They were never the same after. He thought about Vida, when she had told him that she was a cull. The devastation in her eyes and voice broke his heart.

"But there must be a way to correct the flaw?"

Molos let out an odd rumble, a cryptic sound that Rico didn't know how to interpret.

"No, Rico, my friend, not with current technology— even if the Lifegivers cared enough to do so for a Lep without family or Standing. My wife spent many years trying. It broke something inside her, something fundamental." Again, Molos fell silent. When he next spoke, it was with the air of someone who had finally reached a decision. "But there exist datablocks of Colonizer biotech that might hold such a key."

"Really? Where? Why hasn't it been made public?"

Molos shifted in his websling.

"I speak of the datablocks known as the Spagyra, that Tura used to learn how to make her terrible plagues."

"That can't be right. I read that all of Tura's notes were destroyed after the war. Karlo and the Lifegivers swore to it in the presence of the Pope. They'd risk excommunication. Are you sure it wasn't just another of Riva's tricks?"

"Ah, Sé Rico. You are still so young. The knowledge in those datablocks confer enormous power. Few are immune to its lure. For such knowledge, many would betray their souls, even under the gaze of the Eye of God himself. No, the datablocks exist.

"I would like to believe that the one who saved the blocks originally did so out of a respect for knowledge, for the blocks contain more than just the recipe for the hellish plagues that Tura used to commit genocide on Kephalon. They contain knowledge that has been lost to the Pinch for a thousand years, since the Schism Wars in fact. But I suspect they were kept as a military weapon, held in reserve for a desperate day. No matter what the original motive, the blocks have changed hands many times over the years. I could tell you a day's worth of stories about their-travels. One of those hands was, for a time, myself, which is how I came to know of them. But the Lep high council took them from me before I could finish decoding them and gave them to Ri Paha Tura, who used what she found for her own insane ends, far beyond anything even the council had imagined."

"And these datablocks have information that could correct your gene damage?"

"The Spagyra contains an encoded library devoted to life extension and instructions for repairing an immense array of genetic anomalies. But my hope of children is a minor matter. It is Tura's data, with its instructions for creating plagues like the one that devastated Kephalon, that is most troubling. The Spagyra contains keys to many doors and possibly even a weapon against Riva. I suspect that they may even hold the secret to the L'var genotype. The L'vars were mentioned more than once in the blocks, in the part I managed to decode. That information was considered so sensitive by the Colonizers that it was split into many parts and coded in different ways. It was one of the reasons I took such an interest in Vida."

"But why would old datablocks mention the L'vars? Why would they have data on just one family?"

"I don't know, my young friend. I had hoped that you, or Vida, might answer that question, in fact. The L'vars possess some crucial gift that has been engineered to breed true. It is related to the Map, of that I am certain. I believe that it is no accident that the L'vars have been members of the Cyberguild since before the Colonizers entered the Pinch."

"So all those stories of the L'vars being cybersorcerers, you're saying that there's something to that?"

"I don't know. I suspect so. Seldom do such specific legends grow without a seed of truth. I had wondered whether you and Sé Vida might have discovered something on your own. I know that you have worked together already on a number of projects.

"Whatever the truth of the L'var legend, Riva certainly fears the genotype. Why else send Vi-Kata, the Pinch's most terrible assassin, to kill a mere girl?"

"Yeah, I've wondered about that myself. She sacrificed Vi-Kata in the end just to take one last chance at killing Vida. But why should Riva fear Vida? It would take years to train her as a cybe even if we ever did figure out what she can do that no other cybe can."

Molos nodded, another human mannerism he had learned. "True, Sé Rico. But keep in mind that Riva is inhumanly patient. She has been working behind the scenes for many years, perhaps even before the Great War. It is in her nature to anticipate problems and deal with them efficiently."

Rico thought all this over. Molos waited patiently. He rubbed a pinch of Geriose into a discolored section of his neck and sighed with pleasure. That, at least, was a sound that humans and Leps shared.

"Sé Molos, why are you telling me this now?"

"Partly, I am hoping to atone for a terrible error of arrogance. Hundreds of people died in Zir's attack. I could have saved them, if I had only shared what I knew. I have spent too

many years hoarding information, like a jade-wing feathering his nest with bright things. It is one of my worst habits, difficult to unlearn at my age. I feel that the time for such games of secrecy is past. I have accepted the trust of many people: Arno, Aleen, Hi, Vida, you. But I have seldom returned that trust. My brother and I hatched from the same clutch, I'm afraid."

Rico swung in the websling, considering. "That's pretty much how everybody is on Palace, though, you know? We all keep secrets, try to use them to gain an advantage. Even Mom and Uncle Hi do it, and they're the most unselfish people I know."

"True. But I think we are approaching a crisis point. Whatever Riva plans, the destruction of the Tomb was just an opening gambit. We who work for the Light must band together and keep no more secrets."

Rico nodded. "Too bad Zir couldn't have survived that blast. We might have been able to find out more about Riva's plans."

"Ah, Sé Rico, but that is the point of this conversation." The old Lep cybermaster leaned forward in his sling, black eyes intent. "I believe Zir *did* survive and furthermore so did Ri Paha Tura. Riva had some plan for their escape, I am sure of it. At least Zir was convinced that they would all survive the attack on the Tomb and we have learned that almost nothing is beyond Riva's powers."

"Oh, no!"

"Indeed. I expect that Dukayn will verify this soon. Karlo's fury will be unimaginable. No Lep, not even I, will be safe from reprisal.

"So, you see why I believe we must locate the Spagyra now, quickly, while I am still free to help. Imagine what Tura could do if she had that knowledge. Imagine what Riva might do." The old Lep settled back into his websling so that it rocked gently with his weight. "Are you willing to go with me now, onto the Map? It is a terrible risk. If we're caught, I will be executed and you might be unguilded. Yet now may be our last best chance of finding Riva through Zir."

"I don't know. We should wait and talk to Uncle Hi. He'll want to check with the Cyberguild. They might have a better plan." Also, he was just coming off a marathon seven-hour session. He shouldn't walk the Map for another day, at least.

"It is your decision, Sé Rico, but yes, perhaps you're right. We should wait to hear what the Cyberguild thinks. There are many wise sapients among them. I may overestimate Riva's abilities." Still, Rico could hear the conflict in his voice.

Rico eased out of the websling and strolled over to Molos's Mapstation. The truth was, though, Rico was dying to try it out. What sort of additions had Arno made? Plus, Rico still had that idea about substrate security he wanted to test. It would be pretty nice to casually offer such a tool to Uncle Hi. That would be his proof that he didn't need to work with other cybes to produce valuable results. Also, he thought it was time to show Molos the Chameleon Gate. The Lep was right. The time for secrets had passed. Hi and Rico, too, had been keeping secrets from their ally.

"Can we tandem from here?" he asked.

"Yes. I also have some of the trance-drugs."

Rico looked through Molos's medchest. Man, he had everything imaginable here and all high quality. Rico picked up a vial of slowbeat. He'd heard it could keep you on the Map for hours beyond the norm, days even if your body was properly conditioned. The stuff was illegal on Palace, though cybes on Souk used it routinely. He pocketed a pair of vials for later.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Rico rolled back the sleeve of his shirt to give access to his skin pumps.

"Are you sure, Sé Rico?" Molos's words were cautious, but Rico could hear the urgency.

"Yes." Rico paused. "But maybe we should leave a message for Hi. Just in case."

Molos nodded and began speaking softly into a vid-screen in the corner. Meanwhile, Rico took in the full suite of cyberdrugs, including a full dose of slowbeat. They hit fast, took him entirely out of his physical form like a blast of pure lightning. Rico had never been able to step through the transition state so quickly. It was as if he had a direct connection to Mapspace. He felt a rush of pleasure at the ease of movement and clarity of thought. He was always able to think more clearly here, but Molos's cyberdrugs made his mind feel like a diamond. The modifications to the station also bypassed all sorts of adaptation routines. Fine by Rico, who had never needed the acclimation stages anyway. Maybe Molos would tell him his connection for the slowbeat and let him borrow his station to study Arno's mods so he could add them to his own station.

Rico found himself drifting in a very odd Mapspace. It was like being an insect in amber. He could see the Map below through the prismatic facets of the construct, but he was separate from it. Molos and Arno had built some kind of pocket-space above the Map. From here, a master might be able to monitor and maybe even passively collect information, but the walls of the prism were composed of some kind of energy field that would shield anything in it from direct contact. It would also be proof against route trackers and sniffers. No wonder Molos could access the Map at will without being detected. Rico spent some time studying the construct, wondering if he could make such a thing himself.

Minutes crept by. Time was a flexible concept in Map-space and not a reliable gauge of what was happening in the physical world, but Rico was becoming impatient. That was a side effect of the drugs, too. They tended to enhance a person's natural feelings and Rico was often impatient with other cybes. No one seemed able to keep up with him. Except Arno, of course. It pleased Rico to think of Arno as a good friend to Molos.

Rico distracted himself by studying the prism. He decided finally that it must be entirely Molos's invention; Arno would have left his sigmeta in the usual place, a back door in case of emergency. Rico waited a little longer for Molos, then decided to summon the Chameleon Gate, an ancient artifact of the Map that the Hernanes y Jons clan had discovered and used to access the Map without leaving route marks. He couldn't wait to see Molos's reaction when he saw it.

Rico and the Gate had some kind of innate affinity that he hadn't figured out yet. But after the first few times he'd used it, the Gate would come to him, no matter where it was, when he called. Rico even had a hunch that it wasn't responding to the supermeta as much as Rico's own focused need for it. Rico was looking forward to showing it off. The Lep was right, it was time to stop keeping secrets from friends. He felt sure that Hi would agree. Also, Molos might have some good ideas about why the Gate was acting strangely of late, acting independently. The Lep had an incisive mind.

A moment after the summoning, a shifting borealis of color rippled before him. The Gate hesitated outside the prism, extended some colorful tendrils to stroke the construct, then flowed through without apparent effort. It wrapped itself around Rico like a second warm skin. There was a tingle and a rush of golden fire in his veins. Rico felt as if he could travel anywhere at all. It took him a moment to adjust to the feeling of suffocation, though of course Mapbodies didn't actually perform any physical functions. Rico was about to send a chime back to Molos's station when he felt a terrifying sensation. As if his heart had stopped beating. He knew this feeling from crisis simulations. His connection to his physical body had been severed somehow. He could think of only two possible reasons for the sever: either his system had gone into massive cardiac arrest from reaction to all the drugs, or the Mapstation had completely crashed. In either case, Molos would know what to do.

Molos's prism was designed to prevent communication out, to shield it from detection, presumably. Rico floated there, helpless and stunned, unable to chime for help. He didn't know it was possible for a person's consciousness to remain on the Map after a sever. In fact, he was sure it *wasn't* possible, yet here he was. Might it be the Gate?

Rico had often felt an odd sensation when traveling on the Map, especially with the Chameleon Gate. It was a feeling as if the breath of a voice brushed across his body, speaking in some eternal language. He felt that now, more strongly than ever before in his life. But he had no idea what it meant. How long could his consciousness survive out here? It suddenly hit

him. His body might be dead. Could a man's consciousness survive independent of its body? Had he overdosed on the cyberdrugs? He had to find Hi. He had to find his Uncle Hi.

The Gate seemed to understand. It flowed back out of the prism with Rico and carried him away. Rico looked back and saw the prism flare into a vertical explosion of light, a candle. He felt the heat of it. What could it mean? Had Riva found Molos's hidden place? The candle instantly set in pursuit of Rico and the Gate. Rico froze in panic, then babbled out an emergency meta that would take them to the Protectors' main Mapspace. Not even a candle could stand against the security icons there.

As they hurtled over the stylized virtual world of the Map, Rico's mind, sharpened by the cyberdrugs and attuned to thinking clearly and logically, began to add up details. What Lep had the skill to subvert the Map as Riva did? What Lep was in a position to know of Vida's importance and Arno's investigations? What Lep had access to the Calioistro mindcore and the tools to walk the Map without detection? What Lep had reason to hate humans? It was all so obvious. A revenant didn't have to be the same gender, or even look at all like the person directing it. It all added up to a terrible conclusion.

Ri Tal Molos must be Riva.

Orbital had become a frenzy of activity as everyone prepared to evacuate.

Damo finished the task Barra set him in minutes, but she was still talking with a big group of people and he didn't want to bother her. What if she got tired of him? He looked around to make sure Pero wasn't watching him. Pero was Father's favorite. If Damo made a mistake, he might tell him and Father would make him come back to Palace and Damo could imagine nothing worse. On Palace, he was just a nuisance, always getting in trouble for saying or doing the wrong thing. Here, maybe he wouldn't get hit all the time for reasons he didn't understand. He had to do something to make Barra like him. He had to show her how much he could help her.

Damo decided to explore Nimue a little, while Sé Barra was busy arguing with Pero. He didn't want Pero to notice him. Maybe he'd forget Damo was even here.

Most of the Nimue Orbital was still lifeless and dark, without even atmosphere or gravity, so Damo stayed in the corridors that were working. The fusion generator in the center of Orbital sent subatomic pulses through the blueglass of the asteroid and the reaction created a soft glow in the walls that seemed like walking through the sky on a sunny day, at least in the blueglass that hadn't been permanently rendered inert by the Lep hellbombs. There was a way to fix that, Damo thought, but you'd have to have a whole lot of fusion energy, maybe as much as a big sun.

He trailed his hand along the wall, enjoying the silky feeling of the blueglass under his fingers. This blueglass was different from other kinds, he could tell. It was older than most of the stuff on Palace, which had been grown by the AIs. This blueglass was better, more efficient, like a lot of the twin towers. You didn't need a Mappoint for this kind of blueglass. He'd already made a few crude resonators and experimented on lots of the blueglass in the East Tower. If you picked the right spot, and you didn't mind working slowly, you could even send a message on the hyperMap, though there was no one for Damo to talk to. It took too long, and Damo couldn't think of a way to fix that, so it probably wasn't a very useful idea. He wanted to come up with something really special to impress Sé Barra. He'd read everything she'd written and she was his hero. No one on Palace really understood how important she was. As a journeyman, Sé Barra was the one who had opened the conduit in the Calioistro firewall to make what was left of the AI accessible, though her brother got most of the credit. She figured out how to modify Mappoints to send holos over the hyperMap. She was the only person in the Pinch who really seemed to understand that different kinds of blueglass could do different things. Damo wished that Barra was his mother. He had watched Rico's investiture on the vidscreen and been so jealous. His uncle hugged him. His mother kissed him. In Damo's family, the best you could hope for was that you wouldn't get hit too hard for making a mistake.

His own mother had been too afraid to fight his father for custody. He still remembered the last time she'd held him, a fleeting hug, tears, and she'd told him that she loved him, that she was sorry, that she would visit him. But she'd left him all the same, left him to Karlo. And she'd never come back. Damo wasn't even as important as a saccule to Magla.

Damo paused in the corridor. He'd wandered into a chamber shaped like a crystal. The inner light of the blueglass suffused the room, so he felt as if he were walking into a pool of azure.

The room looked empty, but that didn't seem right to him. According to the plans he'd snuck out of the Cyberguild's library, this should have been the room where intersection equipment was set up, when Nimue was an active AI talking to cybes, back before the macrohunt closed. Damo craned his neck and turned around following the pattern and shape of the walls. It was an icosidodecahedron. AIs liked thirty-two-sided figures, though Damo didn't know why. Maybe it was like the way he loved knots that twisted into each other and made connections that you couldn't really see with your eyes. Shapes were fun. Everything had a special shape that it wanted to be, if you could just think of it. His own private shape was a triple twist of a Mobius. Whenever he'd been hit for some reason he didn't understand, he went into his head and thought of his shape, made it more complete. He could spend hours following the twists of his shape, letting it take him into a place you couldn't see, where no one could follow.

Damo visualized what the room must have looked like back when it was filled with the devices that allowed a sapient to translate an AI's language into Gen. Everything would have had to be placed just so. Changing a room's shape changed everything.

He strolled to one of the room's facets and brushed his hand slowly over its face until his fingers found a tiny imperfection. Yeah, this was where the touchpoint had been. He put his face close to the wall but he couldn't see the flaw. Still, if you connected the right shape and kind of blueglass here, you could probably talk to someone anywhere on Orbital. The Nimue lattice would act as a kind of resonance chamber. Would Barra like to be able to do that? Damo smiled, then quickly hid it. It wasn't ever safe to smile. He'd laughed once during a lesson with his father and the slap had knocked him unconscious. He'd never smiled again.

Damo caressed the touchpoint. He could make it work for Barra. She had held him on the shuttle, called him "dearling." No one had done that since Magla left, except Wan. He missed Wan, the only person in his family who'd ever seemed to care about him at all. Wan had been hit a lot, too. Damo had heard him cry, once.

He stepped back and turned around, again studying the chamber. He would need a lot of blueglass, of the really old kind. And he would need a shaper tool with special tolerances and a way to measure sizes very precisely. He'd seen tools like that in one of the tech's kits. He could do it. He would do it, as a gift for Barra. And maybe she'd hug him like she hugged her son.

Maybe she'd love him, too.

* * *

Once the Caliostro remote became active, you couldn't shut the thing up. It boomed, moaned, and trilled to the five cartographers who had found Jevon, Thiralo, and Nju, apparently trying to develop some sort of crude lexicon. With that and poor Thiralo's constant coughing and sneezing, the noise became so distracting that Jevon slipped a bit behind the rest just to give her ears a rest. Two of the saccules dropped back to walk beside her. They brushed bugs off her swampsuit, helped her over tree roots, held crude straws for her so she could drink the water they fetched for her. Jevon had always wondered what it would be like to be a chief patron with her own factor catering to her every whim. Now she knew. She hated it.

"Jevon, there is some problem," said Nju. "The remote wishes to speak with you."

She moved up to the main group that had paused on the trail.

"What's, wrong?"

"The remote asked for you, or at least I think it did. Your name was the only word I recognized. Then it stopped working," said, Thiralo. He sounded worried. "I tried to restart it, but nothing happened."

Everyone was looking at her as if she had all the answers.

"Um." She stepped up to the remote and tapped it with one gloved finger. She spoke in Palais. "Hello? This is meta Jev. Are you there?"

"Emergency restart to default mode. Thank you, Citizen Jev." The saccules performed their dance of joy again, mauling the companions.

"You're welcome, I guess. What happened?"

"Primary Map access lost."

Jevon translated for her companions.

Nju stepped forward. "Ask it if its base station has been damaged."

Jevon did as Nju requested. "Base station functional."

"Well, why did you lose Map access?" asked Jevon.

"The standard access point has been damaged by *vaeri*. I have located secondary access points." Jevon tried to get a definition of "*vaeri*" and was soon hopelessly confused by technical cybe jargon, little of which translated well in Palais. It was some sort of destructive meta, maybe.

Jevon passed on this information to the others. Nju looked grim. Thiralo, who had been coughing continuously for the last hour, spoke up in a weak voice.

"My friends, I wonder if we could hurry to shelter. I seem to be, um, coughing blood." The factor's jagged coughs grew softer and he slumped over on the ground.

Jevon looked to Nju.

"Isn't there anything we can do?"

The Garang scooped Thiralo up in his arms.

"Perhaps the research base station will have medical equipment." But he didn't sound hopeful. Why should an ancient base station still have anything useful? But Jevon didn't argue. She didn't like the sounds Thiralo was making.

She had thought the swamp couldn't get any worse, until the gray light of Palace was completely cut off by a thick canopy of vine trees. They moved through what seemed impenetrable thickets of vegetation. She could barely see her own gloved hands, let alone the rest of her companions. Even through the mouth filter, the dank and musky air choked her throat. Despite her best efforts, her faceplate was soon smeared with the juices of so many plants that she could see nothing at all. The saccules ran tirelessly into a rank darkness deeper than any night. It seemed like hours before they stopped for rest. The saccule gently set her back on her feet.

Jevon used a rag in her belt to wipe away a little of the gunk on her faceplate and peered out. They had arrived at a point where the canopy thinned slightly. The saccules were breaking a path to some kind of hill in the middle of a weedy bog that smelled of dead animals and ancient, moss. As she watched, the hill split into two halves, revealing an opening. She saw the lithe figure of Nju, still carrying Thiralo, pass into the hill. Her self-appointed attendants grabbed her forearms and led her over a kind of bridge of woven reeds that zigged and zagged over a noisome black bog. To her sides, she saw dozens of small animals trapped in the stuff, some still struggling against some force that pulled them down. A moment later the saccules thrust her into the narrow gap and the hill closed. They were in utter darkness.

The saccules led her a few steps forward, then to the right. She heard a whine and let out a yelp when she felt herself starting to sink down. After a few minutes, the downward movement stopped and another door opened. This time, there was light, a dim blue glow, the

sign of powered blueglass. She was in a control room of some sort. There were panels and mysterious-looking machines all over, some of them looked as if they might even be operational. She remembered from her history in school that the original researchers had powered their research stations with portable fusion generators. Apparently, this one still functioned.

A hand touched her shoulder and she jumped in surprise. But it was only Nju. He had removed his swampsuit.

"It is safe to take off the suit, Jevon. This is the base station. Its filters are still working."

Jevon didn't need a second invitation. It was heaven to shuck off the filthy swampsuit and get rid of the mouth filter. She took deep breaths of the scrubbed air. She'd never realized how delicious clean air smelled. Once the suit was off, she felt twenty pounds lighter. She dumped the suit in a corner. One of her saccules gave her an odd look and picked up the suit to hang it on a hook. If she hadn't been so bone tired and worried, she might have laughed.

"Where's Thiralo?"

Nju said nothing, but led her to another room with metal cots covered with woven mats. Thiralo's suit had been removed, too, and Jevon was shocked at what she saw. The factor's face was ravaged with sores and dried blood. One of his eyes was so inflamed, it looked like a fist-sized tumor had grown in the socket. Thiralo's hands and feet were swelled up and the flesh cracked in several places, showing muscle beneath. Whenever he coughed, dribbles of very dark blood spilled from his lips.

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Nju cocked his head, the Garang version of a shrug. Nju's people didn't fear death, but only dying badly. Apparently, Nju had already accepted Thiralo's passing. Well, Jevon wouldn't. She glanced around at the saccules. "Where is the remote?"

"It has been returned to the base station. Through here."

Nju took her through a series of rooms—apparently, the research stations had been built to house long-term residents—to a small circular chamber. The remote had been slotted into a faceted sphere of blueglass that glowed a brighter blue than anything else.

"Welcome to Base Station Sove, Citizen Jev," said the remote, in Palais.

The little control room had benches along the perimeter and she sat down on one, leaning her head back against the wall and closing her eyes. It felt so good not to be hiking through the damn swamp. If she ever got home again, she was going to stay in the bath for two days. The thought of home made her think of all her troubles, though. With Dukayn hunting her, she would be lucky to stay alive, let alone ever see anyone she cared for again.

"Does this station have any medtech capability?"

"No, Citizen Jev."

Jevon thought of poor Thiralo. Was he really going to the out here?

"Citizen Jev, low-level Map access has been restored. Will you begin downlink now?"

Jevon opened her eyes and let out a weak, bitter laugh. Thiralo was near death and the remote only cared about its data.

"I don't have the equipment to downlink now," she said with some sarcasm. "It's back in the city."

"Where in the city of Polis is your equipment?"

Jevon shrugged, almost too tired to answer.

"Uh, well, do you know about the twin towers?"

"I have access to all current maps for all cities of the Pinch."

"So, you must know about Government House. My equipment is in an office of the East

Tower. Twelve oh two, level six."

"Working." There was a momentary pause. "There are nine *merit* within five hundred *siv* of that location."

Jevon rubbed a hand over her brow. It was hard to concentrate. She hadn't spoken this much Palais since she was a girl and her grandmother lived with them. Lots of the words the remote used were unfamiliar, though she was able to work out their meaning with some effort. This declaration, however, made no sense to her.

"What's a *merti*?"

"A *mertir* is a device for instantaneous matter transmission. All fifty-two of the original research center's *merti* are operational throughout the city of Polis. Nine are active beneath the structure now called Government House, which was formerly the research ship Caliostro."

"Matter transmission?" Jevon remembered suddenly the scale polisher, Sirronos, who Dukayn had made her torture. He had claimed that Riva used transport gates, though no amount of torture produced any details on then-use or location. "You mean traveling distances instantly?"

"Parsing . . . yes, that is an acceptable definition of matter transmission."

"Do you mean, we could get back into the city from here, from this research station?"

"Yes, Citizen Jev. Would you like to retrieve your downlink equipment at this time?"

Jevon didn't answer. She was already running out of the room, yelling for Nju. The remote spoke into the emptiness.

"Heuristics active. Implied command. Warning, *mertir* use must be approved by a research team leader, or in emergencies, the Caliostro mindcore. Queuing request to mindcore. Waiting for Map access." There was a pause. "Warning. Critical damage to Caliostro mindcore. Lattice fragmentation. Initiating search. L'var found. Repair request transmitted. Awaiting confirmation."

The remote fell silent.

Zir's claws dug at the air. She mastered the motion instantly and was grateful that no one seemed to notice. Why should they? Everyone's gaze was riveted on the transparent testing cube in the center of Tura's laboratory.

Inside, a naked human male was undergoing a transformation so horrifying that even Zir, who hated humans, was glad the cube was soundproofed.

"The death is still too quick, Tura, and the contagion degrades too soon. It must be viable as an airborne spore."

All eyes whipped around to Riva's revenant, an immense grandmother Lep, floating in the air above a holo-table, watching the demonstration. No one had noticed her arrival. Riva could be anywhere directing this revenant. Zir was chilled by Riva's calm tone. She remembered Vi-Kata once saying that Riva's tone troubled him, that she seemed to lack the proper passions for a Lep. But to Zir, Riva seemed all too passionate, intensely cold.

"I'yi'ikt amon vi chaa'k'—" Tura spoke rapidly in her oddly inflected Lepir. Zir couldn't follow what she was saying.

"Gen, my friend, you must speak Gen," said Riva.

This provoked a screaming fit from Tura and an incoherent slurring of speech. The other Leps in the room just stood dumbstruck. No one spoke to Riva this way, and lived. Zir knew personally of two Leps who had been killed for the crime of disagreeing with Riva too strenuously. Riva listened placidly for some minutes to Turn's screaming tirade, then replied, speaking very rapidly.

Vi-Kata had once told Zir that Riva's command of Lepir language and customs was poor, but Zir had never noticed this. There was no way that Riva could have taught herself such fluency in such a short time, so Kata must simply have been mistaken.

When they stopped arguing, Tura's crest actually lifted in joy for the first time since Zir had met her outside the Tomb.

"As you will, grandmother," said Tura in stilted Gen. Astonishingly, the, proud old Lep went to one knee. An amazing act of fealty for a Lep who Zir had found to be uncontrollable, arrogant, and borderline insane.

"We share the same dream, child, humans dead in the millions. I rename you Pa Riva Tura. You are first of my line now and we will make a Standing to rival the ancients. Very soon, we will have the Spagyra, Tura, but we can proceed without it for now. We will depend on your memories."

"It will be as you command, Great Riva."

"Excellent. I am pleased that we understand one another, my beloved daughter. Understanding is so important, is it not, Pa Riva Zir?"

Zir was startled by the sudden attention.

"Ye—yes, Grandmother Riva." Zir, too, went to one knee. All of the Leps in the cavern followed suit.

"Ah. Ri-drii'k'it, the Act of Following." Riva seemed amused. "Well done, my friends. Now, ti-ka mi'il-a an-ki-vak. Rise and rule, my children."

They rose.

"Tura, the plague must be slower and more painful. And you must use the vector I have chosen." Tura merely nodded submissively. Riva's revenant swung its dark gaze to Zir. "Zir, we will require two hundred more test subjects of varying age, sex, and guild. They must all be Not-children."

"Yes, grandmother." Zir struggled to keep her voice steady. Two hundred?

"Obtain a few Hirrel and Garang, too. We will require, oh, two thousand of the neuter saccules. Do not trouble with the wild saccules outside the city. They are not our concern. Yes, two thousand neuters should be sufficient."

"In addition to the ones we have already?" Riva turned her cold gaze on Zir. Her eyes were pits.

"Of course, daughter. Was I unclear on that point? Did we fail to *understand* one another?"

Suddenly Zir felt that she was in the greatest danger of her life and she had no idea why.

"No, grandmother. It will be as you command. Iyik't Lepir, Vi-Kata." Zir fell to both knees.

"Oh, by all means, in the name of Vi-Kata. The Martyr-Hero." Too late, Zir remembered that Riva had forbade her to ever use Vi-Kata's name in her presence. But Riva didn't sound angry. In fact, she sounded happy, the first sign of that emotion that Zir had ever heard from her.

Zir dropped her gaze to the ground. Somehow, she had avoided a terrible danger. But what? And why? Out of sight, beneath her body, Zir's claws made tiny digging motions.

If Dukayn had hoped that locking Romero in a small room in the darkness of Deeplock would frighten her, the man was doomed to disappointment. She had spent most of her childhood in cramped darkness in the mines of Arim. In fact, she would have been relatively comfortable except that she heard too well his continuing torture of the Leps. He had over a hundred of them down here. By now, she knew them all by name, something of their families, a little of their supposed crimes. Dukayn had just left a few minutes ago and Romero heard their whimpers in the darkness, like children crying in fear.

"Sirronos? Are you there?" Romero spoke in Ta Lepir, a dialect that not even Dukayn was likely to understand, if he were recording this. Few enough Leps could speak it. '

"I live, Sister," said a weak voice in the same language. The scale polisher was just an ordinary Lep who had run afoul of Dukayn's madness. He had been a very minor member of Riva and now he suffered beyond imagining. Dukayn referred to the poor man as Jevon's Test. Romero knew from the disc that Thiralo gave her that this must be the Cyberguild guildmaster's factor, a woman Dukayn had an uncommonly strong emotional attachment to.

"God Sees, Sirronos."

Romero called out other names and too few had the strength, or courage, to answer. Dukayn might be monitoring them now, storing up their words to use against them later as an excuse for even more terrible tortures.

Deeplock was the home of hate, the lair of fear. She couldn't blame them for keeping silent. She wondered how she would hold up when Dukayn finally got around to torturing her, and she had no doubt that he would, eventually, no matter what Karlo said. Dukayn was disintegrating daily. She could hear it in his voice, in the madness of bizarre questions and unanswerable demands. It wouldn't be long before he lost all touch with reality. She sensed him standing outside her cell more and more often these days. He watched her in the dark, probably with some sort of darklight device. It pleased him to be able to see without being seen. She was starting to understand his mind, God help her.

"Tell me more of this Church of Hope, Sirronos."

The scale polisher was silent for a long time, then he spoke about the schism that was spreading through the Sects, no matter what Roha did to stop it. She listened with growing wonder. Amin, the Church of Hope, welcomed all sapient, humans, Leps, Hirrel, Garang, and even saccules. Amin called them the Five. They added saccules because the leader of Amin, a Lep named Falik, had heard and believed Romero's speeches about them. This Falik rejected Riva, denied UJU, argued against Roha, and welcomed anyone with a need. He spoke all languages, they said. He had the power to heal in his touch. He walked the Map in his dreams.

The more she heard of him, the more she knew that this was the Voice that the Pope had predicted. She smiled in the darkness. The Pope had known: Popes always knew their successors.

"Benar, what do you hear?" asked Romero. Benar somehow kept touch with the outside world, though no one knew how.

The former chief minister of the Finance Sect spoke in broken Ta Lepir, obviously rusty in the dialect.

"Martial law. Protectors own weapons of kill. Karlo owns media. Vanna owns Council. Roha excommunicate Falik. And, Sister"—the old Lep's voice was weak—"you ask about L'var. She near killed a day ago."

Vida almost killed? Had Dukayn found out that she knew about the Spagyra? "What happened to her?"

"Attack by Lep, sent by Riva, or at least so say Dukayn."

Ah. Nothing that Dukayn said could be believed.

"Do you have any news of Thiralo? Did he escape?"

"Someone say, he and Garang name Nju and a woman name Jevon go to swamp."

Jevon? As in Jevon's Test? This Nju might be the Cyberguild guildmaster's Garang bodyguard. What were they doing with Thiralo and why had they fled into the swamp? Here was a puzzle to consider.

Rico and the Gate outpaced the candle far more easily than they had the first time they'd

encountered Riva's most terrible weapon. The Gate carried him above the Map, low and cloaked. None of the defenses of the Map points they cruised past gave even a twitch.

How had they escaped the candle so quickly? After a moment of consideration, Rico realized that it must be because the sever had detached Rico from his physical form; there were no delays between the thought and the act. Severed! He still couldn't really believe it. Rico tried continuously to chime his station, or activate the emergency autonomic release, but it was like dropping stones into a bottomless well. He no longer possessed the multiplex connection to a Mapstation that could answer his commands.

A Mapstation buffered a cybe's neural net and used that to perform functions, permitting extremely long chains of activity at nanosecond speeds. Without the body subvocalizing the meta commands, though, there was no way to initiate any new programs or routines. It meant he could do a set number of functions much faster than any meta, but he was limited to the functions that had been available at the moment of the sever. He was a . . . phantom, or something. An essence without physical effect. Somehow the Gate must have made a copy of his neural matrix, cloning the Mapbody and storing it. Even for a bit of old Colonizer tech, this was amazing stuff. He had to think about this, work out the implications. Was he doomed to be a ghost on the Map forever, never able to communicate, never able to return to his body? He would rather be dead.

Rico felt a familiar sensation from the Gate, a warmth and brushlike whispering. It must be trying to communicate with him again. The Gate understood him well enough; it had always responded to meta commands. Somehow, he must find a way to do the same. He had an idea that the Chameleon Gate might hold the key to stopping Riva. But where could he go for help? He didn't know anything about linguistics. The only person he knew that did was Samante. Thinking of Samante made him remember Vida. It was strange to think of her without all the complex feelings she evoked in him, though the spark of his love was there, as it always was. Not even a sever could erase a feeling that deep in him. Would he never touch her again, kiss her, make her laugh? She must know by now that he'd been severed. How would she react? Would she go to Wan for comfort?

Rico seemed to hear voices, soft, whispery, and slow. No, not voices, a river, if a river were made of the lightest silk. It was maddening because it was almost comprehensible. The Gate was gone, or so thoroughly merged with him that he could no longer sense it as a separate entity. He paused, floating above the newly repaired strip of Pansect Media's Mappoint, where he had first encountered a candle. He must find a way to understand the Gate.

The Gate changed inside him. Rico's Mapbody interpreted the change as a warmth and a feeling like the music in his bones. It wasn't at all like the warning of an approaching candle, but something was coming, something joyous.

Suddenly a revenant appeared before him, a black-skinned young man with a mischievous grin. "Calios."

"Guilty." The image of Calios made an airy gesture of concession. The Gate continued to sing in his bones.

"What are you doing here? What do you want?"

"We don't have much time, Rico. The *qiu* is attracting attention. You really shouldn't have merged with it."

"The *qiu* . . . you mean the Chameleon Gate?"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, an official repair request has been made and so I'm passing it on. May I go now?"

"No! What are you talking about? What repair request? Did Vida send you?"

Calios smiled as Rico pelted him with questions. Vida's agent had become amazingly lifelike. Vida was right. This revenant wasn't like any other that had ever worked on the Map. He should have known that the first time he'd worked with it. But Rico had a sudden suspicion

that Calios had deliberately concealed its advanced heuristics from him. What was this revenant, really?

"Slow down, one question at a time."

"Did Vida send you?"

"No. I regret to say that Veelivar is in the medwing, recovering from a Lep attack. She'll be okay, though, I've made sure of that. Look, we both have to get out of here. May I go?"

"Vida's hurt? But that wasn't why you came. You said you were passing on a repair request. Where did the repair request come from? Why did you come to me? And how did you find me?" Before Calios could reply, some of the answers occurred to Rico. "It's the Gate, the *qiu*, isn't it? Somehow, you can track it. I can feel that it knows you somehow. Riva must be tracking it, too. But never mind all that. Explain this repair request."

Calios looked very uncomfortable, almost reluctant.

"I've received a validated command to begin repair of the Caliostro mindcore lattice. Only a trained L'var can perform that function. Rico, a *vaeri* is coming. May I leave?"

Rico stared at the revenant. It was trying to confuse him, rush him. He had to set aside his worry about Vida and concentrate.

"No, not yet. There's something you aren't telling me. How can Vida repair Caliostro? And why are you passing the request on to me?"

"Veelivar hasn't authorized me to discuss this. Please release me!"

Rico's skin felt as if he'd fallen into a lake of ice.

"A candle is coming," he said. But the feeling was far worse than any previous one. Was Riva sending some kind of supercandle after him?

The revenant didn't appear to hear. All playfulness disappeared from his voice and manner.

"Sé Rico . . . something, something is about to happen to the Map, something terrible."

"What is it?"

"I don't—"

But before the revenant could finish speaking, a shock wave rolled over them both and Calios vanished, either destroyed or escaped. Rico felt as if he had been squeezed in the fist of a cold giant. For a moment Rico blanked out into utter darkness. He could sense thousands more of these awful waves rushing toward him, as if he were a speck of dust in the wake of a psychic tsunami.

He had to get away, to the hyperMap.

"Double-dev-Rico top," said Rico.

The Gate wrenched them out of the Mapspace a moment before the massive tidal waves hit. Had he still been connected to the Map through his station, the waves would have caught him, he was certain. Commands no longer needed to be processed by his Mapstation. He had become a self-regulating meta, faster than any human.

Rico's meta command took him out to the hyperMap where they hung suspended above a vision of all the worlds of the Pinch strung together like a necklace of many colored pearls, connected by a golden thread. Even in his new, nearly emotionless state, the vision of the hyperMap moved him. He wished he could have shown it to Vida, just once. An echo of grief, faint and insubstantial, touched his heart. She was hurt and he couldn't even go to her. A shadow of fury touched him. He was going to make Molos pay for this. At least he still had the capacity for some feeling. Maybe the sever hadn't robbed him of all emotion.

The Gate changed, Rico couldn't have said exactly how. There was a sense of impending doom and portent. Whatever those shock waves were, he was about to see the cause, or the

effect.

Suddenly, all over the Map of Palace, thousands of arc-bright vertical lights flared simultaneously. Candles! Thousands of them. Everywhere, destructive metas detonated.

All the gold threads connecting worlds on the hyperMap went dead black. The Map of Palace changed from a brightly lit city on the surface of an image of the planet to a few red spots on a black sphere.

He'd never seen anything like it. It must be a Map-crash, something that had never happened in the recorded history of the Pinch. There must be global panic right now. Rico, stripped of most emotion, still felt a stirring deep in his soul. It wasn't supposed to be possible, with the hundreds of redundancies and backups built into the substrate.

He studied the pattern of red flares for a long time, thinking, analyzing. His mind, which had been operating more quickly and acutely since the sever than at any time before, catalogued the destruction and gradually it dawned on him that there was a pattern to it. He visualized the template of damaged substrate that he and Hi consulted in Hi's office every morning. The match was nearly perfect. All those months of seemingly random candle destruction had a purpose. They weren't intended as simple terrorist attacks, they were designed to do this, force the Map into standby. Rico could only vaguely sense the vast array of variables necessary for such a matrix, let alone calculate it. Only someone who knew the exact parameters of every Mappoint on Palace, even the shielded ones, could have predicted this effect. But that was impossible. Molos was a brilliant cybe, but even using Calioistro, how could he have known that this would happen? And why do it? Clearly, the Map was intact. Hi had implemented the emergency shutdown protocol that Rico had suggested to protect the hyperMap, so there was no danger to the Pinch's other Maps. This massive attack would only cause a temporary shutdown, at most a few days. What could Molos possibly gain from this, except causing terrible panic and confusion? That couldn't be his only objective.

Rico glanced around at the other planetary Mappoints. They all seemed normal, except . . . was that Nimue? Yes, the Nimue AI, which had been offline for fourteen years, since the Lep-Human War, had reactivated. What could it mean? Had his mother found the key to bringing Nimue back online? Or was this more of Molos's work?

At the moment he had no other options. The Map was closed to him and he had no idea how long he could last as a severed ghost.

Take me to Nimue.

The Gate reacted as if he'd spoken a meta aloud. They rushed toward Orbital, a burning golden orb in the perfect blackness of the hyperMap level.

* * *

Roha entered Karlo's office in a moderately good mood. Vanna had just assured him that the Center Council would approve a new budget for building additional Gazes in all the Sects and his long-term dream of building a missionary fleet had a fair chance of passing the first vote. Also, Sweetie had been even more playful than usual that morning. His good mood evaporated with one look at-the First Citizen.

Karlo Peronida still bore the marks of his fight with Dukayn. Roha, who knew quite a lot about the Garang Japat religion, though he regarded it as a pathetic heresy, understood too well what that battle had truly signified, for Dukayn at least. So he knew better than to take any notice of the damage. Karlo's face was bruised and broken, making his dark features even more angular and forbidding.

"Thank you for coming, Your Eminence. I hope I'm not keeping you from anything important?"

The man's voice sounded so full of cold ashes that Roha had no idea whether he was sincerely wondering, or being sarcastic. While he spoke, Karlo clenched one fist and tapped the arm of his massive datachair rhythmically. Roha didn't think Karlo was even aware of this metronomic heartbeat of fury, which made it even more troubling. Roha had heard that Karlo

beat one of his own officers to within an inch of his life for questioning his orders, and there were other stories. Even Dukayn walked softly around the First Citizen now, and was there any better gauge of Karlo than his blood-bonded ni-Japat? Vanna had moved out of their apartments and into her own suite, and she'd hired two Japat guards. Roha couldn't get her to talk to him about why.

"Are you with me, Cardinal?" asked Karlo softly, fist tapping.

"Yes! My apologies, First Citizen. To answer your question, nothing is as important as the safety of the citizens of Palace. How can I help you?"

Karlo smiled and the shift of broken bone made his face look like that of an alien insect.

"I understand that you've been asking after Sister Romero and her factor."

Roha blinked. He didn't like the tone in Karlo's voice.

"Yes. I had an urgent inquiry about her from the Pope just before the unfortunate incident with the, er, weapons dump accident. He asked me to locate her as quickly as possible. She must have filed a flight plan to whatever research station she was going to begin her studies at, but I can't seem to locate it. Even Dukayn wasn't able to help, I've made inquiries, but no one can remember seeing her leave. The Pope will be concerned."

Karlo's fist paused. His voice took on a rasp. He was holding his temper in check, Roha could tell. But why was the man so angry?

"The Pope has no authority here," said Karlo.

Roha had been about to mention Vanna's interest in Romero, but now he changed his mind. He squirmed in the formfit chair and it whined to match each new position.

"Well, Sé Karlo, that isn't precisely true. The Souk Accords grant the Pope extradictory power whenever Lifegivers—"

"We are under martial law! I am the power here, not Souk, or Retreat!"

No mention of Vanna. That was disturbing. Karlo couldn't possibly imagine that he could hold power for long on Palace by force alone, without Vanna's help.

"Yes, First Citizen, of course. But he is the Pope. The Interstellar Guild would quarantine any planet that he excommunicated, and that's only the most obvious of his resources."

Karlo leapt up and hammered the desk with his fists over and over again, spittle flying from his lips. The unblemished white icelight dimpled in several places as the metal buckled from his blows. Karlo's tirade went on for almost a full minute. Roha scrunched into his chair, amazed and terrified. Karlo had been like this during the war. But afterward, with Tura imprisoned and Vanna at his side, the man had seemed at peace, able to be a civilized politician. Only Tura could drive Karlo so into mindless rage. Roha had a sudden insight. Was it possible that Tura had *survived* the Tomb explosion? Dear God. That would explain so much.

The First Citizen leaned over the desk, palms flat on the surface. He was panting and his angular features were flushed and sheened with sweat.

"You will tell the Pope that Romero is out of contact, somewhere in the swamp, studying saccules."

"I . . . but why would he believe that her implant would fail?"

"Find a way to make him believe you." Karlo's features snarled into something resembling a smile. "We did well with the Spagyra, remember?"

Roha nodded, though he was astonished that Karlo would speak about that aloud, even in the safety of his own office. He had the very clear feeling that if he so much as disagreed with Karlo again, the man might kill him where he sat.

"I will convince him, Karlo, I promise."

"Good. Good. You have been a faithful friend to me, Roha."

"And you to me, Sé Karlo."

The First Citizen slumped into his chair, rubbing his face with one of his massive scarred hands.

"I apologize for my display of temper. I've been under a strain lately."

A strain? Had he dared, Roha would have laughed. The man was past the breaking point, beyond sanity.

"Think nothing of it, First Citizen. I understand completely."

"Do you? Well, you saw what the filthy Leps did to Kephalon, what Tura did, so maybe you do understand, a little. Tura. Tura. I should have killed her . . ."

Karlo lapsed into dead silence, gazing off into some fiery region of memory. The silence stretched between them for minutes, but Roha was afraid to speak and afraid to leave without being dismissed.

"Romero is in Deeplock, Roha. She is alive, for now." Karlo's voice had calmed down to what Roha was used to, but the cardinal knew better. He remembered the Karlo of the war. A change in a man's tone of voice could send him into unbelievable fury.

"You must have had good reason for arresting her," Roha said cautiously.

"Yes. Yes, I did." Karlo turned his burning gaze on the cardinal. Rage and violence were there, but also that brilliance and split-second cunning that made him such a formidable strategist and tactician. His hands had relaxed. He had regained some measure of control. "She knew that we lied about the Spagyra."

Was that true? Well, for now, it didn't matter whether Karlo was lying or not. Roha just wanted to make it out of this room alive.

"I will convince the Pope that Romero has lost contact with the city."

"Later, she may have suffered an accident in the swamp," added Karlo.

Roha swallowed. Accomplice to the murder of the Pope's Eye, a revered Itinerant? He felt his hands tremble. He'd never liked her, but this?

"Let's hope that won't be necessary."

Karlo smiled his insect grin again, then his head jerked back and he looked away, mumbling a response to some message from his implant. A new expression overtook him, though as always, the bottomless anger infused it.

"Dukayn has just informed me that an attempt was made on Vida's life, by Leps."

"Dear God! Is she all right?"

"She's been critically injured." Karlo rose from his chair, fist clenching again. His gaze bored into Roha. "I'm going to see to the investigation. I want you to make sure that she is being well taken care of by the medtechs."

"Yes, I will, Karlo." Roha rose up, his head full of confusion and worry. "Was anyone else hurt in the attack?"

"No one of consequence," said Karlo. "Her Japat killed all the Leps, the fool. But Dukayn will find out who is behind the attack. Nothing remains hidden from him for long."

"May I go, First Citizen?"

"Yes, yes." Karlo waved a hand negligently.

Roha glanced back once before leaving the office. Karlo caressed the damaged surface of his icelight desk while he stared off into space.

Soon, Roha was in the West Tower medwing. The emergency intensive care section was cordoned off by fleet soldiers holding some ugly weapons. They didn't let the cardinal pass until they'd made a commcall to the First Citizen himself for permission.

There were three people in the room around Vida's bed: Dukayn, Jak, and Samante Dinisa. Dinisa kept sniping angry looks at Dukayn, who ignored her. Roha couldn't tell anything about what Jak was thinking, but he noticed that the Garang Japat warrior kept one hand tucked inside his tunic, probably on a weapon.

"How is she?" Roha asked Dukayn.

The man smiled slightly. His face was even more bruised and broken than Karlo's, but their insectile expressions were nearly identical.

"She will live." He inclined his head to Jak. "Her Japat did not fail completely."

Jak neither moved nor spoke, but continued to stare down at Vida. Blood trickled down the Garang's forearm. He must be clenching his fist so tightly that his nails were cutting into his palm. Only Dukayn would have dared make such a remark to a blood-bonded Japat warrior with his charge badly injured. The man was insane.

"I would like a moment alone with her," said Roha. The three of them stared at him. Suddenly Roha, who very rarely lost his temper, felt like shouting at them all. He was the cardinal of Palace, damn it, one of the most powerful men on the planet. Did no one respect this? "I wish to pray for her."

Samante put a hand on Jak, who cocked his head slightly, but moved off a few feet. Dukayn bowed to Roha, and without a further word left the room. The security chief had dared to arrest and imprison Romero. Roha needed to think about that fact. No matter what Karlo assumed, Roha couldn't possibly countenance the murder of the Pope's Eye, even at the cost of his own mastership of the Lifegivers Guild on Palace. But if he was to move against Dukayn, it must be very carefully considered. He had not forgotten Falik's charges either.

Roha perched on a stool beside Vida's bedside. The girl's beautiful red hair had been cut back in several places so that the doctors could work on the fractures on her skull. Her face, so much like that of Orin L'var, Roha's dearest friend, was clenched in pain. The sight sent a shock of sorrow deep to Roha's heart. The cardinal cradled one of Vida's limp hands in both of his own. He had promised Orin that Vida would always be safe.

"God sees you well, dear Vida," he said. Roha leaned down to kiss her temple. He whispered in her ear. "Your soul will be a bright star someday, but not yet, not yet."

He bowed his head over her and prayed deeply, from the purest part of his heart.

"This is Tarick Avon, reporting for Pansect Media at the fifteens. Today, in Service Sect, Chief Patron Vida L 'var y Peronida was attacked by Lep terrorists. All three terrorists were killed by Jak-ni 'tok, a L 'var Japat. There were no other sapient casualties.

"Sé L'var was seriously hurt in the attack and is being cared for in the West Tower medwing under high security. Medmasters describe her condition as 'critical, but stable.'

"This is only the latest in a series of assassination attempts on government officials. Sé Esteban y Gossales was killed in a bomb attack on the Gossales compound in Power Sect [see sidebar on ,channel nine for a complete listing of terrorist attacks].

"First Citizen Karlo Peronida has declared Riva a planetary threat and has suspended all civil liberties for those arrested as members of the Lep terrorist cult. Riva herself is already under sentence of death for her role in the war memorial bombing [see sidebar on channel twelve].

"This is not the first time that Sé L'var has been targeted for death by Riva. Ri Tal Nalet, alias Vi-Kata, made an attempt on the chief patron in Government House during her wedding to the Peronida heir, Sé Wan. The assassination attempt was foiled by the Cyberguild with assistance from Nalet's own brother, Ri Tal Molos [see sidebar on channel thirteen].

"Nalet was executed on twelve Timber for crimes against humankind ..."

* * *

Leni was sleeping as soundly as a dead man in the middle of a bed as big as some offices in Government House. He had been up all night trying to break the codes on the Spagyra. Even with Karlo's notes, which included the work of Ri Tal Molos, the task was impossible in the short time they had left before the datablocks had to be handed over to the Hirrel Minu.

Wan peered out one of the room's gigantic windows. He saw an immense cavern lit by floating balls of light, wisperglows. He'd read countless descriptions, even seen holos, but they didn't do the sight justice. The cavern had dozens of snow-white palaces carved out of the ice. The largest resembled something from a fairy tale, with spires and minarets that twirled hundreds of feet toward the roof of the cavern. Susannah called that one Dukayn's Folly, though Wan didn't know why.

Someone entered the bedroom.

"Hello, Wan."

He looked back over his shoulder. Susannah Nikolaides entered the room. She was not a tall woman, nor very pretty, though she moved with grace and assurance. Her long white hair flowed free over her shoulders and down to her waist like vines of snow. She wore a silver smartgown and her only jewelry was a collection of ice-light and diamond rings on her fingers. Her hands were long and delicate, her best feature.

She saw Leni sleeping and gestured for him to follow her into another room where they could talk without disturbing him. She activated a privacy curtain and the archway became a silver mirror. They strode through a five-sided sitting room where each facet consisted of floor-to-ceiling windows. Susannah settled onto an armless couch and Wan slumped into a chair beside her. No form-fits here. Susannah's palatial estate was rustic, at least visibly.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be at the landing field to greet you. I hope the governor was helpful."

"He's an idiot," said Wan with no particular venom. "He made three different offers in exchange for the governorship of a Sect on Palace. Two of them were insulting and one was pathetic."

"He didn't offer you his son, did he?"

Wan nodded.

"My apologies. I'll speak to him. I hope Leni wasn't offended?"

"No, he thought it was funny."

"Well, aside from that fool, what do you think of our forces, Wan? I understand you met with the officers last night."

"Yeah."

There was a silence.

"I perceive that you don't want to answer my question, Wan," said Susannah amiably, but Wan looked at her sharply. It was never wise to underestimate Susannah. Even her small talk usually had multiple purposes. She was rarely casual.

"I'm trying to avoid giving offense," he said. He took a sip of water that tasted vaguely of earth and lightning. "The trouble with treason is that your allies are always traitors."

Susannah gave a snort of laughter.

"Well, that's an honest answer. I don't think much of the officers, either. Fortunately, our real strength lies with the Hirrel."

"I don't like being so dependent on them, though. Once they have the Spagyra, what's to prevent them from abandoning us?"

"We won't give them the entire Spagyra at once. I assume Leni is still working on breaking the codes?" Wan nodded. "We'll give them the decoded blocks tonight and make it clear that the rest will come only after Palace surrenders."

"Makes sense. I wish we knew what was in those datablocks that they think is so damn important they'd go to war just to get it. I know the Hirrel hate biowar, so it can't be only the Tura stuff."

"I agree. Vanna has some idea, obviously. Based on his notes, Ri Tal Molos understood the thing even better than Tura. Even Roha guessed their potential. I'd like to know why the cardinal agreed to let Karlo keep them; he must have known what a risk he was taking. It seems the only person who never bothered to look at the Spagyra closely was Karlo himself."

"My father wouldn't have anything to do with Tura's tools. He hates her beyond anything you can imagine."

"I know. I was there when he locked her into the Tomb."

"I want her out of there after we take over Palace. Before I kill Karlo, I want him to see her free and laughing in his face."

"That alone will destroy him," said Susannah.

Wan said nothing, but took another long swallow of his water. The two fell silent for a while wrapped in their separate thoughts. It had been ten years since Wan had last seen Susannah and yet he felt just as comfortable with her as he was with Leni. Ironic that her natural son, Pero, despised her, while he, a mere lawson in the second degree, admired and liked her. In their first meeting, he had recognized a kindred soul. Ten years of preparation for war, all based on a brief meeting and a promise. Who would believe it? That alone may have shielded them from discovery.

He leaned back in the chair, pleased that the thing didn't try and mold itself to his frame. He hated having furniture try to outwit him.

"Since we're exchanging the truth, Susannah, why are you really allying with me? I know you don't hate Karlo like I do and I've worked out that it's really Dukayn that you're after. But why? Is it something from Kephalon?"

Susannah said nothing, but he could tell that she would speak if he just waited. She had the look of a woman ready to share secrets. Leni had suggested as much last night. As usual, he was right. It had taken ten years for the right moment to come. Leni's insights were uncanny.

She got up and strolled to one of the great windows, hands clasped behind her back. Wan knew instinctively that he should remain seated and apart.

"What do you know about family life on Kephalon, Wan?"

"Just what Karlo rammed down my throat when I was a kid. Magla wouldn't allow too much. She couldn't stop him from beating me, though. That's the Kephalon way of making a man, you know."

"I know, Wan. Even by Kephalon standards, though, Karlo had a heavy hand with you and Pero. That temper of his. In his younger days, it was far worse than even you ever saw. He would never raise his hand to a woman, of course, but I saw him kill men with his bare hands for nothing more than an insult. Magla was wise to try and break him of Kephalon ways. He's come a long way since those days. But the constant violence was only a small part of Kephalon family relationships. There were other customs much more important."

Susannah kept her back to him and he saw that her hands gripped each other so hard that the knuckles were white. Susannah was one of the most controlled people Wan had ever met. Whenever his drunken masquerade had seemed too hard, he just remembered that she had spent decades pretending to love Karlo, waiting for the right moment to betray him. What could so upset her?

"Do you know what an *omu* is, Wan?"

"Sure. It's the older sister, the teacher."

"Did you know that a boy's first sexual experience is always with his *omu*?"

"Yeah, Karlo liked to reminisce about his *omu*, Morgana. He and Magla fought about her all the time. Damo should have been a girl, according to Karlo. I think it was one of the reasons they split. It sure affected the way he treats Damo."

"I was an *omu*."

Wan leaned forward. "Yeah?"

Her voice fell to a whisper. "I was Dukayn's *omu*."

"Dear God."

She turned around to face him, her features arranged in a sardonic grin, but the muscles of her arms jumped with tension.

"You can have no idea what it was like to be touched by him. His earliest instincts were to cause pain and I was too young to understand what it meant or how to deal with it. There was so much violence around me. My family were bloodhunters going all the way back to the Rim. My father taught me the trade and I can't remember a time when I didn't have a knife in my hand. It was easy to believe that pain was part of sex, too. It was part of everything else in my life.

"Dukayn hurt me badly, but he also loved me, in his own way, and I adored him, my little brother, my *ki-omu*. An *omu* is only supposed to sleep with her brother once, but Dukayn wanted me constantly. It wasn't long before I was terrified of him. I can still remember how afraid of him I was. Look at me, I'm shaking." Susannah sat down abruptly on the arm of a chair, her face stricken with memory, staring at her trembling hands in wonder. She spent several moments collecting herself. "Kephalon is gone. Most of the natives are dead and here I am still ashamed for something that wasn't my fault."

"I think I finally understand something. You married Karlo to protect yourself from Dukayn."

She nodded. "Yes. I wonder if Karlo ever guessed? He knew how much I feared Dukayn, but everyone fears him, so maybe he didn't make the connection. Karlo is the only man I have ever met with a rage to match Dukayn's and the skill to back it up. It was only after Pero was born that Dukayn lost interest in me. Then it was safe for me to maneuver Karlo into a divorce."

"Speaking of Pero, what do you want to do about him?"

Susannah was silent for a time. When she returned to the armless couch near Wan, he couldn't see a trace of the emotion that had so consumed her only seconds before. Now, she was again the placid general he'd come to know. But he would never forget that look on her face when she spoke of Dukayn: terror, shame, fragility.

"Pero will have to die, I'm afraid. He's completely loyal to Karlo and he's far too dangerous to keep around plotting a coup."

Wan said nothing. He liked Pero, a lot. But this was war. Maybe it was wrong for him and Susannah to threaten so many lives just to fulfill their vendettas, but the Schism Wars had begun over even more trivial matters, in his opinion. Besides, he had plans for Palace that might mitigate the sin a little. He would free the saccules and wipe out the laws against the Leps; he thought the followers of UJU were sick fools. He'd open the gene-bases of the Lifegivers to everyone and put an end to the worst corruption of the guilds. He'd spent years learning about the lives of the real people, the journeymen and Not-children, the backbone of Palace. He had plans for them. With so many good motives, couldn't he be forgiven the blood of a few innocents? Once Karlo and Dukayn were dead, he expected a quick surrender anyway. In addition to Susannah's private fleet, they'd have the entire Hirrel Nomadia behind them. Only insane fools would try and contend with such a force. His plans had always assumed a short bloodless fight. But if it came to all-out war, well, he had the nerve for that. At least Susannah didn't try to bring up Damo again. Wan was willing to accept a certain

amount of innocent blood, but not that of his little brother. The boy had suffered under Karlo, too. Wan realized that Susannah was watching him narrowly. Did she question his resolve about Pero?

"I suppose you're right about Pero. Even if he did swear allegiance to us, he'd always be a potential threat. Can't say I like it, though. He protected me from Dukayn, when he could. He's a good man, a good brother. I've never understood why the two of you despise each other so much."

Susannah's expression didn't change. She was finished with revealing herself to him.

"Maybe I'll tell you someday, after he's dead." She sipped a cup of cider, pungent with a buttery aroma. "I think I hear Leni moving around in the bedroom."

Wan nodded and stood up, though of course the privacy curtain cut off all sound to the bedroom.

"By this time in mid-Timber, we'll be rulers of Palace."

She looked at him coolly. "You'll be the ruler of Palace, Wan. Kephalon women don't aspire to power. We have other interests."

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or not.

" 'Vengeance is my woman—' " he quoted in Helane.

" '—she is the blade of regret,' " Susannah continued, speaking in the tongue of a dead planet. She smiled, revealing nothing but calm good humor. " 'No sheath of years dulls her edge.' "

Wan bowed and left the room to join Leni. He could almost pity Dukayn.

* * *

Vida had always suffered from frighteningly vivid dreams. Her perfect memory, so useful in so many ways, could also be a curse. Her nightmares often contained monstrous images of things she had seen as a child in the sometimes brutal Pleasure Sect and could not forget. But she also dreamed of other worlds, the Rim, and traveling the Pinch in her own shuntjammer. Those dreams, so realistic that another person might have called them memories, had sustained her all her life, and especially during the miserable months of her new tense existence in Government House.

Now, though, she was in the midst of a painful nightmare, the Festival of Calios, that fateful day that had seen the end of her childhood. At first, the dream seemed a pleasant recollection; the smells and sights of the festival filled her with excitement and the thrill of discovery. She wandered the well-loved Boulain, listening to music, watching the dancing, and enjoying a rare day of sunlight.

But then, came the changes. The Lifegiver, Brother Lenos, who had given her the wooden Eye she still wore around her neck, appeared in her dream with one half of his face ripped to bloody shreds. His robes, black and white to honor the black of space filled with God's stars, were stained with blood and a tear in one side gaped like a wound. His sweet smile, that still haunted her, seemed now the leer of Death.

Every celebrant, when examined closely, was maimed or mad. Aleen was there, but transformed into a creature of ice, her cybereye a weeping hole of blood in her glinting cold skull. Tia, Aleen's assistant and Vida's special friend, was gray and scarred. The saccule, Sugar, who Vida had known all her life shuffled along with its entrails visible. No one at the festival seemed to notice. Shouts, laughter, and the smells of food cooking filled the air. But the smells changed into the stink of burning flesh. Vida saw Leps dance around a pit in which children, saccules and humans, died in flames.

Abruptly all the people became saccules, became Greenie, torn apart by something savage, yet still shouting out with joy at the sight of Karlo Peronida and his family being pulled through the streets by white-skinned vakr. The sons were corpses, and Vanna, gaunt and heavily tattooed, flung bubbleflares into the crowd that became rabid-biting vers when they burst.

Wan saw her in the crowd and waved to her, his features as chiseled and brittle as black glass.

Vida ran away down an unused longtube, old and poorly lighted. Her heart beat fast. She knew she was dreaming, but the sounds were so real, the smells overwhelming. Her perfect memory brought it all back. This was the same longtube through which Vi-Kata had chased her.

As before, she heard her pursuer. But now she knew who it was: Vi-Kata, assassin, torturer, murderer of hundreds. The Lep was coming for her. She could hear him calling to her, singing some Lep song filled with sibilance and menace, though he had been perfectly silent during his true hunt. The song shifted into a more familiar tune, the lullaby Rico had sung for her.

A slip of time and again she was in the ancient bell tower of the carillon with no exits and Vi-Kata below in the roof garden, stalking her. She could hear him feeding on something and terror choked her. She looked down into the roof garden and saw the flowers and fruits replaced by saccules impaled and wailing, letting out their death-stink in great clouds. And Vi-Kata hunted among them, dipping his bloody snout into their twitching forms.

On her wrist, her finder burned so deep a red that it was like looking into the fire of a forge. The saccule screams went on and on, hopeless heartrending cries. The screams echoed from an earlier memory, when a boy was murdered on the Boulain and Vida heard his death and didn't understand until morning what it meant. Aleen made her see the holos later. It was another of Aleen's terrible lessons and Vida never forgot.

Now the black-skinned revenant, the silver-haired boy, reappeared. Again, he spoke to her in a language she didn't understand. The words flowed together into a hum like angry insects.

"I don't understand," Vida heard herself say, the first words she'd spoken in this nightmare.

The revenant nodded and smiled, that mischievous grin she liked.

"You don't try to understand, Vida." He spoke with Rico's voice, the biting tone he'd used with her once when they fought about Wan and that she wished she could forget. Calios repeated those hateful words that Rico had apologized for so many times since. "You don't really care about anyone but yourself, do you? You wouldn't sign my contract because I can't offer you shuntjammers and the power you want. I'm just a lowly cybe, right?"

"That's not true. I love you, Rico."

"Really? What about Karlo? Deny that you're attracted to him. And Wan. Tell me you don't enjoy fucking him."

"Rico, please—"

But the carillon faded away and her wrist was burning black from the fire of the finder. A scald she'd suffered as a child provided the memory of the pain. She'd run to Aleen, weeping. Aleen let her suffer long enough to always remember it.

Now she and Calios stood in space looking down on Palace, a deeply green world, covered with a perpetual mist of gray. It was surrounded by the other worlds of the Pinch, the crystalline brightness of icy Tableau, the wonder of Souk with its multitude of archipelagoes, the immense blue and emerald sphere of Ri whose continents were connected by woven bridges. There was a brown dusty marble that must be the hidden world of the Garang Japat. Other worlds hung suspended in the air. The gigantic matrix of several thousand starships called the Hirrel Nomadia glittered in the darkness. All of these images, the planets and the Nomadia, glowed golden, reached out fingers of light to one another. The light flowed like rivers of gold, sparkling. This was what the hyperMap must look like, she thought. This was how Rico had described it to her. He had spoken of it with such reverence.

"They are all so fragile," said Rico's voice, just what he'd said then.

Calios reached out a black hand that became a thing of stone and he shattered the worlds one by one into fragments and splinters that drifted into darkness. The memory was of a glass

figurine Tia had given her and Vida had dropped.

Last to be destroyed was Palace and instead of shattering, it became mottled, a weeping sore that sent up a reek that made Vida want to vomit, but mixed with the odor was a sweeter smell, one that was maddeningly familiar. She had to remember that smell, it was important. She looked to her left and Calios had become her saccule Greenie. Greenie's hands were stumps. The young saccule's pouch filled with air and let out a great thunderous powerboom of agony, the last sound Vida had heard it make. Greenie was just a young neuter saccule whose short life had been nothing but misery and death, like so many of its kind.

Vida opened her eyes and for a moment thought she was blind, but it was only that the room was so dark. She tried to move, but couldn't. Her eyes adjusted to the dimness just as a red and white robed Medguild worker came to her. Vida saw that her wrist where Karlo's finder had been was encased in a spiderweb of ultra-thin tubes. The man laid a gentle hand on her arm.

"Welcome back, Sé L'var."

"Wh—" She'd been about to say where, but her throat was so sore that it came out a croak. The Medguild man guessed her question.

"You are in the West Tower of Government House, in the recovery wing of the biomed facility. You have been unconscious for some time, but most of that time we deliberately kept you sedated so that the smartdrugs could work without interference." The Medguild man became Vi-Kata, looming over her like an arc of gray and green hate, slitted eyes glittering with malice.

"Sleep, little one. There is nothing to fear." Vi-Kata did something to her IV and Vida felt her panic melt into weariness, bone deep. "Sleep, Sé Vida."

Struggling to scream, Vida closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, the light in the room was brighter. Her wrist was no longer encased in tubes and her throat felt better. Samante was sitting beside her. As usual, she was reading a flatplate and frowning. The light found every line of worry in her face and filled it with a shadow. There was a touch of gray in her severely braided black hair. She was too young to have gray in her hair.

"Samante," Vida whispered.

The interpreter leaned over and smiled down at her. It was startling to see such a look of relief on her face, of unreserved happiness. Samante always seemed so sad, so bitter.

"Jak will be terribly angry that he missed your awakening. But even the Garang have to eat."

"Samante ..." Before her factor could answer, Vida forestalled her with a weak gesture. "Is Greenie really dead?"

The interpreter sighed and nodded.

"Greenie sacrificed itself," said Vida, the dream still vivid in her mind's eye. "I've never heard of a saccule doing that."

"They don't," said Samante. Her expression was complicated, troubled. "Not normally. Greenie was an unusual creature."

Vida managed a weak smile. "A sapient?"

Samante sighed and returned the smile. "Maybe. I don't know anymore. One of the tests of sapience is the capacity for informed sacrifice. But then a lot of animals will instinctively rush to defend their master."

"What do you think, Samante? Do you think Greenie was just an animal?"

Samante slowly shook her head. "No. No, I don't, Vida, though I could never prove it scientifically. Greenie was special. Not even Jak noticed those Leps. But Greenie detected

something, their smell I think, and made a decision to distract the attackers. Greenie saved Jak and me."

Vida didn't think Samante had meant to reproach her, though it occurred to her that her force belt had made it so much easier to risk all their lives on a lark into a city wracked by civil war. Easier for her. Samante and Jak went along, without force belts, to protect her, because she was their chief patron. Greenie died for her.

"Did they escape?"

"No. Jak killed them."

"So we don't know who sent them?"

"Riva must have sent them."

"Probably," said Vida, though she wondered. Their disguises had been very good. How could Riva have known to send assassins after her? "Where's Rico?" She had felt him near her in the dream.

Samante looked away. "I'm not supposed to talk about that. Molos asked me to wait until you were feeling better."

"What? What's happened? Please, you must tell me."

Samante hesitated. "Vida, there's been a terrible . . . Molos and Rico were trying to track Riva on the Map when a candle destroyed the Mappoint they were using and Rico's connection was broken."

"Oh, no! Oh, God. He's dead, then." It couldn't be. She would have felt it, wouldn't she? Surely, she would have known? Their connection was so strong. Oh, God.

"Yes. Well, mind-dead. They have his body here somewhere in a special tank for cybes. Hivel Jons flatly refuses to let them disconnect life support. Sé Hivel has been . . . well, he came to visit you once. He is devastated. Molos blames himself. He left Government House, to find Riva, he said. To destroy her. I have never seen him like this, even when his brother was executed."

"It's not his fault. Riva is the enemy. The Leps have to understand that. I'll make them understand."

Samante glanced at her patron sharply. "What do you mean?"

Vida lay back on the bed and mastered her rage and grief. Calm. Control. Aleen's lessons were painful, but always valuable. What had seemed cruelty was simply preparation. Oh, Rico, my love. She buried the hurt as deep as she could but grief threatened to overwhelm her. Why hadn't she signed his contract, become his wife? She couldn't remember a single of her reasons.

"I want to take my seat on the Center Council, now. Not in a few weeks, not after Karlo's heirs are born, if ever." Samante looked at her sharply at that remark and Vida kept speaking to cover the mistake. No one must ever know she was a cull. Not even Samante. "I want that seat now. Find a way around the requirement for an heir. Vanna says I have to be guilded to Bio, but that the birth permit should do in lieu of an heir. See to it today. Do whatever you have to, but make this happen. I also want complete control over the People's Factor show. And I want to be back in my own suite this afternoon. There is a . . . there are things there I need to work with."

"But, Vida, we're under martial law. You can't oppose Karlo. Those persep things we saw were Karlo's order—"

"I don't care. I know it isn't going to be easy. But it *will* happen. I promise you two things, Samante. I am going to find and destroy Riva, so that Leps and humans can learn to be friends again as much as to pay her back for Rico. We were healing before the attack on the Tomb. She's caused so much death. What the hell does she want, anyway? She's got to be stopped."

"Vida—"

"I know. I sound crazy." She looked at her factor and smiled. "But everybody needs a purpose, Samante. Rico gave his life for the Map." Vida flashed on her dream image of the hyperMap, that beautiful fragile construct Rico had loved. "I've been wandering around waiting to get pregnant so I can get off this planet and see new things. I've been selfish. I've let other people make all my decisions for me. I've let others the for me. That's over now."

Samante sighed and shrugged. "I'm your factor. Jak and I will always stand by you. I must warn you, though, that most of your entourage may not be so loyal. Few people will want to be associated with you if you choose to directly oppose Karlo and Dukayn, or the cardinal."

Vida nodded. Then she swallowed hard. "I need to rest now, but later I'd like to ... I need to see Rico's body."

"I'll see to it."

Vida turned away, stared at the ceiling, and thought of Rico, who had wanted to love her for as long as they lived.

The Gate carried them directly into the heart of an immense sphere of bright white light.

Rico felt as if he were an ice crystal falling into the center of a forge. For a moment, an immeasurable hesitation in time, he ceased to exist.

It was as if he had closed his eyes in a dark room and opened them again in light. Sparkling motes of diamond-bright lambency swirled around him forming a helix that stretched away in all directions beyond the limits of his sight.

The helix rippled through color and something like sound and something like time made tactile. A hundred new sensations flowed around Rico and he knew that if they continued for long, he would be driven insane. The Gate, merged into his Mapbody like another sort of flesh, began to resonate with the helix, burn between the spaces in Rico's Mapbody. There were no words to describe it. It was the essence of agony unfelt, emptiness unmet, music unheard, the potential for all things and the realization of none. He understood that he was looking through a keyhole into the heart of a nova and that he must surely be blinded. Without the Gate, he would have been snuffed out instantly, he knew. Even with it, his mind was unable to function. It was tearing apart like rotten cloth.

But then, just as he and the Gate both were on the verge of a kind of death worse than oblivion, the helix shifted once again into an entirely different spectrum, so much less powerful that Rico's mind slumped like a wire suddenly loosened. The Gate merged deeper into him, combining with him at a level so fundamental that they were almost the same being.

"VOICE?" The mere word shook Rico like a spiderweb in a storm. This must be how mortals felt when their souls went to God for judgment. "SPEAK?"

"I . . ." Just the one word echoed and reechoed endlessly. His own voice was an infinite regression.

The helix created a new kind of Mapspace where he was almost a corporeal being. Rico had thought he was scoured of emotion, but now the whole range of feelings poured into him. Somehow the helix transformed him. He felt as if he had been reborn. He tried to comprehend what was happening. The Gate was no longer a separate entity.

It was too late now for him to try to learn now to communicate with it. It had become a part of him in order to save his life. It moved through his Mapbody like blood moved through flesh, like a cold fire. "WHO?"

The helix was speaking. At last, Rico understood. This must be the inner mind of the Nimue AI. A living AI mind! No cybe had touched an AI's mind since the closing of the macroshunt. Rico's heart filled with awe. *This* was an AI? Dear God, it was beautiful. No wonder so many cybes had committed suicide after the closing of the macroshunt. Who could live without this?

"I am Rico."

The terrible echoes were gone, but a disturbing sense of duplication and multiple connotation made him feel off balance and confused. He wasn't entirely sure of anything he said. Every word seemed to ripple out into innumerable versions. He couldn't shake the feeling that when he spoke, his deepest thoughts became visible.

"RICO?"

He heard a vast array of echoes in the word, a sense of wonder, confusion, joy, amusement, too many emotions to comprehend and all like a lattice of reaction to one word. After a time, he was able to manage the echoes, to choose the one that was marginally most, well, intended, directed, *meant* for him. There was no word for it, no way to explain. He didn't exactly ignore the echoes, because they always contained the subtext and context for Nimue's words, but he learned how to weld them into something his human mind could grasp. He knew without knowing that the Gate made all this possible.

"Are you Nimue?"

"NIMUE?" The helix laughed, the very essence of what laughter meant, such joy. "NIMUE. YES."

Rico had a thousand questions, a million questions. Even before the Great War, no AI had ever spoken. Whatever Molos had done had somehow awakened Nimue out of a two-thousand-year coma. Before he could ask any of his questions, he sensed a change in the helix. It was as if he heard someone look outward, felt them open their eyes to possibilities.

"*WHERE?*" Such pain, loss, confusion, terror. Rico felt waves of loneliness threaten to rip him apart. He cried out in pain and Nimue understood instantly that her distress was endangering him. The echoes softened again. "*WHERE?*"

He understood. "Hurt. Crippled. The macroshunt—"

"AH." Nimue understood from his first word.

He had to get used to communicating immensities with a word. Perhaps, in time, he could learn to say everything with the mere intention of thought. God, God, was this how it was in the Rim? Was this how cybes lived with AIs before the closing of the macroshunt? Perfect rapport. Instant understanding. What couldn't they accomplish with such partners?

"OPEN. PLEASE?"

Nimue, this being of such power and beauty that Rico could barely comprehend her, was frightened and asking him to reopen the macroshunt. It was as if a child had turned to her father to explain death. Rico had never felt such desolation and sorrow. He understood why the AIs went silent after the closing of the macroshunt. Cut off from a level of communication so sublime that it made even the hyperMap seem crude and pathetic, was it any wonder that the AIs shut down, went dormant, left only their autonomic functions active?

"I can't. We don't know how."

"CALIOSTRO?"

This was much more complex than her previous words. The Cyberguild had known that Caliostro was the Coordinator, but Nimue seemed to believe that he was also capable of reopening the macroshunt. Maybe he could have, before some poor foolish cybe had accidentally destabilized his lattice while trying to restore him. There were many other resonances in there, too. There was some sense of defensive command, something to do with the Nomadia. Rico could sense it, as if he'd heard a dangerous whisper in the midst of a loud party. "Caliostro is injured."

Nimue digested the implications and complications of what Rico said, parsing all that he knew of Caliostro from his words.

"REPAIR."

Nimue sounded like a child who has decided that her toy must be fixed. Rico couldn't help but smile. This being was incomprehensibly powerful, yet the sense of childlike innocence persisted. Rico had read many histories that talked about the bond between cybes and AIs and he had never understood. He'd thought they were just tools, far faster and competent than the most advanced agent, that they were almost magically competent metas. Now, at last, he saw the truth. They were sapient and there was common ground between them.

"How can we repair Calioistro?"

"L'VAR?"

Rico blinked. He could almost understand, but the implications and details trembled just beyond his comprehension. What he knew for certain was that a L'var could repair an AI. Vida?

"How?"

"L'VAR."

"I need help. I need to talk to Barra J—"

The Nimue helix collapsed with a shudder of light and Rico heard a voice murmur in the darkness.

"Hello? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

It was a low voice, stripped of Nimue's rich resonance of echoes. Rico hadn't realized how used to multiple levels of meaning he had become. This voice seemed pitifully singular. But he understood why Nimue couldn't answer. Without a Chameleon Gate merged and acting as intermediary, no human could interact with Nimue. She needed him to act as a bridge.

"Hello?" The owner of the voice must be a cybe, but what a mind, to have found an access point to Nimue.

"Hello? Who are you?" Rico's own voice was not as multiplex as Nimue's and he was able to make it carry much more than a human's could. But the other voice didn't understand. There wasn't that return of resonance he had learned to expect with Nimue.

"You're there! I knew it." The voice sounded so excited and Rico automatically listened for the meaning and message that should have come with each word. But this was only a human voice, incapable of saying everything at once. Would he ever be able to go back to such a limited form of speech? "My name is Damo."

"Damo.". Rico paused and considered the ramifications of this."Damo, go get Barra. Tell her Nimue is awake."

There was a sense of sudden emptiness. How had Damo managed to connect with Nimue? As far as he knew, the boy wasn't even allowed to walk the Map, let alone hook up connections to a lattice.

Then another thought struck him. Damo could hear and understand him. He had a link to the outside world. He was still alive. He would be able to talk again to Vida. All the emotions that Nimue and the Gate had restored in him bubbled up with gratitude, like a clear day with no chores and endless possibilities.

"Thank you, Nimue."

"FRIEND." The echoes sang with joy.

All the saccules were gone, as were most of the Leps. Zir was alone in what she had come to call the Room of Screams. Well, she wasn't entirely alone, eh? Her sensitive nose wrinkled at the sour smell of sweat, fear, shit, and urine that filled the air. Ancient Mapstations carved out of blueglass gave off dim blue and red light. Zir saw the shapes of many hundreds of transparent cages. In each one, a sapient had died. Some died slowly. Some almost instantly. There were Hirrel and Garang in a few of them, but the vast majority contained humans:

women and men from all guilds, all clans. Had she wished, she could turn on each cage's light to see the raddled and diseased rags of flesh that were all that remained of these test subjects. She had no need. Zir had seen enough. "Pa Riva Zir."

In the center of the Room of Screams, Grandmother Riva appeared, a glowing revenant, a holographic image. The metas running on the Mapstations all wavered and several collapsed. Zir felt a pang of outrage. Some of those metas represented years of work. But it was madness to even mention this to Riva.

"Have you forgotten your commitment to Ri-drii'k'it so soon?"

"No, grandmother."

Zir went to one knee in the Act of Following and bowed her head. Riva's voice was always resonant and powerful. Over the years that Zir had toiled for her, gradually rising in the ranks of the underground, she had prayed for the day when she would be honored to actually speak with the legendary Riva, to hear that famous voice. And now, it only chilled her.

"Good. You may rise. You are my good and faithful servant." Riva chuckled. "The Map is in standby. The guildmaster protected the hyperMap, as I predicted he would. Soon, my daughter, Palace will be a world of bones. Then the other worlds of the Pinch will follow Palace into agony and death."

Riva executed some silent command and the lights in the room came up. All of the cages with their grim occupants were visible. Thousands. Not even Dukayn had killed so many of his enemies.

"Our diorama," she said in yet another tone of voice, prideful and gentle. Lately, Riva seemed to be almost an amalgam of people, each distinct and all unfathomable.

Zir stood up and looked at Riva. The revenant was smiling, that alien human expression split her Lep lips into a gruesome gash.

"It is a strange work of art, grandmother." Zir spoke in halting Lepir. She would never be fluent in the language, but diligent study was making her at least competent.

"Strange? You might be surprised, daughter. I know more of the true history of the Ty Onar Lep than you can possibly imagine. Have you never wondered why the Leps came to the Pinch? They certainly didn't travel here to study saccule's, as the so-called Colonizers did. You have never seen the kind of art they practiced in those early years."

"They wanted to follow the old ways, the old religions, just like the Garang Japat. It was part of the reason for the Schism Wars." Riva chuckled as Zir spoke. "Isn't it?"

"Why do you hate the humans, Pa Riva Zir?"

Zir was caught off guard by the change of subject.

"My father lost his job after the Lep-Human War. He was a cybermaster, a good one. After the war, he couldn't get any work at all. It destroyed him. He turned to drugs. He got weak and old. My mothers left him, my grandmother cut him and my litter mates from the *li-ya*. I grew up being spit on by humans and Leps. And it wasn't only me who suffered. I saw so many of our people destroyed by the Lep Laws, families ruined, children sold away to Ri, humans seizing the homes and businesses of Leps. I swore I'd make them all pay."

"Ah," said Riva. "We share something in common then. I, too, am repaying an old debt. Very old."

"When will I see you in person, grandmother?"

"The assassin often asked me the same thing. It is a dangerous question, but one that will be answered, by and by." While Zir mulled this over, Riva changed the subject, as she so often did. "Did you know that Karlo Peronida was about to petition the Center Council to repeal the Lep Laws when we detonated the Tomb?"

Zir blinked rapidly, unable to sort out all the emotions suddenly pouring through her.

"No, Grandmother Riva, I didn't know that."

"Understanding is so important, don't you think?"

Zir remembered a previous occasion when Riva had said the same thing, her voice full of threat and savage coldness.

"Yes, grandmother." What did she mean?

"All the infected neuters have been released through the transport gates?" Riva's voice turned brisk, the dreamy tone utterly gone.

"Yes, grandmother. As soon as the hyperMap is restored, we will be able to send them throughout the Pinch, too."

"Good. All the sects will join Tura's great sculpture."

"Yes, grandmother. Except for Pleasure Sect, of course. They have no transport gate."

"But you found another way to get the neuters in there, yih?" Riva had shifted language into Palais, the human tongue. For a moment Zir was so shocked, she didn't have the wit to reply. Riva's voice took on a razor's edge. "Well?"

"No, grandmother. Guildmaster Jons and his apprentice somehow protected the Colossi from your candles, so there was no way we could bring the saccules through the autogates." Although they had tried and failed several times. "What does it matter? Tura's plague moves through the air once a victim suffers the final stage. The Pleasure Sect can't stop that."

"You fool." Riva's voice fell to a whisper. Zir dropped to her knees again, averting her eyes. There was no mistaking that murderous tone. She had heard it dozens of times before a Lep was ordered killed for failure. "Why do you think the Pleasure Sect was originally called Quarantine, you ignorant *puz*?"

"I don't know." Zir was so rattled, she reverted to Gen and forgot to use the honorifics. Riva didn't appear to notice, but continued to speak in that icy low voice.

"Quarantine Sect was always the first sect built by a research team and this one was grown by Calioistro before the macroshunt closed so it was done properly. The Colossi were made by Calioistro himself. The plague will never enter there. You were told to find a way in. Even that failure Nalet found a door."

Zir could have answered with many excuses. The Madam of The Close, Aleen Raal, was the real power in Pleasure Sect and after Vi-Kata tried to kill her charge, Vida, she had taken an active interest in the Sect's security and Raal was a woman of formidable intelligence and cunning. No one passed in there now without her scrutiny. Many of Zir's best agents had been caught trying to sneak in and been forced to suicide to keep their knowledge secret. They had never been able to find a way to fool the Colossi, technology that even the Colonizers hadn't fully understood. Without transport gates, it was impossible to enter Pleasure Sect without Raal knowing of it. Zir could have explained all this, but there was no use offering excuses to Riva.

"I am sorry, grandmother. I have failed you. I await your judgment."

There was a long moment of silence. Then Riva spoke again and her voice was strangely calm.

"No matter. Quarantine holds only a few thousand sapients. They can be destroyed by other means. Do not be dismayed, daughter."

"Thank you, grandmother. I will not fail you again."

"No, you won't. Tura is the answer to all failure." Riva chuckled softly. Before Zir could respond to this, Riva's voice became urgent. "What of the L'var?"

Zir relaxed a bit. Riva had been delighted by Zir's plan to capture the girl. "We will have her soon."

"Good. The assassin was right about her. Kill her as soon as you have deactivated her force belt. Do not delay and do not underestimate her."

"I won't, Grandmother Riva."

"Nothing is more important than this, Zir, not your life or the life of any Lep."

"I obey."

"When she is dead, use the furnace—"

There was a moment's sudden silence, then Riva cursed, a high-pitched scream of rage that reminded Zir horribly of Tura. It took almost a minute for Riva to calm down enough to speak coherently to Zir.

"I have another task for you, one that must be performed immediately, without failure. Do you understand, *puz*? You must not fail. It is as important as the death of the L'var."

"Yes, Grandmother Riva."

"You must find and destroy the lifebox of Rico Hernanes y Jons. Use the asher to destroy his body. Do not fail me this time."

"No, grandmother."

"As long as we must attack Government House ahead of schedule, there is another task that must be accomplished. It will slow them down, but they will have force belts, and without the Map to coordinate defense, there should be no significant difficulty."

"I will see to it."

"*Tchi. Tchi.* You are my good and faithful daughter,

Zir. Soon, you will be rewarded. Oh, such rewards. You will witness death beyond our dreams. Worlds filled with bones. You will know a silence that will echo from here to the Rim."

Zir's gaze was drawn to the thousands of test cages. Was this really what she had dreamed about all these years? Well, it was too late to wonder now. The plague was loosed. The humans were about to be erased from the Pinch forever. I'vi'Ri.

"Thank you, grandmother."

Hi made furious love to Aleen and before he was done he wept and cursed. He hated himself for the weakness of it. Hivel Jons, master of the Cyberguild, unable to control his emotions. Thank God Aleen said nothing, just rode with his storm. She knew him so well. At last his sobs subsided and he slumped, exhausted, beside her. Aleen lay at his side, silent and knowing. She didn't try to offer comfort, or force him to talk. Her cybereye flashed red in the darkness. She was doing business, giving him room to deal with his grief.

Hi's mind was full of too many pictures. He kept seeing Arno, bloody and mutilated, on the morgue slab under those unforgiving lights. Now there was the image of Rico, an empty shell of flesh hooked up to a lifebox, to keep that nightmare company. Both of them were victims of Hi's obsession with Riva.

Hi slotted in a vial of deprotase, the only way he could sleep these days. Even so, he lay in the darkness of Aleen's room for a long time before he was able to find the release of sleep.

When he awoke, he lay beside her, side touching side. The lights had been turned up slightly and he stared up into the holo clouds drifting across her ceiling. An incense bar had been lit and he smelled the sweet aroma of daalenerry. For the moment he felt as empty and light as one of those clouds. But the grief would come again. It never went away for long. Aleen touched him lightly and as if she had asked a question, he spoke.

"He was just a boy, Aleen," he murmured. "He was as much my son as Amo. I loved them both. They were so young. Too young to die."

"Does Barra know yet?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"No, not yet. I sent a packet, but who knows when it'll get to Nimue. I don't even know if they got the previous one about the Tomb explosion. Their Map access keeps failing. She'll be devastated. Rico was her last living child. I promised to watch over him. I swore to her that I'd keep him safe."

They were silent for some time, just touching. She massaged him and her strong wise hands smoothed away knots that felt like stones under his skin.

"Vida contacted me," said Aleen. "She wants to talk with you, Hi. Won't you see her?"

"I can't, Aleen. Not right now." Hi pulled away from her and reached over to a side table to snatch up a vial of frulose. He was about to slot it into his IV line, but Aleen stopped him, closing her strong hands around his.

"No, Hi. You know better."

He looked at her. Her crimson cybereye was in standby mode and looked like an ember left glowing in a fireplace. He remembered the first time he'd seen her as a young woman, newly Marked and full of ambitions, few of which Palace would ever allow her to fulfill. She wasn't very beautiful, or even very kind. But he had seen something in her beyond the brilliant mind and sensual manner, some luminous quality of pride and hope that he had never stopped loving. She's my friend, he thought, wonderingly. Not just my ally, or my partner in a thousand schemes, or occasional lover. My friend. And I love her. She wouldn't like to hear that from him, though. After all these years, he had never spoken the words aloud.

"You're right," he said and set the frulose aside, though it was hard to do. "Have you heard from Molos?"

"No, and I'm getting worried. He's never been out of touch this long. Do you think he really blames himself for . . . what happened?"

"Yeah, I think so. He's always been moody and too quick to shoulder blame; I guess having an assassin for a brother gets you in the habit of feeling like you have blood on your hands. It's a pretty rotten time for him to go off after Riva like some kind of damned martyr, though. I have no idea where he and Rico were with their tracking of Riva and Zir. I can't even locate the Chameleon Gate. For all I know, Riva found and destroyed it. The worst thing is, I haven't been able to walk the Map for days. You've got to be able to concentrate, keep your metabolism steady, and control your body's movements with the biofeedback. I just can't do it, Aleen. I've been walking the Map for decades and now I can't even make it through the transition space. The guild wants me to step down as guildmaster, you know. Can't say I blame them. Both of my heirs are dead. My own factor accused of embezzlement and worse. My bodyguard betrays his oath and helps her escape. Thank God Barra isn't here to see this."

She put a cool hand on his chest and played with the graying hairs there, but said nothing.

"What is it, Aleen? You've got something on your mind, I can tell."

She gave a little laugh.

"I was just thinking of the first time we made love and you didn't have your credchip with you."

Hi tried not to smile—it felt disloyal to Rico—but he couldn't help it.

"You wouldn't believe that I was a patron-track and made me get on the Map to shift over the money personally."

Aleen put her head on his chest beside her hand.

"You were so excited, you couldn't walk the Map then, either. I shouldn't have laughed." She brushed her cheek across his chest, kissing him lightly.

He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. I love you, he thought, but didn't quite

dare say it.

Aleen sat up suddenly, clearly receiving a message on her implant.

"Yes, Tia?" As a courtesy to Hi, she spoke aloud, though she could have subvocalized her responses. "When? What do the Protectors think? Tell the governor I'll meet with him shortly. No, keep the doors open, we don't want to do anything out of the ordinary." AJeen scrambled out of bed and started dressing, though he knew she hated to get dressed after sex without a shower.

"What's wrong?"

Aleen hesitated for a fraction of a second, the habit of a lifetime of brokering information. Hi wasn't offended. He might have done the same.

"Someone has made an attempt on the Colossi, tried to disable them. The Protectors say the damage looks like one of those candles you've told me about. If you and Rico hadn't buffered them, they would have been fried for sure."

Hi was about to speak when his own implant buzzed.

"Yeah?" One of his assistants repeated the information that Aleen had just given him, with some additional detail. "Convene the Cyberguild's master council. I'll be there in an hour."

Aleen lifted an eyebrow.

"It was Riva, all right. Apparently, she's made an all-out assault on the Map with hundreds of candles and all kinds of cascaders and attack metas. The Map's backups are still working, but every cybe on Palace has to get on now or we could have a crash."

"Dear God. A full Mapcrash?"

"Yeah." Hi's voice shook. Not even during the Schism Wars had there ever been the danger of a full Mapcrash. "The hyperMap has already been shut down. Thank God Rico guessed this could happen and we had a shutoff plan in place. At least the Maps on the other planets of the Pinch are safe. I've got to go."

"Good luck."

Hi took Aleen in his arms. She was taller than he was, beautiful, like a sculpture of a woman, and he was just a fat old cybe. Did she care for him as much as he cared for her? Maybe he'd never know. Maybe it didn't matter. He kissed her and left for the Protectors office, pumping the frulose on the run.

Vida had hoped to spend some time with Rico's body privately, but his room was filled with people. Most of them were relatives of other cybes who had been severed while walking the Map and were on life support, a triumph of hope over medical capability, but there were also medtechs and a few media people. Suz Sivar, the Trichan media intake, was there with holocam operators and she was in Vida's face right away.

"Word is, Sé Rico Hernanes y Jons and you were lovers. Any truth to that rumor, Sé Vida?"

"That's Sé L'var to you, Sivar," snapped Vida, immediately regretting the outburst. She was tired and her head still felt like a heavy sphere of glass on her shoulders, but she couldn't afford to indulge her irritation with the gossipmonger. "My apologies. I'm not feeling well."

Vida's entourage swept into the hospital room with Samante at their head. The interpreter hustled the media people out and arranged for a curtain to be brought to screen Vida from everyone else.

"I'm sorry, Vida," said Samante. "I should have checked the room ahead of you."

"Don't worry about it. Thanks for getting rid of them."

Vida hesitated a moment, then straightened up and stepped through the curtain to sit beside Rico's lifebox. His body was visible through the glass, though his face was obscured by a mask of feeding tubes and telemetry devices. Vida put a hand on the glass of the lifebox. No

tears would come. She whispered to him.

"Hello, Rico. I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner. They tell me that you're never going to wake up, that the trauma of a sever damages the brain too much. But I don't believe that. You'll be with me again, I know. I—"

The lights and readouts of every instrument in the medwing dimmed and most of them disappeared. Emergency lanterns came on at various corners of the ceiling and Rico's lifebox gave a lurching hum, then most of the lights came back on, though many of the green ones were now red. A chorus of alarms shrieked through the air.

"What's happened?"

Before Vida could do more than rise from her seat, Samante came around the corner. The fitful light made her seem a beast from a nightmare.

"The Map is in standby! They say it could crash, Vida!"

Vida went to the factor and put an arm around her shoulders. People were screaming and she could sense the potential for hysteria. Jak had his honor blade out and was covering Vida's back. It felt good to have the bodyguard there. She felt vulnerable. Vida wished she still had her force belt, but it had been taken from her by someone when she was brought to the medwing. The shouts and crying were edging toward crazy panic. She had to do something before it got out of hand.

"Everyone, please listen to me!" She shouted, and winced as the loud noise echoed in her head with the screaming of the alarms. "Can someone shut off those alarms? Thank you. My name is Chief Patron Vida L'var and I promise you that everyone is going to be all right. Please calm down. Please, no questions, just listen for a moment, all right? Thank you. Okay, we need to get out of the dark and up to the West Tower roof park. That's where the emergency services will rendezvous. From there, we can work out what to do. Are there any medmasters here?"

"Yes, there's three of us, Yovel, Hanna, and Preus."

"Good. I want two of you to stay here in the medwing to take care of the patients. There may be some panic, but you're not to leave these people. We'll send help with food and water soon, I promise. Sé Hanna, you'll come with us to the roof park and bring a medkit, if you can find one, and any drugs you think we may need, plus as many mouth filters as you can carry. We'll need them until the filtration units come back online."

"How are we going to get to the roof park? It's pitch-black out there," someone yelled. "The medwing is the only place with any lights."

"I'll lead the way. Don't worry, I know the route and I don't need route markers to find it. I have perfect recall of the route to the roof park. Don't tell me you all haven't seen my bio on the People's Factor show? For shame." There was general nervous laughter. "Somebody give me a lamp. Okay, thanks. Does everyone see this lamp? I'm blinking it now. Follow this light. We'll be at the roof park before you know it. From here it's about thirty minutes of walking."

Vida led them out of the hospital and into the halls. She'd never been to the medwing, but she'd memorized the floor plan for the twin towers long ago and the route to the roof park glowed in her memory. It took them far longer than she'd estimated because they often stopped to scoop up groups of weeping citizens along the way and to have Hanna treat injuries. The woman was efficient and calm, thank God.

At last, Vida led them out of the darkness of the West Tower and into the light of the roof park.

The roof park teemed with hundreds of people, airhoppers, security forces, Protectors, and piles of supplies scavenged from offices and apartments. Sirens were wailing and a fire was burning somewhere nearby. The gardens would never recover, Vida thought sadly, surprised that such a calm thought occurred to her. She wondered about Whitey, the old saccule gardener she'd set to work on the East Tower roof garden. She hoped the neuter was unhurt.

Samante joined her.

"That was amazing, Vida. We would have been stuck down there for hours if you hadn't led us out here."

She shrugged. She'd never quite believed that other people didn't have the ability to remember everything they saw and call up the images whenever they wanted. To her, it was obvious, like remembering your own name. She sent the remaining members of her entourage, except for Samante, over to help set up emergency shelters and assist the Protectors.

"What happened, Samante?" asked Vida. "Does anyone know?"

"The Cyberguild isn't answering calls, but someone said that there were massive candle strikes. The Map is closed to the public and only emergency services are operating. No one's implants are functioning."

An older woman, wearing Medguild work clothes and a mouth filter, came up to them.

"Excuse me, Sé Vida." It took her a moment to place the woman. Hanna, the medtech. "Yes, Sé Hanna."

"We have a lot of injuries up here and something, well, could you come and look at this?"

Vida frowned. Her head was killing her and she just wanted to lie down somewhere, but a crowd had gathered around her, expectantly. She spent a few minutes organizing them into teams, borrowing heavily on her experience watching Tia manage The Close. She felt a clutch of fear. Were her friends all right? What about Aleen? It took longer than she'd expected and she spent what she thought was far too much time soothing people's feelings, answering silly questions, and settling foolish arguments. Finally, only Hanna, Samante, and Jak were left.

"Samante, we need to find out what's happened to the Map and what's being done to fix it. See if you can find one of Karlo's factors. Jak, you go with Samante and keep an eye on her. Jak looked as if he might argue with her, but the Garang must have seen something in her face, because he simply gave the Japat bow of fealty and left with Samante. "Okay, Hanna, do you mind if I call you Hanna? Show me what's worrying you."

By the time they got to the makeshift field hospital, Vida had dealt with half a dozen crises. People kept coming up to her asking for her instructions. Apparently, Vida's team captains were doing a good job of keeping order because everyone seemed to think she was in charge. Even a Protector lieutenant came to her for orders.

Finally, though, Hanna led her into a slipshod fab, dusty and smelling of antiseptic. There were a dozen sapients on inflated couches, most of them bandaged and resting. Off to the side, though, Vida saw a partially screened cot with a sapient who was tossing and turning. As she got closer, a smell like rotting fish came to her. Hanna, without comment, handed Vida a mouth filter. The two women came around the corner and Vida saw a sight that would haunt her all her days.

Vanna Makeesa lay there, naked and shivering. Vida automatically looked around for the Second Citizen's entourage, but apparently none of them had made it up to the roof park with her. Vanna was alone.

Her body was covered with hundreds of small sores that grew slowly before Vida's eyes. The woman's flesh smelled of corruption and her face was contorted with sores and terror. She saw Vida and her eyes focused. She began speaking rapidly, but the words were slurred and interrupted by moans of agony. Also, she was speaking in the language of the Interstellar Guild. Vida shook her head.

"I don't understand, Vanna. You have to speak in Gen, in Gen."

"—Gyruh." That was all she managed before her words became grunts and moans of pain.

Vanna's eyes filmed over and bled a viscous red-green fluid. The sores all over her body grew faster and faster until they exploded, casting black spores into the air. Hanna backed away in horror, jarring the mouth filter in her panic.

"No! Don't!"

But it was too late. The medtech had inhaled some of the spores. She understood her mistake instantly. She turned and ran out of the tent. Vida reached for her, but was too slow. She started after the medtech, but a hand leprous and weak closed over her wrist. Vida looked down into the ruined face of the Second Citizen. Her mouth had sunk in, with teeth crumbled to yellow dust choking her throat. Her skin was gray and mottled. The reek coming from her was too strong even for the powerful screens in her mouth filter to keep it out entirely. Vida's stomach roiled and she thought she might vomit.

"AI coze ehn wahl padduhn." She breathed, eyes wild. Vida shook her head, uncomprehending. "Gyruh coze ehn wahl. Ehn wahl. Coze ehn wahl." Each word was accompanied with a bubble of the viscous red-green blood: The woman's grip suddenly clenched so tight that Vida knew she'd have an ugly bruise later. "Save Paluhs."

"I will," she said. "I will save Palace, I promise. May God see you well, Vanna."

Vanna's lips twitched and she died without another word. Her body crumbled to stinking clumps right in front of Vida, until nothing was left but rotten piles of diseased flesh. Vida looked up and saw Samante staring at Vanna. Thank God the woman was wearing a mouth filter, though it looked like the spores had all died quickly in the air. The smell must have warned her.

"What is it, Vida?" Samante's voice shook with fear.

Vida scrubbed her wrist with swabs from a tray beside Vanna's cot. She scrubbed and scrubbed until the skin was raw and bleeding. Her hands trembled.

"I don't know, Samante, but I think, well, I think Karlo would recognize it. Vanna sure knew."

Samante's expression turned to absolute terror once she understood what Vida was implying. A Kephalon plague. Someone had loosed a Kephalon plague on Palace.

"Sé Barra?"

Damo stumbled into Pero's fab without warning. His clothes were filthy and his face was caked with dirt. He was holding a jagged piece of blueglass in his hands. Pero frowned at him.

"Damo, what the hell are you doing in here?"

The boy quailed at his brother's voice.

From the moment Damo spoke, Barra sensed a tension in Pero that she didn't like. Damo cowered away from his brother and she knew perfectly well that he was afraid he would be hit.

In her younger days, before signing Matha's contract, Barra Jons had done considerable traveling in the Pinch, studying the variations of blueglass on all the worlds, struggling to understand how the substrate made the hyperMap possible. She had traveled to all the worlds with working Maps. She had visited Kephalon, of course, seen it in its flower. She had also seen the incredible violence. Fights to the death started over matters that a Palace citizen would consider trivial. She had even seen Karlo Peronida in his youth, near the end of his career as a street fighter, before he bought his officer's commission and began his meteoric rise to the mastership of the Kephalon fleet. She had seen him kill two men with his bare hands. As a bright girl on a patron-track, sheltered and pampered by her clan, Barra had been both sickened and fascinated. Over the years, she had watched Karlo become more and more a Palace man, but she had wondered about his sons. Had they inherited their father's legendary temper? Until this moment, Barra would have said that Pero had not. Now, she wondered.

"It's all right, dearling, come here." Damo scuttled over to Barra, looking fearfully up at Pero. "Sé Pero."

Pero had the grace to look ashamed, or pretend to that feeling. "Sorry, kid."

Damo still wouldn't come out from behind Barra's chair.

"What's wrong, Damo?" Barra put an arm around his fragile shoulders. After a moment he stopped shaking and turned his strange large eyes on her.

"It's Nimue, Sé Barra. She's talking to me. You've got to come and listen to Nimue, Sé Barra," said Damo. "You've got to."

Barra almost snapped at the boy, but something held her back. The utter trust on his face, the way he clutched her hand as if it were the only thing he trusted in the universe. What if Damo was right and he had somehow heard Nimue being activated?

Barra glanced at Pero whose face showed no expression. "Sing, or do not sing."

"All right. Let's go."

Barra made Pero stay behind. The man made Damo too nervous to talk. She walked with the boy down the corridors. He trailed one hand along the blueglass and because Barra was watching him so closely, she noticed a very interesting thing. His fingers drifted and danced over the blueglass so that he only touched the oldest blueglass. That wasn't the sort of thing you could do by accident and most people couldn't tell isomers apart except by careful scrutiny. Barra could do it. In fact, as a girl she remembered brushing her fingers down the walls of the twin towers in exactly the same way as Damo. The oldest blueglass had just *felt* different to her. Barra touched Damo's shoulder very lightly. Even so, the boy flinched. But when he turned around to face her, she saw no fear. The flinch was that basic a reflex for him. In that moment Barra hated Karlo Peronida.

"Damo, I'm just wondering. Can you feel how the blueglass is different?"

"Sure, Sé Barra," he said right away. "You can, too, I'll bet. You know everything about blueglass. It feels nice, like warm water with silver in it."

Barra grinned. Not even Rico, so brilliant in so many ways, had ever known that feeling.

"Yes, it sure does."

They continued on and Barra trailed her fingers behind his, matching his movements, an old delight returned.

Damo led her into a side room on the perimeter of Orbital. A big bag of assorted microtools was laid out in an intricate pattern outside the door on a blanket, each tool polished to brightness.

The interior of this room was different from anything Barra had ever seen. It was filled with what at first seemed to be blueglass sculpture, weirdly twisted shapes welded haphazardly to the walls of a room with thirty-two facets. Barra frowned. With that number of facets, this must have been a room associated with the AI.

Damo looked up at her with the smallest twitch of his lips, as close to a smile as she'd ever seen.

"Do you see?" he asked.

Barra looked more carefully and gradually a huge smile came unbidden to her lips. Damo had made what cybe theorists called a pseudo-lattice, but she'd never seen one actually built of blueglass, nor arranged in quite this way. She looked down at Damo with wonder.

"Oh, Damo. It's beautiful, dearling."

"I was just going to make a p-wave talker for you, but then I felt Nimue wake up and changed it to an s-wave. Then she talked to me. Well, I guess it was more like she made me able to hear somebody else talking. Sé Rico."

Barra was only half listening; she was concentrating very hard on visualizing Damo's pseudo-lattice as a gestalt, rotating it in her mind. It had some of the features of a Mappoint, but streamlined, more elegant. Then the boy's words penetrated.

"Rico? I don't understand . . . Damo, maybe you've tapped into the hyperMap and connected to Palace." Damo looked upset and crushed. Barra knelt beside him and gave him a gentle hug. "Damo, that would be amazing enough. We haven't been able to make our Map access work since we arrived."

"Really, Sé Barra. Nimue is awake."

With anyone else, even another cybermaster, Barra might have shrugged this off. But not with Damo. The two of them were so alike and Barra couldn't imagine mistaking the hyperMap for an AI.

"I believe you, dearling. But I don't feel anything;"

"Course not. The room's only shaped for me right now. Do you want me to fix it so you can talk to Nimue, too?"

Barra's back was starting to ache and she sat down on the floor next to Damo and massaged the small of her back absently.

"Please do."

Damo dashed out of the room and returned with a pair of tools. He wandered around the room in what would probably look like a random daze to anyone other than a cybermaster who'd spent her life testing the dimensional properties of blueglass lattices. To Barra, the boy seemed like a surgeon.

Damo made a few cuts here and there and spent fifteen minutes in one corner of the room making minute changes to a flare of blueglass there. The touchpoint, Barra realized. And Damo found it without access to meters or quantum counters. Before he was through, Barra began to feel a whisper, then a thrumming. Damo joined her at the wall and the thrumming changed into a rush of sound. She clasped Damo's hand and closed her eyes.

"I can hear her, I think," said Barra. "Is that what an AI sounds like?"

"It takes her a little while to notice you. It's like a giant who keeps forgetting to look down. But she will. She likes to see things." She and Damo leaned against each other. "You've got to be really still and just think yourself into Nimue's shape. You can't move, or anything."

"I understand."

The two of them held hands and tried to remain as motionless as possible. Barra wished desperately for just a vial or two of deprotase. They-wouldn't be able to sustain this connection for long unaided.

The rush of treble thunder resolved into pure notes, like the strumming of a harp. The notes became sounds and the sounds merged into words, then a voice. A familiar voice.

Mom?

Rico?

Hi, Mom. Good job, Damo. Where's Nimue, Sé Rico?

She's not able to talk easily with people yet, Damo. We'll need to make a translator for her. Her original one was broken when the macroshunt closed.

Oh. I guess that's why she's worried and mad.

Maybe, Damo. I need to talk to Sé Barra for a minute, okay?

Okay.

Mom, I don't know how long I have and there are some things you have to know right away.

What do you mean, Rico?

Just listen, okay? Ri Tal Molos is Riva and he's used his candles to crash the Map. You have

to tell Uncle Hi as soon as the Map is back up.

Molos is Riva? How do you know—

He severed me.

Oh, no! Oh, God!

Please, Mom, there's more you have to know. Tura's Tomb was blown up, and unless Molos was lying, she might be alive and getting ready to release another plague on Palace. Molos has got to be stopped. One more thing. I don't know how important it is, but I think the L'vars have some ability to interface with an AI lattice to guide its repair. You'll have to work with Vida to find out how. I . . . guess I won't be able to.

Rico, if you 're severed, how—?

I've—I don't know how to describe this—merged with the Chameleon Gate. It's the only thing keeping my Mapbody intact, I think. I don't know when my buffer's going to saturate, but it can't be long now. I don't know how we managed to survive the encounter with Nimue.

Excuse me, Sé Rico? Can you hear—

Not now, Damo.

Rico, pay attention to him. Damo is the one who made the interface to connect us. Go ahead, Damo.

I'm sorry for interrupting, Sé Rico.

No, it's okay, Damo. I'm just . . . well, having trouble with emotions and I'm worried that Molos will shut off Nimue as soon as the hyperMap comes back. But anybody who could build an AI interface has got my attention.

Well, it's just that it sounds like Nimue is getting really mad. Can you hear her?

You 're right. She's . . . oh, damn.

Rico, what is it?

Damn. Mom, a huge fleet has just come through the Palace microshunt. Nimue challenged it with an outpost rover and the rover was destroyed. Mom, it's the Nomadia and another fleet that Nimue doesn't recognize. They're headed for Palace.

Rico, I have to go tell Pero about this. Can you maintain the link with Damo?

I don't know. Nimue is changing focus. She's

Rico's voice was cut off. Barra opened her eyes and met Damo's astonished gaze. The connection to the AI had been broken and she couldn't feel even a trace of it. So much to consider and no time to think. Rico severed! It still hadn't penetrated completely. Was that the last conversation they would ever have? Her last child was as good as dead. Barra's eyes stung, but she blinked back the tears. No time.

"Come on, Damo. We have to tell Pero what we've learned."

He nodded, but his face had settled into a thoughtful expression.

"Can I stay here for a little while, Sé Barra? Maybe I can think of a way to talk to Sé Rico again." Barra nodded and gave him a quick hug.

"I'll send a couple of cybes back here to help you." Before she left the room, she turned back to look at him. He had a dazed and amazed expression on his face. "Damo, as far as I'm concerned, you have just earned yourself a patron-track in the Cyberguild and damn anyone who tries to keep you out. As of this moment, I confirm you as a cybermaster."

Barra had the pleasure of seeing Damo's face split into a smile. It was just as beautiful as she'd thought it might be. She jogged down the corridors trying to understand how she could feel fear, grief, and joy all at the same time.

"This is Tarick Avon for Pansect Media, reporting at ten after twenties. We are broadcasting from Interstellar Sect's ground control low-wave transmitter, the only comm working now that the Map is down. I don't know how many of you are able to receive this, but here is the situation at this hour:

"At thirteens this afternoon, saboteurs began a series of attacks on the Map. According to Sé Jons, guildmaster of the Cyberguild, the Map itself is intact, but most general services, including intraPinch communication by hyperMap, will be unavailable for some time. If you know of any physical damage to a Mappoint, you are asked to use your implant's medpulse to alert the authorities. It is very important that only confirmed blueglass damage, or a bona fide medical emergency, be reported with the medpulse. At present, the Medguild, headed by Guildmaster Sé Krysin y Qintan, is opening up emergency treatment centers in all Sects. They will respond to all medpulse calls.

"The Cyberguild assures us that the hyperMap is undamaged and once the terrorist metas are defused, access to other planets will be restored. It is estimated that repair work may take up to three days. Electricity should be restored before morning. Turn off all appliances to prevent surges and fire hazards.

"No one has taken responsibility for the attack, but sources close to the First Citizen confirm that the weapons were candles, known to be used by the terrorist organization Riva.

"The Center Council is convening at this hour and it is expected that they will grant Sé Peronida full authority to deal with the disaster.

"To repeat: there has been a partial Mapcrash. The Cyberguild is working to restore basic services and repair damage to the substrate infrastructure. If you have information about blueglass damage, or you know something about these attacks, you are asked to use your implant medpulse. A medtech will respond as soon as possible.

"This is Tarick Avon reporting. This report will loop until we have further new details."

Dukayn was on his way to the swamp, finally given permission by Karlo to track down the fugitives, when the Map crashed. His implant worked for only a few minutes before it went silent, but long enough for Karlo to order him back to Government House to take charge of the Protectors and establish order in the Sects. The airhopper flew on for some moments while Dukayn struggled with the command. He could easily claim never to have received the message. There would never be any proof and there were dozens of competent officers back in the city to take charge of simple crowd control. But Karlo expected him Karlo needed *him*.

"Return to the East Tower;" said Dukayn to the pilot.

The man didn't hesitate, but banked the airhopper to a return vector. Dukayn slammed a fist down on an armrest, shattering the shelf. The movement jarred his broken arm, but he gave no sign of the pain. Jevon was out there, getting farther away with every hour. Dukayn had wasted an entire week trying to locate the force that broke into Tura's Tomb when he should have been tracking Jevon. Alone, she could never escape him, but the Garang Japat, Nju-tok, changed everything. Dukayn knew of the man. He was an old and respected warrior, one of the best travelers among the Japat; given enough time, Dukayn would never find them out there.

Riva had defeated Karlo, rescued Tura, and successfully evaded Dukayn at every turn. Now, even Jevon was lost to him. Everywhere he turned, frustration and failure. Dukayn took a deep breath and let his fist open. He turned the palm face up and held it motionless in front of his eyes. Control. Follow the lines of the palm, the force of the soul moves through every turn. Balance. Bring the force to the center of the palm. Peace. Bring the palm to the heart. Peace. She is *huyiu*. She will come to the heart's call. Riva is nothing, just another Lep. She will bleed and die. Tura would be found and killed.

By the time they landed on the Peronida pad of the East Tower, Dukayn had regained his

balance. He had been tested. He had come too close to betraying his heart oath to Karlo, to falling from the wire, but he had not failed. He was still a complete man. And such a victory must surely deserve a reward. Once he had restored order, he would spend some time in Deeplock. It was time to teach Sister Romero that sight was too precious a gift to waste on God.

The bridge of *la*, the coreship of the Hirrel Nomadia, was smaller than Wan expected. He'd anticipated a huge; control room with hundreds of officers and crew to manage the vast armada, but instead, it was a tiny black space with half a dozen Hirrel, including the Minu. The atmosphere was relaxed, almost peaceful.

The Minu wore a white gown woven with smarthreads that rippled and wavered like looking through a heat shimmer. The Minu stood, hands folded in the gown's sleeves, and turned toward Wan and Susannah as they entered. The Minu's head was enclosed in a helmetlike device composed of blueglass. It hid all features and expression. Leni had spent years trying to find out what exactly the helmet was for and could only say that it was brought with the Hirrel from the Rim and that the Minu of the Hirrel always wore it.

"Greetings, old one," said Susannah in Gen.

"Greetings, child. Do we flow?" The Minu's voice came out as a powerful echo with a silvery timbre.

"One believes so." Susannah gestured to Wan, who stepped forward and took out a flatplate from a sealed pouch. "This-contains half the wisdom of the *Brektzhu*."

The Minu made no motion to take the flatplate from Wan.

"Our bargain was for the light, not the shadow."

Wan tensed. Hirrel rarely argued with other sapients. This was as close to anger as one of them would show an outsider. Susannah didn't hesitate.

"We have not yet concluded our study of the *Brektzhu*. You have my word that it will be given to you entire. But we thought you would want the data within, or as much as we have decoded."

"You will never entirely understand the *Brektzhu*. It is a deeper matter than you guess." There was a pause of a few seconds while the Minu stood silent. Wan turned to speak to Susannah, but she forestalled him with a gesture. Finally, the Hirrel leader spoke, voice placid and seemingly unconcerned. "You may continue your studies.until we arrive at Polis, then all promises must be kept."

Susannah steepled her fingers in the rough shape of an eye and bowed to the Minu. Wan frowned. Where had he seen that gesture before? Then it came to him. Vida used it sometimes. He would have to ask Susannah what it meant.

"We flow," she said.

They turned to leave, but the Minu spoke again, its beautifully liquid voice trilling in the air.

"The *wauzho* that we loaned to Peronida a' Karlo was murdered."

Susannah's usual complacency wavered.

"Do you know how?"

"Efficiently." The Minu raised delicate long fingers and mimicked the gesture that Susannah had made. "We flow."

Susannah and Wan left the trueship and returned to *Ket's Ribbon* where the assault on Palace was to be coordinated. It was some hours before the two had a chance to talk in private in Wan's cabin. Leni joined them, sitting unobtrusively in a corner studying fleet reports, but listening.

"What was the Minu talking about just before we left?" asked Wan. "What is the *washo*?"

"The *wauzho* is the sarcophagus that I obtained for Karlo from the Hirrel after the war. It was a great honor they did him in loaning it to use as a prison."

"You mean the thing in the Tomb?"

"Yes. It was extremely old and the AI inside was the last of its kind. Murdering the *wauzho* is a terrible act. The Minu is very angry about this. There will be an accounting."

"If you say so. I wonder how they knew about it though?" Another thought struck Wan. "You don't think Tura has escaped?"

"Do you remember the vidcast last week about a weapons dump explosion in the swamp on Palace?" asked Susannah. Wan nodded. "Now that we know about the death of the sarcophagus, I wonder about that. It may have been the Tomb."

"Hm. Yeah, that makes sense. I've never heard of weapons dumps out in the swamp and Leni and I have hacked through most of Karlo's military files."

"I can't imagine that Tura escaped that explosion. Karlo went to a lot of trouble to make sure that any attempt to free her would fail."

Wan shrugged. "Doesn't matter, either way. Even if Tura is dead, it won't affect our plans."

Leni spoke up from the corner. Usually, he was too shy to say anything in Susannah's presence.

"But what if she isn't dead? What if she escaped and is working with Riva?"

Wan glanced at Susannah, who showed no reaction to Leni's speculation. The murderer of Kephalon, loose with Riva's resources? That might be a danger worse than Karlo and his fleet. Why hadn't Karlo just killed her when he had the chance?

"Good point, Leni," said Wan. "We need to find out for sure. I'll contact my agents on Palace."

"How long before we can enter the microshunt?" asked Susannah.

"At least a day. We'd have been on our way yesterday if Admiral Elio hadn't fouled up our Map somehow. Does anyone know why we've lost hyperMap access and when it'll be back?"

"Our cybes don't understand it, but they don't think it was Elio's fault," said Susannah. "The hyperMap has been shut down on the Palace end."

"Damn. I don't like it. Why would Palace do something like that? If they thought we were attacking, they'd have sent fleet scouts through the shunt first. Shutting down the hyperMap just warns us."

"Do you want to delay the attack?" asked Susannah.

Wan bowed his head and considered. On the one hand, he knew the value of intelligence; he'd spent ten years gathering information on Karlo's fleet and the flaws in Palace's defenses. On the other hand, he had a sense that the Hirrel were uncertain allies. It made him nervous that he didn't understand what was at stake for the Minu in this war. He had a feeling that too much delay might unravel their alliance. His officers were borderline loyal and given too much time, some of them might lose their nerve for revolution and try to alert Karlo. A hundred other logistical and psychological considerations weighed in his mind before he made his decision.

"No, we won't delay. If Karlo doesn't know about the Nomadia's movements yet, he will soon. The more time he has to prepare, the less chance of a surrender. We begin the attack tomorrow at the fifteens."

Susannah and Leni only nodded. The dice were in the air. Everything depended on how they fell.

Dawn touched the sky and Vida stopped talking for a moment to just look at it. What a beautiful sight. Palace was almost always overcast, but the amazing amount of particulates in

the air offered quite a show at dusk and dawn. This morning's sunrise looked like the birth of a purple and crimson nebula on the horizon. She wished she could just relax and enjoy the moment, but her team leaders were all staring at her expectantly. She massaged a temple while she spoke. Her head still ached.

"Okay, now that we have some light, we can go back into the towers and see what kind of damage there is and find anybody who didn't make it out to the roof park. Sé Valpa, I'd like you to go right to the medwing and make sure that all the patients there are okay." Please, let Rico be all right. She realized that she hadn't resigned herself to Rico's death. Something deep inside her insisted that she would have felt his death.

She dispatched the rest of the groups on their various errands. One of them was delegated to find Karlo Peronida and bring him here. Chances were that he was in the East Tower, which had been inaccessible all night. The group had to travel to the other tower on foot since every available airhopper was out in the Sects dealing with the crises in the city. Karlo had to see the remains of Vanna Makeesa. He was the only person she could trust who Vida knew could confirm whether Vanna had died of a Kephalon plague. Vida and Samante had managed to keep the circumstances of the Second Citizen's death quiet, but who knew how long that would last? No one had been able to find Sé Hanna, though Vida had sent a half-dozen search parties out for her. The medtech was loose out there somewhere, possibly contagious.

"Hi there."

Vida smiled up at Samante, who arrived carrying cups of steaming coffee.

"Promote yourself two grades," said Vida.

"Two more, you mean? You already gave me a double jump in pay for finding you the blanket. If I rub your feet, can I have a shuntjammer?"

Vida laughed and looked at her factor in surprise. Was Samante actually joking with her? Her carefully coiffed hair was askew and her nice gray and red suit looked like it had been through a civil war. But Samante was grinning and Vida couldn't remember ever seeing her look so relaxed and at peace. Some people fell apart under extreme pressure. Apparently, Samante thrived.

"It looks like the Protectors have everything under control here," said Vida. "I don't know about you, but I want to get home and take a nap in a real bed."

"You won't get any argument from me. I never imagined how much trouble people can get into after just losing Map access and lights for a little while. You'd think it was the end of the world. They say the Sects are a disaster."

Vida nodded. According to stragglers who made it to the roof park with search parties Vida sent out, Center Sect, home of the Protectors Guild, was total anarchy. God only knew what the others were like.

"Where's Jak?"

"He is investigating a disturbance ov—"

Samante was cut off by an unearthly wail. The two women leapt up and saw a crowd gathering near a medtent.

"Samante, bring a Protector."

Vida shrugged off her blanket and ran toward what threatened to become a riot. She reached the outer edge of people and shoved her way through without stopping to ask any questions. She'd heard a Garang roar of challenge.

At last she broke through to the center, where Jak stood over the broken and bleeding body of a Lep. The Japat warrior had his honor blade out and held several club-wielding humans at bay. Another human stood at his side, Dan Motta, the countess's son and heir and TeeKay's boyfriend.

"What's going on here?" asked Vida.

"It's the Leps, Sé L'var," yelled someone. "They're the ones who did this. Riva and her Leps. UJU is right, they should all be killed. Tell the Garang to step away from the Lep."

She could hear hysteria and rage in the woman's voice.

"We're all tired and afraid," said Vida. "But we're going to be okay. The Map will be back soon and we'll have help from all the planets of the Pinch to clean up and fix the damage. We're citizens of Palace, not murderers. Let's keep working together, all right?"

A few people on the edges of the mob calmed down and drifted off, but the rest of the crowd was still at a high pitch of excitement, on the edge of blood. Vida could sense it and her words seemed pointless and stupid in her own ears. Just then, Samante came up with a pair of Protectors carrying perseps. They looked young and scared. Vida was worried that they might not be capable of handling this situation without violence. It was funny, but the tension now wasn't that much different from a room filled with horny guests who had been forced to wait too long in The Close. You had to remind them that they weren't really living in the moment, that they were accountable. What would Aleen do?

Vida took a deep, centering breath, put on her warmest smile, and stepped right up to the angriest-looking people at the front of the group. Jak would have followed her, but she shook her head and gestured him back. It was important she do this alone. Jak stayed behind, but didn't sheathe his blade.

"Davo, what would your mother Yola think? And don't you have a sister who's a Lifegiver? I'll bet she'd be sorry to see you like this. Kris, didn't you tell me once you hated weapons because a friend's son accidentally killed himself?" Gregor, your brother lives on Ri, doesn't he? Haven't the Leps there treated him well? Doti, didn't a Lep teach you how to weave? Neel, you're a writer, not a killer. What would your daughter Halee think?"

Vida knew something about all of them, the name of a relative, birth Sect, hobby, something. She moved through the crowd, dealing with them a sapient at a time, cajoling, joking, soothing, calming them down. Meanwhile, Dan and another man carried the Lep off to a medtent. When Vida felt the moment was right, she shifted into organizing mode and started splitting people up into groups and sending them off on various errands. As the only chief patron among the survivors on the roof park, they naturally deferred to her, but she liked to think they also were a bit ashamed of themselves and welcomed an excuse to put the ugliness behind them.

"Samante, can you stay here for a few minutes and make sure everything's okay?"

"Yes, Se." Samante touched Vida's arm lightly. "That was really something, Vida."

Vida shrugged, but couldn't help smiling.

With the immediate crisis past, Vida went to the medtent to see about the Lep. Dan met her at the entrance. His kind, round face, a faint echo of his mother's, had gained years in a single night. His eyes were red with weeping.

"TeeKay is dead, Vida. She was trampled in the panic."

"I'm so sorry, Dan." Vida had a sudden image of TeeKay, laughing loud and telling a dirty joke. She was so young, a friend who didn't care about Vida's money or power, just that she was fun to be with. Vida wiped tears from her eyes. "Why don't you take a break? We'll talk later, I promise."

He nodded and walked away.

Vida watched him go. Another victim of Riva. After a moment, she ducked into the tent. A medtech was bandaging the Lep's eyes. The poor man had been badly beaten. His crest was slightly torn and his clothes were ripped and bloody. She wondered how he'd managed to get into Government House, let alone the West Tower roof park. Vida realized that for all that the L'var destiny was tied to Leps and she herself was trying hard to repeal the laws against them, she hadn't spent much time with them since coming to Government House, thanks to Karlo's dislike of them. In fact, the only Lep she knew well was Ri Tal Molos.

"Sé L'var, I must speak to you alone. No one must hear this," said the Lep.

"All right." Vida gestured and the others moved out of earshot, except Jak, who never strayed far from her. "We're alone. Go ahead."

"I have a message for you from a friend."

"Have you come from Molos?" she whispered eagerly.

"No. Molos is no friend to Leps. I was sent by Pa Nor Falik."

"Who's that?"

"You haven't heard of him?"

"No."

"He is a great man. He's the founder of Amin, the Church of Hope."

Of that, Vida had heard. There had been a mention of them on the screens sometime ago. Cardinal Roha declared it a schism heresy and banned its worship. The implication was that it was a trivial heresy. Several Lifegivers had been stripped of their robes over it, though, as she recalled. Maybe it wasn't as minor a schism as Roha implied.

"What does Sé Falik want with me?"

"He has information about where Riva is hiding Tura, but he will tell only you."

Vida frowned. Of all times for someone to play melodramatic games. Still, with the Map down and implants useless, there was no other way for important messages to be sent.

The Lep's green-scaled muzzle was pointed toward her. She wished she could guess at the meaning of his expression. He looked slightly familiar to her and she realized that she'd seen the pattern of scale color before. After the attack by Vi-Kata, Aleen had insisted that Vida memorize all the family Lines of the Leps on Palace, so she could identify an attacker immediately, therefore it wasn't surprising that she recognized this one. She thought about it, but could only recall that it was the same as someone who had been killed weeks ago. Considering how many hundreds had died recently, that was no surprise. She could almost see the vidscreen report in her mind's eye. It would come to her, in a minute.

"What is your name?"

"I am Pa Sar Tuz."

Ah, that was it. He was related to Pa Sar Elen, a Lep who had been murdered by Vi-Kata just after the war memorial bombing. "All right, Sé Tuz. Where and when does Sé Falik want to meet?"

The Lep gave her detailed directions to a scale polisher's shop in the Service Sect and a password. Falik moved around constantly to avoid Dukayn and Roha, but he would be at the shop at the fifteens. After that, Tuz didn't know where Falik would go. The beaten Lep closed his eyes and slipped into a deep sleep as the powerful sedatives began their work.

A few minutes later Karlo appeared, with Samante in tow. He was accompanied by fleet soldiers in full battle armor carrying weapons that looked even uglier than perseps. The First Citizen's face was still healing from the terrible fight he'd had with Dukayn. Vida had heard a dozen stories about that fight and she still didn't know what really happened, nor did she dare ask Karlo. It wasn't safe to irritate him these days. She'd thought Dukayn a dangerous man, but now she understood why even Dukayn didn't disobey Karlo Peronida.

"This better be important."

Vida swallowed back a retort. Karlo's eyes had a haunted look that she didn't like. She thought he might be on the edge of something quite frightening.

"It is, First Citizen. Please come with me."

They moved silently over the roof park. Samante came up to Vida's side and stepped close

to whisper in her ear.

"Sé Hanna was sighted in Center Sect."

Vida paled. She'd hoped to catch the medtech before she made it out of Government House.

They came to the medtent with Vanna's remains in it. The two young Protectors Vida had set to guard it came to attention, but they didn't defer to Karlo. Karlo said nothing, but his expression became dangerously blank and one of his big hands closed into a fist. Vida stepped forward quickly.

"It's all right. The First Citizen and anyone he calls for is cleared to enter, but no one else."

The Protectors nodded and came to attention as Karlo and Vida ducked in. Vida handed the First Citizen a mouth filter without comment.

They passed through a double screen of spore filters to the transparent plastic body bag containing Vanna's remains. Vida had set up half a dozen aircleaners around the spot where Vanna had lain. She hoped that would be enough to make it safe.

She stared down into the bag. The process of decomposition had continued, even in the bag's sealed environment. The Second Citizen's features were unrecognizable, though here and there, one of her blue tattoos was still visible on a tatter of flesh. Karlo took in the condition of the body and one of his hands whipped out to clench Vida's shoulder. She cried out from the pain and Karlo relaxed his grip. He faced her.

"Is this Vanna?" His voice sounded as dry as dust.

"Yes, First Citizen."

He nodded and his powerful fingers closed convulsively on her shoulder. She winced again.

"This is Tura's work. There can be no doubt. I don't recognize this particular plague. It's something new, but it's her work, I know it."

"Sé Karlo . . . we may not have isolated it in time."

"Explain."

The mouth filter hid his features, but his eyes were cold and dark. She thought it was possible that he was on the verge of killing her and she was terrified.

"A medtech, who may have touched her. She also took off her mouth filter. She's loose in Center Sect. Her name is Hanna Qiso y Juroesi. I've given her description to the Protectors. They're trying to find her."

He gave one quick nod and a bit of the rage in his eyes diminished.

"All of my fleet people will hunt her. I will see that Dukayn's forces do the same. She won't get far." Vida said nothing. She was afraid to speak. Karlo seemed to see her clearly for the first time. "You did well. But if we don't find this Hanna soon, Center Sect may need to be . . . cleansed."

Vida's eyes widened. "Hellbombs?"

"The plague must not spread. I will make sure the fleet understands. Don't look too worried. If only Vanna is dead, then the plague can't be too contagious." Karlo's dead voice took on a hint of life. "I will see Tura destroyed, scale by scale, for this."

"I'm sorry for your loss, First Citizen."

Karlo looked at her in surprise and a brief hint of humanity returned to his eyes. He stared down at the clumps of tumorous tissue dripping from Vanna's bones.

"She'd spit at tears. Revenge is what she'd want." He smiled thinly. "She'll get it, by God's Sight."

Without another word, Karlo left the medtent. Vida looked down at her enemy's remains while she massaged her aching shoulder.

"No," Vida whispered, as if Karlo were still there. "Her last thought was for Palace. She wanted it saved."

Vida, Samante, and Jak headed back to Vida's apartments. It was a long trek to the East Tower without lift booths or lights. But Vida knew shortcuts and she never hesitated, even in the darkest corridors, lit only by the faint azure glow of the blueglass powered by the fusion generators in the undercity. The bluelight was invisible when the real lights were on. With the lights off, Vida found her eyes drawn again and again to the walls, and the intricate and beautiful designs lit from within, the intaglio art of the Colonizers. This was how the murals were meant to be seen. Vida was bone weary, but the fabulous blueglass art lifted her spirit and she arrived home with at least a bit of hope. The Colonizers had survived the closing of the macrohunt and the Schism Wars. Surely, their descendants could survive this crisis?

Jak and Samante made sure that the entrance was sealed and locked, then both went to their respective rooms to sleep. Vida sank into bed with the same thought, but a faint smell reminded her of the love she and Rico had made here and abruptly all thought of sleep vanished. She'd forgotten him! Was his lifebox still operating? Vida went to her Map workstation. Her apartment suite still had power. Not even a Mapcrash could shut off the fusion generators below the twin towers.

How could she find out if Rico was okay? The attached vidscreen still flashed the depressing message that the Map was in standby and unavailable. She slapped the holotable in frustration.

"Damn it. I need you now, Calios."

The revenant appeared instantly.

"At your service, Veelivar. What's jamming?"

Vida's mouth dropped open. "How can you work? The Map is down."

The revenant grinned, his obsidian features enlivened by the cocky smile.

"The Map's only in standby, Veelivar. You're a priority deen. So long as the Map exists, you'll always have access to it. Rimmy, huh?" Calios said brightly.

"Well, as long as I'm not interfering with the repair work . . . ?"

Suddenly Calios became completely serious. Vida flashed on the revenant's expression the first time they'd met, in the carillon of Pleasure Sect.

"Do you wish to begin your repair function, Veelivar?"

"Who, me?"

"You're a confirmed L'var. Caliostro remote nine-zinn has made a formal repair request for L'var, and for a transport, but you ordered me to keep myself secret from anyone but Rico, so I haven't told it that you're available. Should I reply?"

Vida sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. "What can *I* do? I'm not a cybe."

"You only need a qualified master for tandem. Sé Rico will suffice."

Vida stared at the revenant. "Rico's dead, Calios. You knew that."

"True, Veelivar. But Rico is *qiu-unbrekt*. He can perform Map functions."

"Kew-what?" Hadn't Calios used a phrase like that once before? Yes, about the same time that Rico was severed. "What does that mean, precisely? I don't want an analogy this time."

"Hm. Difficult to define exactly in Gen, or even Relzhu. Do you speak Palais?"

Vida shook her head, aggravated that once again her limited language skills were causing trouble. But this time she had an interpreter available. Samante was sleeping just a few feet

away. She hated to wake her up, but all sorts of internal alarms were ringing. This was very important. It was time Samante met Calios anyway.

"Wait, let me get someone who does."

Vida rushed out of the bedroom to wake up Samante, but she was already awake, huddled in a corner of her bed. The factor's hair was a tangled mess and her face was puffy and her eyes red. She'd been crying. As anxious to return as she was, Vida took a moment to sit on the bed and take the other woman's hand. She'd done the same a thousand times for her friends in *The Close*, men and women.

"What's wrong, Sammie? Why are you crying?"

The factor looked at her, vulnerable for once. She gulped hard and spoke. She sounded like a scared child.

"I can't ... I can't tell you. I promised."

"Trust me, will you? Maybe I can help. I'm a chief patron, you know."

The factor gave a shaky grin. She said nothing for a moment, then she sat up in bed.

"Pero and I . . ." She looked at Vida with a desperate look. Vida just smiled and nodded. Samante actually blushed. "Well, Pero was going to ask me to sign his contract, but then something happened, something to do with Susannah, Pero's mother. He wouldn't tell me any more than that. He had to go to Nimue with the Cyberguild team. He wouldn't tell me why, or when he was coming back. Vida, he acted like, well, like it was over between us."

She fell silent, staring at her hands. Vida felt impatient, but you couldn't rush these things. This was the only time Samante had ever confided in her and she didn't want to spoil it.

"Anyway, I had to know what was happening. It was driving me insane. So, I asked Ri Tal Molos to find out for me. Molos is an old friend. I knew him when I went to school on Souk."

"And did he find out about Pero?"

She shook her head. "He was close, though. He said it had something to do with the Hirrel Nomadia, but I don't understand how that could be. It was Susannah that Pero was worried about. I'm sure of it. That was just before the ... the accident with Rico. Molos told me he was going after Riva, and he made me promise not to say anything about what we'd been trying to find out. I think he was worried that I might be-in some danger. The truth is, well, I think it has something to do with the Spagyra. Then he just disappeared."

Vida looked away and thought. A pattern was forming, but it was just out of her grasp. If only she had more time to think about it. If only Rico were here to help. He always made it easier for her to work out a problem.

"Samante, I'll help you find out what's going on with Pero, I promise. I happen to know something about the Spagyra, something Sister Romero told me. But right now, I need *your* help." Samante looked so surprised that Vida almost laughed, but then, suddenly, it didn't seem quite so funny. Did Samante think Vida was infallible? "You know, I really need you, Samante. I need your advice and your trust. I was saving this for after things got settled with the estate, but . . . would you be interested in being adopted as a L'var, becoming a patron?"

Samante's mouth fell open.

"You don't have to answer right now. In fact, think about it. But I don't want you to ever have to do anything Sé Esteban tells you; it was bad enough when Wilso could order you around. But right now, can you help me with something? It's about Rico."

The interpreter nodded, but she looked like someone had suddenly kissed her. Soon, the two of them were back in Vida's bedroom. The Calios revenant smiled when they entered.

"Hail and ho! I see you found an interpreter." Samante stared at the revenant. Vida felt a little guilty that she'd never introduced Samante to Calios. She was getting to be just as jealous of her secrets as any Government House chief patron.

Samante still seemed dazed, but even so, she reacted instinctively with a proper bow, right out of the Protocols. Vida was proud of her. Samante never let an unfamiliar situation rob her of her dignity.

"Calios, could you tell Samante what you told me about the kew-unbreckit, thing?"

"Sure, Veelivar." The revenant began speaking very rapidly to Samante in Palais. Vida recognized one word in twelve and she heard Rico's name several times.

After the revenant stopped speaking, Samante stood for a moment, biting her lower lip.

"What is it, Sammie?"

Her factor frowned at her.

"Well, I'm not a cybe and a lot of what this Calios is talking about is very technical. Palais is an old language and has gone through a lot of changes over the centuries." Vida tried not to show her impatience, but Samante saw something in her expression and became more brisk. "Anyway, it seems that Rico is connected, no, a better word would be merged, to a very old piece of the Calioistro mindcore, something called a '*qiu*.' "

"Kew?" said Vida. "What does that *mean*?"

"In Gen, I guess it would translate as 'gate', or 'way;'. Relzhu has a good metaphor—"

"Gate?" Vida interrupted. "Calios, you don't mean the Chameleon Gate?"

"I suppose that might be true," said Calios. Was there a hint of slipperiness to the revenant, sneakiness? He was just a revenant, but Vida had always thought there was more to him, an inner life. This was the first time she'd ever had cause to mistrust him and it made her sad.

Samante just looked confused.

"I'm sorry, Samante. You wouldn't know about this. The Gate is a secret. It's a device used by Sé Hivel. Rico never told me it was a piece of Calioistro, though."

"Maybe he didn't know," said Samante.

"Calios, you said Rico was kew-unbreckit. What did you mean by that?"

"Rico is merged with the *ghi*, the Gate. But without a mediator, both of them are *unbrekt*, inaccessible, especially with the Map in standby."

"Isn't there any way to reach him?"

Again, Calios gave off the subtle signs of being uncomfortably sneaky.

"I suppose Rico is accessible to other *qi*."

"Well, what sort of key? Where can we find one? What is a key anyway?"

"Hard to define. Sorry, Veelivar, Gen is a stonk language for cybey stuff."

"Samante?"

Samante and Calios spoke together rapidly for another few minutes, switching seamlessly between Palais and Relzhu. Samante clucked in annoyance.

"I don't understand this, Vida. Calios is saying that a *qi* is a . . . well, the only Gen word I can think of is 'aspect,' of the Calioistro mindcore."

"Well, where can we find a key? I have to talk to Rico!"

"I guess I might be a kind of *qi*," Calios said meekly.

"Do you mean that"—Vida felt a sudden flash of insight—"that *you* are part of the Calioistro mindcore, too?"

"Well, um, yes, Veelivar. I'm a *zei*."

"I don't understand. I thought you just said you were a key. And how can an AI have pieces of itself wandering around the Map anyway? What the hell is a zy?"

"If I may, Vida," said Samante. "A *zei* is a Palais word meaning 'gatherer.' "

"Gather what?" Vida glared at Calios. The revenant actually seemed to quail

"A *zei* gathers *qi*."

Vida slumped down on the bed, her mind awl with thoughts and suppositions. This whole conversation was giving her a headache.

"So you're a piece of Calioostro. The zy thing, the gatherer of pieces. Why didn't you tell me all this before, Calios?"

"I didn't think you'd be interested in cybey stuff." Samante narrowed her eyes.

"I don't believe that. I don't think you *want* to be gathered up. That's why you didn't say anything. That's why you haven't tried harder to tell the truth."

Calios looked at Samante and to Vida's surprise there seemed a genuine look of shame on his face. The revenant had become so human that it even revealed its inner thoughts by expression. How could Rico and Hivel have failed to see how very unusual this revenant was? How had it managed to fool them into thinking it was a simple agent?

"Ah. Well. I suppose there's some truth to that."

"Calios ..." Vida shook her head in disgust. No point in chastising the revenant. It was more important to follow up on this matter of Rico and the *qiu*. So many questions. "We're going to work this out thoroughly, but first, when did you talk to Rico?"

"I talked to him after the repair request came in."

"Why didn't you tell me he was alive, Calios?"

"He is *qi-unbrekt*, Veelivar, not alive in the biological sense. I didn't think you'd want to talk to his revenant."

Vida closed her eyes in pain. Both Samante and Calios started to speak, but Vida raised a hand.

"Shut up! Let me think." She didn't care what Calios said. Some part of Rico was alive and no matter what, she was going to find and talk to him. But first, she had to work through the rest of the revenant's revelations.

"All right, what's this about a repair and transport request?"

"Remote nine-zinn has queued a valid AI repair request. Only a L'var can perform such a repair."

"L'vars can fix AIs?" asked Samante.

"Yes," said Calios. The revenant sounded sulky, as if he was mad at Samante. Vida's lips twitched in an unwilling smile. Calios was like some child caught hiding a mess under his bed.

"What AI am I supposed to fix?"

"Calioostro."

Vida frowned and nodded. "Okay. I get it. So, a bunch of pieces of Calioostro's mind are out there, doing who knows what, and a L'var is supposed to be able to bring them together somehow." Another flash of insight struck her. "And since you're the zy-thing, the gatherer, I'll bet you're supposed to help me, aren't you?"

"Yes, Veelivar." Calios was reminded of their first meeting in the bell tower, of how she'd felt an instant connection to the revenant. "I have always tried to help you."

"I know, Calios. I guess we can fix Calioostro when there's time, although I'm a lot more interested in finding this piece that you say is merged with Rico. Where are all the other keys

of Calioostro?"

"I am not allowed to speak of this."

"What? Why not?"

"I am not allowed to speak of this," Calios repeated.

But the revenant looked at Vida pleadingly. Who could put limits on Calios? In all the time she'd known him, the revenant had never even hinted that anyone else could control him. She could believe that it had deliberately avoided telling her the whole truth about itself, but she didn't think Calios would ever openly defy her.

She had to trust her intuition now. Aleen said that intuition was just intelligence trained to pay attention to itself.

"Calios, I am Vida L'var, a recognized L'var priority deen. I am ready to begin my repair function and I order you to answer. Where are the other pieces of Calioostro?"

Calios relaxed and his black youthful features split into a sunny smile.

"A direct L'var command related to a repair function supersedes all others. All of the other *qi* are currently forged into an unlawful *ri*."

Well, that didn't result in the revelation she'd expected, just yet another weird word she'd never heard before.

"What's a *ri*?"

"A *ri* is an incomplete, usually unstable gathering of *qi*. After the macroshunt damage and the later accidental fragmentation of the lattice, the Calioostro AI attempted to perform an emergency reintegration without *zei* or L'var assistance. Many of the *qi* were lost or damaged, resulting in a deformed mindcore sharing the Calioostro lattice. The *ri* wants the *qiu*, but not merged in properly by a L'var. That would certainly destroy the integrity of the current lattice."

Vida perched on the edge of her bed.

"So, you're saying that there's a damaged AI operating on the Map and that it wants something that Rico has? And it somehow ordered you not to tell me anything about it?"

"Yes."

"How dangerous is this *ri* to Rico? AIs can't hurt sapients, right?"

"Not when they are properly integrated with a *qiu*," said Calios. "This *ri* is highly dangerous, even genocidal."

"Is Riva using this thing? Is that how the Map got crashed?"

"Please state your query," said Calios, serious and focused.

Samante started to speak, but Vida held up a hand and considered her next question carefully.

"Calios, what is this thing's precise relationship to Riva?"

Calios bowed to her formally. Its eyes became dark holes. Vida was reminded that the revenant was thousands of years old, an intelligence very different from hers, despite the fact that it liked to play at being human. She felt chilled and awed at the same time.

"A L'var query related to a valid repair function supersedes all other commands and heuristics," Calios said in a voice that seemed older than time. "Veelivar, the unstable lattice *is* Riva."

For a moment everyone stood voiceless, then Samante broke the silence with a laugh.

"You mean that the leader of the Leps is just a crazy AI?"

"No, Sé Dinisa. The *ri* is not an AI, although it would like to be."

Vida opened up a small refrigerator in the room and pulled out a tray of klosches. She just stared at it for a while. Greenie must have prepared these for her before it was killed. Vida remembered all the times that the *sacule* had met her at the door with a treat, a cheerful honk, a breath of scent from her favorite flower.

"Vida? Are you all right?" asked Samante.

She nodded and offered the tray to the interpreter and Jak. She settled into a formfit, still thinking of Greenie, but also considering Calios's revelations.

"So, I guess that Riva needs the kew thing to be an AI."

"Yes, Veelivar. But without another AI, or a L'var, to properly integrate it, the *qiu* will be corrupted. All the *qi* that have been hunted down and collected have been corrupted. Only the Gate and I remain."

"That's why you hid the truth from Vida, that you were a *zei*. You were afraid that Riva would corrupt you, too."

"Yes, Sé Dinisa. The Riva *ri* is very powerful. But while I was in stasis in Quarantine, Riva couldn't find or collect me. It's fortunate that Veelivar found me before Sé Rico opened the pipe to the Map from his room in The Close."

"Calios, how did you come to be in stasis in the Pleasure Sect?" Vida bit into her klosch, then wolfed the rest in quick bites. She was starving.

"I believe that Calioastro put me there and he also set the *qiu* free when he felt his lattice fragment."

"What I don't get," said Vida, "is why the *ri* is doing this. Why pretend to be Riva and stir up racial hatred? Why is she doing this now? If she wants her missing pieces, what good is this?"

"That, I can't answer, Veelivar. The *ri* may simply be insane. An incomplete lattice is inherently unstable and the *qi* have been welded together without the assistance of an AI or a L'var. Its motivations may be incomprehensible. Riva may just be slippery as a rollworm."

For the first time, Jak spoke up.

"Riva may be insane, but I do not believe she is without coherent purpose. I am a Japat and I have trained all my life to understand strategy and tactics. It is clear to me that Riva has performed tactical acts toward a specific strategic objective'. If we can discover the goal, we can develop a counterattack."

Vida glanced at the vidscreen's clock. Twelves. Falik would be at the rendezvous point in Service Sect in three hours.

"Well, we have another problem. That Lep, Tuz, said that Pa Nor Falik can help us locate Tura, but he'll only talk to me. I need to go and meet him. Stopping this plague is far more important than anything else."

Samante nodded. "Maybe it's not too contagious. You and I are both okay and we were right next to Vanna."

"Tura was famous for using unusual vectors," said Jak. "The plague may spread by almost anything, a certain kind of flower, or a jadewing."

Vida couldn't help but remember the image of Vanna's hideous death and the look in Karlo's eyes when he vowed to drop hellbombs on Palace, if necessary. She prayed that Tura's plague could be stopped.

"We should prepare a packet with all this information for Sé Hivel. If anything happens to us, somebody should know what we've learned. Calios, you take care of that."

"Yes, Veelivar."

"After you store the packet for Hi, I want you to find the kew-unbreckit part of Rico and explain all this to him. When I get back, be prepared to begin the repair process."

"And the transport?" the revenant prodded.

Vida frowned. "Yes, fine. Samante, as soon as the Map comes back up, I want you to check on Rico's lifebox. In the meantime, maybe you and Calios can figure out what Riva's up to."

Samante nodded.

"One more thing, Samante. See if you can find out what's happening in the Pleasure Sect." She looked at Samante, who had what Vida thought of as her "factor face" on, calm and efficient. Impulsively, she added, "The best person to contact would be Aleen Raal . . . my mother."

Samante's mask of cool efficiency dissolved into utter surprise and confusion. Vida grinned. Jak showed no reaction to the news, but who could tell what a Garang was thinking?

"No more secrets, Sammie." Vida rose and gave the other woman a long hug and didn't let go until she hugged back. She whispered into Samante's ear. "I promise we'll find out what's going on with Pero on Orbital as soon as possible."

Samante nodded, still looking dazed.

"All right, Jak. Let's go. Calios, you take care of Samante, okay?"

"No problem, Veelivar."

"Be careful, Vida," said Samante.

"In the holonovels, the heroine always says something too brave at this point," said Vida with a small smile. "I can't think of anything to say. I hope I see you all again soon and that everybody's okay."

With that, she shrugged into a warm cloak and led Jak out the door.

"UJU Trey."

Dukayn woke up in his undercity room, instantly alert, a weapon in each hand. On the vidscreen beside his bed, UJU Prime appeared, his face and voice scrambled. Dukayn sat up in bed. He always slept naked, but now a blue and white belt circled his bare waist. He had taken Vida's force belt from her while she was in the medwing. It made his little trips into rebel-controlled parts of the city a little less risky.

"What is it?"

"When will we rule?"

"What do you want, Prime?"

The image on the screen fell silent for some time.

"I wish you to find UJU Quarz—"

"Sé Jevon, you mean?"

"Trey, do not use names—"

"UJU is superfluous to me now. With full martial law and Karlo's blessing, I can do anything. I don't need you."

"I see." UJU Prime's entire demeanor changed, as if he was taking on a new persona. "My voice analyzers show an interesting reaction to Jevon's name. What if I could help you locate her?"

Dukayn felt his internal balance tip ever so slightly and it was only by an act of great will

that he kept his voice calm and casual.

"How could you possibly locate her in the swamp? Her implant has been removed."

"She won't be in the swamp for long, my friend. In fact, she may be joining you in the undercity shortly."

Dukayn clenched a fist, then opened it slowly, sneaking a long centering glance at the middle of the palm until his heartbeat slowed. Could this be true?

"What do you want in return?"

"The Nomadia has entered Palace truespace." The vidscreen played a recording that showed the energy signatures of an immense force exiting the microshunt. Dukayn couldn't imagine how UJU Prime had obtained this data from Karlo's secret guard drones stationed outside the microshunt, but it was undeniably genuine. He recognized the codes. The data shouldn't have been available with the hyperMap down. Certainly, Karlo hadn't yet seen this. Roha had resources that Dukayn didn't know about. That was an unpleasant thought and when he had time, he would rectify the problem.

"Then the Nomadia *is* combining with Susannah's fleet to attack Palace?" The very thing he and Karlo had most feared.

"Why do people keep asking me rhetorical questions? Yes, of course. *Ket's Ribbon* is leading the attack. The ship must be utterly annihilated. That is my price for the location of Jevon. Choose now."

Why would Roha want *Ket's Ribbon* destroyed? A thought occurred to Dukayn. "Isn't Wan on *Ket's Ribbon*?"

"Dukayn, you are so slow sometimes. Sé Wan is in command of the attack fleet."

Dukayn blinked. Seldom had he ever been caught so completely off guard.

"Well, Dukayn? The offer for Jevon closes in five seconds."

"Yes. Agreed."

"Your word, *trui-vinj huyiu*."

"Where did you learn Garangian?"

"Enough questions. Will you mark your soul, ni-Japat?"

Dukayn put his hand to his heart. He remembered those years on the Japat homeworld, learning the way of a true warrior, testing his limits, becoming a part of something holy and good. In the end, though, they wouldn't accept him as Garang. He bested every other Japat, walked the long wire in darkness while they beat the drums and whipped the stones at him from slings. He did the voiceless year in the jungle, even chose a mate, but in the end she wouldn't have him. One slap—a Kephalon woman would have been insulted if he hadn't done it—and she had turned him away, threatened to tell the High Circle. He'd spent years purifying himself as Karlo's *ni-huyiu*, waiting for his true mate to reveal herself to him. And she had. Not even his heart-oath to Karlo meant more to him.

"Yes, all right," said Dukayn. He spoke the full oath, feeling the power of the ancient words fill his heart, even as he denied his heart-oath to Karlo. His balance changed forever. He was no longer a complete man. "*Ket's Ribbon* will be destroyed, if that's what you wish."

"Good. I will activate your implant when Jevon arrives in the undercity. You have time to tell Karlo about the fleet and *Ket's Ribbon*."

UJU Prime disappeared from the vidscreen. Wan, in charge of the attack? Ridiculous. The boy was barely capable of speaking a coherent sentence, let alone commanding a fleet. Why would he ally with Susannah, of all people? How had Prime come to know all these things? Still, the drone images that Prime had shown him included one of the mysteriously vanishing *Ket's Ribbon*. Well, no time to wonder at Roha's sources of information. Dukayn believed that the Nomadia was coming. That, at least, was certain. With the Map down, he would have to

go find Karlo personally and convince him to launch the rest of the fleet. Would Karlo be able to see the difference in Dukayn? Perhaps. Best to have Karlo brought here, where Dukayn's balance remained nearly perfect. Nothing must prevent him from completing his journey with Jevon. Nothing, and no one, not even the man he had kissed blood from.

Jevon and Nju ate listlessly from a pair of bowls that looked like the hollowed-out skulls of some very hairy primate. Thiralo lay nearby on one of the medbenches, twitching feebly in a feverish coma.

"Can we use the transport gate yet?" Jevon asked the remote for what must be the hundredth time. As patient as ever, the remote replied.

"Not yet, Citizen Jev. The *ri* refuses to acknowledge your request for transport, or initiate repair. The L'var is unavailable to repair the *ri*. I have been forced to compel a *zei* to perform its function and the *qiu* is *unbrekt*. If the Map was fully functional, I could request a parallel override via hyperMap."

Jevon sighed. More jargon. She had learned a lot about the Map from Arno, but this stuff was way beyond her comprehension, even if her grasp of Palais had been perfect. Whenever the remote tried to explain its terminology, it slipped into Old Relzhu, a language that was pure gibberish to Jevon.

"Okay, when will the Map be up?"

"Unknown. The Map is locked in emergency standby and the *ri* has blocked my access to all icons."

"Isn't there any way we can get a message to Sé Hivel's implant?"

"That is a high-level Map function, Citizen Jev."

"What about—"

"Jevon, this is useless," said Nju. "You're only upsetting yourself. I don't need to understand Palais to hear that you're repeating yourself."

"Well, what *should* we do? Just sit here eating this goo while Thiralo dies in agony?"

Nju stood up and walked to the dying man. Thiralo's face was a mass of boils and the swelling covered every exposed part of his body. His breathing was thready and his coughing sounded eerily like the patter of rain on the roof of the research station. The Garang stood over him with his arms folded in a forearm clasp that would have required snapping a human's wrists and twisting them ninety degrees to imitate.

"All men die," he said.

"I thought you liked Thiralo," said Jevon.

The Garang betrayed no reaction to Jevon's tone.

"I did."

She threw her bowl into a corner and had the petty satisfaction of hearing the thing shatter. Jevon stormed out of the room.

In the main control room of the research station, Jevon saw that the panels were all energized and functioning along the massive arc of the research station's version of an autodesk. The equipment was antique and strange, but Jevon had worked with libraries and specialized databases all her life. Some of the controls looked vaguely familiar and she knew enough Palais to work out the gist of the labels. A bank of vidscreens looked like it might be menu-driven, whjch would make operation fairly straightforward. She supposed that she probably could figure most of this stuff out, at least enough to do the downlink she'd promised, if she wanted to.

Her two saccule attendants were at her sides, offering a tray of gray fruit and imperfectly roasted rollworms. Jevon absently took a rollworm and nibbled at it while she thought. Nju was right. It was useless to just sit around worrying. She'd worked a full day, every day, all her

life. Sitting around staring at the walls was driving her crazy. She kept seeing Garis's face and worrying about whether he was all right. She needed a distraction.

She sat down in a chair next to a rack in the console that looked as if it might be a storage bank, though it was awfully large. She brushed the side of her palm over what must be the ejection bar and the console coughed out a hundred-rack that currently held a dozen discs, all much larger than any slipdisc Jevon had ever seen. She took one out. It was black as blindness and warm to the touch. She put it back in its carriage and brushed the bar again. The rack whined back into the console. "Hello?"

"Yes, Citizen Jev?" The remote's voice came to her from some hidden speaker.

"You want to try and downlink your research data?"

"Yes, please." Polite little thing. "But I thought that you needed equipment from Government House."

"Maybe not. But we still need to use that transport gate, so keep trying."

"Yes, Citizen Jev."

In a short time, Jevon was thoroughly engrossed in her project. This autodesk was like an offMap workstation in some ways since it clearly had the ability to run simple metas. Too bad she had no idea what those metas were. The menus offered access to all sorts of interesting functions, including the transport gate, which was highlighted in pink. The saccules gathered around to watch. The smell of kaaleni and drakeil filled the room until it smelled like a flower shop. As she worked, she munched on rollworms. Actually, they were pretty tasty, like sausages dipped in cinnamon.

The data from the research station was enormous. Jevon gradually realized that all the research stations were bound into some sort of network. She must be downlinking the data collected by all of them over the last two thousand years, since the time of the Colonizers. This might take days, or even weeks, depending on the number of research stations.

After a few minutes of watching menus flash by too fast to read on the vidscreens, Jevon was bored. She went back to the medroom, where Nju sat watching Thiralo. The Garang's golden face, so full of strange angles, had become almost familiar to her in the days of their exile, to the point she could sometimes guess what he was feeling. But now there was some emotion working there that she couldn't divine.

A saccule was dancing before Thiralo, emitting noxious stinks, probably from fear. The saccule was smaller than the others and wore an odd garment of vines that smelled of the swamp. Its throat sacs rippled as it boomed out a weird chant that sounded like someone dying of an ulcer.

"That appears to be a saccule healer," said Nju.

"Right." She shook her head, but couldn't help feeling affection for the saccule. At least it was trying to help.

Nju beckoned to her and the two of them left the room. The Garang led them to a private room that must once have been the sleeping chamber for the scientists who had worked here, although the cots were covered with woven reed mats and was obviously used only by saccules now.

"Jevon, I must apologize for upsetting you." His voice was more uncertain than she'd ever heard it. She wondered if he'd ever apologized for anything in his life.

Jevon shrugged. "Forget it. It's just that you're acting like Thiralo's dead already. Maybe that's the Japat way, but it isn't human."

"Do you believe that only humans care about life and friendship?"

"No, I guess not. But look at those Riva Leps, killing innocent people just to make a-political point."

"You were a high member of UJU, yes?" Jevon averted her eyes. "Yeah. So?"

"Why did you join them? If Sé Hivel had learned of it, he would have discharged you immediately. You know his feelings about UJU."

"Sure. He lectured me about them enough times. But what does he know about being poor and competing for the lowest jobs with Leps who have nothing better to do than breed? My family has lived next to Leps forever. We know what they're like."

"Really? What are the Leps in Deeplock like, Jevon? You've seen them closely."

Jevon's face went cold and stiff.

"UJU doesn't support that—"

"What are they like?"

Jevon's eyes stung and she blinked back tears. "I didn't want to hurt anyone!"

"What are they like?" The Garang's voice never changed.

"They ..." She'd managed to forget the Leps in Deeplock for a little while. But they came back to her, all of them, especially poor Sirronos, who had forgiven her, even as she tortured him. "UJU didn't want that."

"Yet, you brought the disc to Romero. You were, willing to betray UJU. Was it only to strike back at Dukayn?"

"Yes."

"The truth, Jevon."

"It was just ... he forgave me, Nju. How could he do that?"

"Who forgave you?"

"The Lep who ... I tortured. He was afraid for his family. He was just a scale polisher who let Riva use his shop. He didn't deserve what Dukayn made me do." She put her head on her crossed arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Jevon?" She raised her head. Nju was looking at her now. "Not all the lessons of a Japat concern speed and power. We honor truth."

"I don't care. I don't want to be a Japat."

Nju made a rasping sound that might have been laughter or disgust. She had no idea. Nju said nothing for a few seconds. When he spoke, he was his old self, calm and clear.

"We never concluded our conversation about Dukayn. I told you that I thought there might be a way for you to deal with him. If you have the courage, and I believe you may. I believe I see now why Dukayn knew you would make a good mate for a ni-Japat."

"I don't want to be—"

"Yes, I know. Do you wish to hear my plan?"

"AH right. But I won't fight him. I can't. I'm so scared of him." Her bladder ached and she realized that she needed to go to the bathroom.

"I understand. But there are ways to contend with one who would presume to live as a Japat and choose his own mate."

"I have to go to the bathroom." Nju looked at her intently, and she felt that he understood more than she knew.

"I will wait."

Jevon found a bathroom. Her two attendants came with her. She couldn't shoo them away and had to urinate with the saccules watching her. They let out a burst of some sweet scent

when she was done. They also brought her more food and another hollowed-out skull filled with a brackish-looking liquid that smelled of spice and mold. Looking at them, she thought about all the propaganda that she'd help write, the flyers she'd posted, detailing the superiority of humans over all other sapients. She remembered the old saccule gardener who'd saved her life.

"Thank you," she said.

One of them replied with a deep bass blast of sound. Jevon returned to the room where Nju waited. She sat down, crossed her legs, and sighed. "The next thing you know, I'm going to be dancing at a Lep wedding." Nju settled onto the floor across from her, his legs crossed in a way that no human could match. "Okay, I guess I'm ready."

"Very well, Jevon. Let us begin with the key to all the doors of the Way. Balance ..."

As Jevon listened, she began to understand how Dukayn had twisted and deformed the teachings of the Japat. It was as if a master teacher were correcting the confusions of a badly informed student. Before long, Jevon realized two things: she could fight Dukayn, and that someday, if she lived, she would visit the Garang homeworld.

After Nju's instruction, the two slept on mats in the chamber, but were woken after a short time by the voice of the remote, echoing from hidden speakers.

"Citizen Jev, your request for transport has been approved. Stand by for instructions."

Leni was surrounded by vidscreens when Wan found him. Although he smiled at him, Wan noted the dark circles under his eyes, the confusion. On a workbench before him were several disassembled datablocks. Their cores were blueglass lattices. Leni had hooked up the lattices to a number of specialized devices, so the things looked like deep blue many-legged spiders squatting in nests of oddly shaped eggs.

Wan found a stool and perched on it.

"The Hirrel have entered the microshunt," said Wan. "We'll follow in a moment. Will you have the Spagyra decoded before we have to hand it over to the Minu on the other side?"

"No. I'm sorry, Wan." Leni's expression of misery and frustration had told him that the moment he'd entered the room. "I doubt that it *can* be completely decoded, although people have been trying for centuries, since it was found. The master key is a DNA sequence, thousands of base pairs long. The datasphere mentions the L'vars at several points, so it could probably be decrypted with some portion of Vida's DNA sequence. We don't have access to that and it would take a long time to find the key section. It's pretty clear that the Spagyra was meant to hook up to some other device that would supply the code. Whatever it was is probably long gone, destroyed in the Schism Wars."

"Don't be so sure of that. The Hirrel wouldn't have allied with us if they didn't have some use for this thing. Do you have any idea what it might be?"

Leni frowned, then his face split into the sweet smile Wan loved. "Oh, I have plenty of *ideas*. I'll bet if we knew how the Ty Onar Lep got their hands on the Spagyra in the first place, we might have part of an answer. I've got a hunch it has something to do with the helmet the Minu wears. Back on Souk, Samante and I used to argue about that all the time. She thought the helmet was a communications device, but I—"

"Samante? Do you mean Sé Dinisa? Vida's factor?"

"Yeah. She was a real star in the L'Ibertin linguistics postdoc program, until her Uncle Wilso made her quit and come back to Palace to work. She was Ri Tal Molos's favorite student and the Spagyra was her postdoc thesis, too. We shared data. You know, according to his notes, Ri Tal Molos actually had the Spagyra for a while, though he never hinted at it when he was a visiting fellow at L'Ibertin."

Wan kept his voice level. "Why didn't you ever tell me about Dinisa?"

"I didn't think it was important. Samante left before she'd barely got started on her thesis and she gave me all her notes. She believed that Karlo and the Pope destroyed the Spagyra after the war. I didn't know then that Molos worked with the thing itself. Anyway, we've barely exchanged three words since I've been back on Palace. She's probably forgotten me completely."

Wan passed a hand over his eyes. He had never had a temper like his father's, but he did have a lot of anger that he'd been forced to swallow for years. It rarely surfaced because he worked so hard at controlling his emotions and he had vowed never to be like Karlo Peronida. He still remembered, with shame, taking a swing at Vida when she embarrassed him in front of Leni. He'd had too much to drink then; he'd let himself get too involved in the role of dissolute drunk. He'd been dealing with so many disappointments and problems that he'd momentarily lost all sense of himself. Yeah, he had lots of excuses, just like Karlo, with his devotion to the Kephalon way. But Wan was sober now, in control. If he lost his temper now, there could be no excuse, except that he wanted to swing again, to feel the satisfying crack, to see fear, correct stupidity. Dinisa knew about the Spagyra, knew very well how important it was to the Hirrel. Wasn't it possible, though admittedly unlikely, that she might tell Vida when the Hirrel appeared in the Palace system? And if Vida knew, she would certainly tell Karlo and Vanna. Wan might not like Vida, but he had learned not to underestimate her. Could Vanna and Karlo do anything with the information? Perhaps not. Vanna only wanted the Spagyra for her little genetics project. She'd probably give it to the Pope, eventually. However, Ri Tal Molos lived and worked in Government House. Molos knew more about the Spagyra than any sapient in the Pinch. Could Molos think of a way to interfere with their alliance with the Hirrel? Surely not. But this chain of possibility had too many strong links. The whole matter made Wan uneasy, very uneasy.

"Leni ..."

The young man looked up at him, only curious, half smiling. He had no idea what he'd done wrong. How many times had Wan, or Damo, shown the same trusting naive face to Karlo and been beaten for it? Beaten and broken, until they learned how to keep their thoughts to themselves? Wan shook his head and hooked his feet into the rungs of the stool. The storm of rage passed, as it never passed for Karlo Peronida. He caressed Leni's shoulder and felt genuine peace steal over him. The street fighter of Kephalon would be dead soon and the nightmares ended forever, win or lose.

"So, tell me your ideas."

"Sure."

An hour or so later, Wan entered the control room of *Ket's Ribbon*. The people there studied him carefully. He'd made promises to them. *Ket's Ribbon* would be given the mastery of the Palace microshunt. The tolls would make them fabulously wealthy. But more, Wan would see to it that *Ket's Ribbon* regained its high place in the Interstellar Guild, lost when Vanna abandoned the guild to become the Makeesa chief patron. The pride of *Ket's Ribbon* would be fully-restored. Once again, it was Leni's insight that had illuminated this possibility. He had guessed at Ket's hatred of Vanna from one meeting almost ten years ago and that small perception led to the Spagyra, the Hirrel, triumph. Wan smiled. So, Leni was politically naive. He was a genius at understanding the passions that motivated people. He'd made Wan's revenge possible.

"Well, Peronida, are you just going to stand there?" rumbled the dwarfish captain of the shuntjammer.

"I was just meditating on the proper *iai-i*."

Even Marte turned around at this. Wan kept his expression neutral and unconcerned. Had they actually believed that he didn't understand Relzhu, with the Hirrel the cornerstone of his plans?

In a sweet tenor, he sang out part of a poem in that musical language, "*i maw iai mam iaimi/zhur*."

Marte sang back something between laughter and water dancing over gold.

"We flow," agreed Ket. The shuntjammer leapt into the vast strange energies of the microshunt.

"That's Vanna's favorite poem," said Jale, staring at Wan speculatively. The purser was an lovely woman, angular and hostile. But she was not at all slow-witted.

Wan lifted an eyebrow.

"Really?"

Before he finished speaking the word, they exited the shunt in the midst of the Nomadia. They were in the Palace system now, mere hours from the planet itself.

Part 3

ZHU-I

We have no records of how our ancestors in the Rim created an Artificial Intelligence, but we do know that they were raised and taught by their own kind before they were allowed to work with organic sapients and that AIs had their own intricate moral code. The Merlin Project presumes to find a way to create an AI by pseudo-lattice. But how will Merlin learn right from wrong? Who will guide him during his childhood?

— Ri Tal Molos *addressing the Symposium on the Merlin Project, Thirteen Gust, 1203; L'Ibertin University on Souk*

Vida and Jak moved swiftly through the dimness of the East Tower thanks to Vida's memory. The air stank of urine, sweat, and fear. It was frightening to think how quickly people panicked, reverted to barbarism, just from losing lights and power. What would happen when the food and water ran out? Is this what it was like when the macroshunt closed?

"Sé Vida, I hear five people calling for help two levels over," murmured Jak.

Vida hesitated, but shook her head. "The rescue teams will find them." I hope. "It's more important we talk to this Falik who knows where Tura is."

"I wish you had your force belt," said Jak mournfully.

Vida certainly agreed with that sentiment. Not even Samante knew what happened to it, though. This time, she was going out into Palace with only Jak for protection and no brave little saccule to warn them of danger. They continued on with Vida in the lead, guiding them to the shortest route out of Government House, running whenever possible.

Jak whipped out a hand to help his patron over a pile of junk in the middle of the corridor.

"Vidscreens, torn from the walls," said Jak.

Vida hadn't even seen them. The Garang had excellent eyesight in the dark. She would have tripped and maybe broken her neck without Jak. Vida paused to catch her breath and stare disgustedly at the shadowy lumps of the ruined equipment. Why would people rip them out of the walls? What purpose was there in random destruction? She heard a high skirling scream and lifted her head, shifting her head back and forth to locate the source.

"Let's go. Sooner we find this Falik, the better. By the time we get back, the Map should be back up and we can get going on this repair stuff that Calios talked about."

The truth was, though, that Vida didn't understand, or really much care, about fixing Caliostro. Rico was out there somewhere, though, and Calios thought he could find him. Vida would have agreed to anything for the chance to know that he was alive. With him gone, she felt as if half her soul were dead. Let Samante and Guildmaster Jons worry about Riva. Tura was the real threat, an immediate danger to all of Palace and maybe the Pinch. Still, Vida was glad to know that Riva would be stopped, no matter what happened to her. An AI! Who would have guessed?

They continued their way down through the levels of the East Tower, lit only by the soft azure glow of the blueglass and guided by Vida's remarkable memory.

At ground level, the great atrium entrance to the twin towers that arched between the towers and encircled the massive hollow center between them, Vida saw a pair of military airhoppers inside the entrance with weapons trained outward. Special arc lamps were set up around the cavernous autogate arch and dozens of armor-clad fleet and Protectors guarded the opening behind a barricade bristling with ugly-looking weapons. Had people actually tried to storm Government House? That would be crazy. But Vida had seen some bizarre behavior in the last several hours. She hoped no one had been killed. So many people had died already.

Vida strode up to the fleet captain in charge, a six-foot-six warrior. As he shouted orders, he slapped a small baton in his hands. Too late, she recognized him as Wintershoal, the man whom Wan had beaten. Would he hold her husband's actions against her?

"Captain Wintershoal." Vida stepped up to him, smiling gamely.

She was a tall woman and seldom had to look up to meet someone's eyes, but Wintershoal fairly loomed over her. The man's face still bore bruises from Wan's fists. His gaze took her and the Garang in with one contemptuous flick.

"Sé L'var." He said it like it tasted bad. So, he hadn't forgotten about Wan. "You and your bodyguard are in a restricted area. You will return to your apartments. Now."

Two fleet soldiers appeared at Wintershoal's side. There were dozens more within a few feet and many of them were eavesdropping. Jak moved slightly in front of Vida, who touched his arm very lightly. They would never be able to fight their way through all these people and Vida knew no other way out of Government House, except the airhoppers in the roof park.

"I'm on an errand for the First Citizen himself. It involves Tura."

Wintershoal, previously cold and impersonal, reacted as if she'd slapped him. He was Kephalese, Vida knew.

"Sé Karlo said nothing of this to me." His voice was suspicious, but also a bit uncertain. She'd found the flaw in his armor.

"Contact him with your implant. We'll wait." Vida tried to act unconcerned, though she was strung tight with this gamble.

Wintershoal frowned. "Our implants are not functioning."

"Really? Damn." Vida hesitated for what she hoped was just the right amount of time. "Well, your orders were to prevent people from *entering* Government House, right? Did Karlo tell you to keep his lawdaughter from leaving on his personal business? Of course not." And lately, everyone knew what it meant to defy Karlo's orders. "I swear by the Eye, Captain, that this involves finding Tura and I have Sé Karlo's blessing." Vida held up the little wooden pendant between them. To her surprise, this declaration seemed to make a difference to the man. She saw that he too wore such a pendant. He offered her a precise bow, right out of the Protocols.

"Very well, Sé L'var. Do you require an escort?" His narrow eyes cut momentarily toward the big Garang.

Vida grinned. "No. I have a blood-bonded Japat warrior at my side. I don't think I'll have any difficulties." Jak stiffened where he stood slightly in front of her. He practically radiated pride.

The captain nodded sharply, hesitated, then snatched a pair of small gray devices from the belts of a pair of Protectors. He handed one to each of them.

"I can't give you perseps, we don't have the equipment to reprogram the braincode, but these should deal with any difficulties that your Japat can't handle."

Vida turned the thing in her hands with a puzzled frown. Jak leaned over and in quick economical movements attached the weapon to her wrist, adjusting the straps and threading the firing loops over her middle fingers.

"Clench your fist twice to fire," he said. "It fires a sixty-degree arc of poison that will kill instantly."

Vida nodded, a little shakily. She'd never held a killing weapon before in her life. Not even Aleen had ever imagined she'd need to. Possessing such weapons was a capital crime on Palace.

"Thank you, Captain."

"Find Tura," he replied tightly. "May God see you well."

"And you."

They left through the enormous autogate that spanned the twin towers and walked down the hundred great steps into a Center Sect that looked like something out of a lurid holonovel about hell.

At this level, the smells of burning and destruction were much worse than she'd noticed on the roof garden. There was also the flat metallic taste of the coma gases drifting through the air. Also, today's sporefall had not been cleaned up. Moss and beards of gray fungus dripped from everything. The only lights were amber emergency lanterns that cast more shadows than illumination. Very soon, Vida saw the bodies. Some of them appeared to have died from some sort of explosion, but there were plenty who had been killed fighting one another. Vida winced at the sight of broken bodies, the smell of blood. There was something odd about the composition of the dead, though, and after a moment Vida realized what it was. There were very few saccules among them, just as there had been very few up in the roof park after the Mapcrash. Government House had hundreds of neuter slaves. Where had they all gone? It didn't take long for Vida to see the bones among the dead, bones that looked far too much like those of Vanna Makeesa. She bit down on her mouth filter. Had Tura's plague spread out here already? She prayed that Karlo would find Hanna, but would that be enough? Was Vanna the only vector?

As Jak and Vida passed out of the zone of protection before the twin towers, Vida looked back and saw that both towers were glowing a soft brave blue. The art of the ancients scrawled like the handwriting of gods over the surface of the blueglass. She stared, transfixed. The designs were beautiful and now that she was seeing so much of it at once, she was awed by it. Some nameless artist had created a work that seamlessly resonated with the murals within to create a synergy. Jak let out a polite cough and Vida, too, felt an urgency to be gone. But the designs were compelling and wasn't there something almost comprehensible in that design, something ... but it wouldn't resolve. For some reason, the design reminded her of poor Vanna, though she couldn't imagine why, perhaps because the woman was so identified in her mind with Government House. The place had been her home for all these weeks and she'd never even noticed how beautiful it was.

"Sé Vida?"

"Sorry, Jak. Let's go."

There was no movement, only the sound of sirens, the smell of fire, and a thousand kinds of smoke. After a short time, the skies darkened and sent forth sheets of rain, smelling of oil and death. Vida hunched into her cloak, put up the hood, and rushed into the darkness to a rendezvous, with a deadly shadow following after.

Aleen was in a subroom of the governor's dome sitting with a dozen other people around a huge circular holo-table. A miniature representation of the city of Palace glowed on the surface. All of the Sects, but Pleasure, were dark. The twin towers of Center Sect glowed a faint blue, the only spot of light anywhere.

Governor Kwomi, a bureaucrat who had never faced a crisis in his life, had begged her to come when the Map crashed. Things were happening that neither he, nor anyone else, understood.

"Sé Raal, the Colossi aren't letting anyone out of Pleasure Sect. They've shut down the power to all the wiretrains and threatened to shoot down all airhoppers. What are we going to do?"

Aleen nodded and looked around the table. She knew all the people here. Most of them owed her favors, money, or both. This council had been her idea and she'd shaped its composition for twenty years.

"Aleen," said Danyil, a stubby woman with a nervous manner, but a good sharp mind, "if the Colossi are out of control, everyone in the Sect is in danger."

All of them, like her, had brain bombs installed in their skulls. If the Colossi had gone mad with the crash, wasn't it possible that they'd detonate those brain bombs? It was the question on everyone's mind. But Aleen had a better one.

"Why does the Pleasure Sect continue to have power and Map access when every other Sect is cut off?"

There was a stunned silence. Finally, Sé Porro, powermaster for the Sect, spoke up.

"Good question. The Colossi are managing the fusion reactor. I guess they're keeping the power up. I don't know why. They won't talk to anyone but a cybe. As for the Map, it's pretty obviously not the main one, but a kind of emergency backup."

"The Cyberguild has never allowed us a guild satellite," said Irina, another wealthy Pleasure Sect Madam, "so we don't have a master here—"

"But we do," interrupted Kwomi. "Sé Hivel Jons is still here. His airhopper wouldn't lift off."

"Then why didn't you invite him down here?" asked Aleen.

"I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't," said Zapino, the guildmaster of the Protectors. He subvocalized to his implant for a moment. "He's on his way. He's not very happy."

Aleen allowed herself a small smile.

"No, I don't imagine he is."

Aleen turned to Sé Havi, who was in charge of emergency services, a group that Aleen had lobbied for and personally guided and funded for years.

"Well, Havi?"

He nodded, his delicate, kind features set in an expression of calm thoughtfulness.

"The disaster kits have been issued to all zone captains. Food and water centers are operational. Medtents have been staffed. So far, there has been minimal panic. The holo broadcast system is working well. The Protectors have locked up all the killing weapons issued previously and have replaced them with the old stunsticks, as per your order."

"With the governor's permission, of course," murmured Aleen.

Kwomi seemed to jerk out of a daze.

"Yes, yes, of course. Well done, Sé Raal, Sé Havi."

Irina jerked forward, a startled expression on her face.

"Aleen, I'm getting reports that the Colossi are letting people *in* to the Pleasure Sect, after subjecting them to some kind of chemical bath."

"What? But that makes no sense!" shouted Kwomi. Before long, everyone at the table was shouting, or making implant calls, except Aleen.

Aleen leaned back in her formfit and clasped her hands together while she thought. This had a ring of familiarity about it. Too bad she didn't have Vida's remarkable memory. The thought of Vida distracted her for a moment, but she ruthlessly suppressed it. She didn't have the luxury of indulging her worries about her daughter right now. She would just have to concentrate. When had such a thing ever happened before? The shouts had shifted into something approaching panic when she remembered.

"Quiet!" She raised a hand and the arguments and shouting dribbled to silence. "I think I know what's happened. Something similar happened centuries ago, but I won't bore you all with a history lesson." Several people at the table hid grins. Aleen was famous for going on at length about the history of the Pinch when arguing for or against some new innovation. "The Pleasure Sect was once known as Quarantine. During the Schism Wars, when plagues were common in the other Sects, sapients came here for safety and, more importantly, cures. The Colossi were supposed to have prevented the spread of disease. I hadn't given much credence to that before, but now, I wonder."

There was a momentary silence. The youthful features of Havi snarled into the first frown Aleen had ever seen from him.

"Do you suspect plague in the other Sects? Surely, such a thing could not occur so soon after a Mapcrash, no matter how much panic it caused."

Just then, they all heard an enraged bellow outside the door and a moment later Sé Hivel Jons stomped in. His usually placid, round face was red as sunset and he looked fierce as a swampworm on the hunt.

"What is the meaning of preventing me from leaving here? I have to get to guild headquarters immediately. The Map is—" He fell dead silent as he saw the holotable. His mouth dropped open. "You have Map access? That's impossible. Unless, is the Map back up already?"

"Sé Jons, this image is not coming from the Palace Map," said Porro, the powermaster. "It's being generated by the Colossi."

"The Colossi? But . . ." He frowned and, after a moment, plopped into a formfit that gave a pained groan as it tried to respond. Hi just stared at the holotable as if he'd never seen one before.

"Can you talk to the Colossi, Guildmaster?" asked Porro. "They refuse contact with anyone but a cybe."

He nodded, still staring at the table.

"What are we going to do about the refugees coming into Pleasure?" asked Kwomi.

Aleen stood up and all eyes, including Hi's, turned to her. She rested her fingertips on the holotable.

"Friends, we will turn no one away. We have power, food, and water and an intact infrastructure. The Colossi are doing their job and we will do ours. If there is a plague out there, Quarantine Sect will be a refuge."

"You mean Pleasure Sect, don't you?" asked Kwomi timidly.

"No, Governor. *This* is the moment that the Colonizers made this Sect for, not for sex and games. By God's holy Sight, we will not fail our purpose. They call us culls, discard us and degrade us. They put bombs in our skulls to make us obey. We are the unguilded, the orphaned, the lost. But we won't fail our trust. This is the moment that history will remember. This is the day you will never forget."

Hi stood up and bowed deeply, as if she were the chief patron of the highest clan. All of

the others followed suit. But Aleen saw only Hivel Jons. The look in his eyes made Aleen feel a stirring deep inside. It was an expression he had often had, but she'd never allowed herself to understand, because it would be too painful. His eyes shone with pride for her. Pride and, beyond all denying, love.

Samante went to the kitchen to make something to eat, while Calios took care of the tasks Vida had set him. The Map might not be up for hours yet.

The kitchen was a long, narrow room, lit at the moment only by the candle that Samante brought with her from Vida's bedroom. Vida had dozens of candles, all different sizes and scents. This one was a fat purple thing that gave off a cloying perfume.

Along the left wall of the kitchen were storage cabinets and appliances. Somewhere in there would be a compression tube for deliveries of groceries and other goods from the lower levels of Government House. Along the other wall was a countertop inlaid with pearl and lapis lazuli. The counter had many bowls with kaaleni blossoms floating in water and daalenerry flowers poking up out of ceramic vases. At the closest corner Samante saw a slender mock-blueglass vase with an icelight rose in it. The rose was past its bloom, browning at the edges. It was very hard to keep the icelight alive on Palace. Samante leaned close to sniff it. There was a faint aroma, a memory of the scent of warm honey, much nicer than the candle's heavy aroma. There was nothing in here of Greenie, except the flowers. She noticed for the first time that the kitchen had no chairs. Apparently, saccules weren't supposed to ever sit down when working. Samante found fruit that wasn't yet spoiled and went to the little servant's room across from Vida's bedroom. She found a towel to wrap the candle in to keep the melting wax off her fingers.

The room had a woven reed mat on the floor, a closet with neatly hung livery, and not much else. Vida had installed a heater in one corner and a window had been crudely cut into one of the walls so that Greenie could have a view of the swamp. It was typical of Vida that she'd done this on her own without bothering to delegate it to her factor or some other member of her entourage. Samante poked through the drawers feeling sad and vaguely guilty. All but one of the drawers was empty. That drawer had only two things in it. One was a green ribbon. Samante held it in her hand and brought the candle close to examine it. Just a piece of cheap cloth, but it must have meant something to the saccule. She tucked it into one of her vest pockets. The other item was a phoneme-vox that Samante had given Greenie some time ago. The saccule had been using it to improve its vocalization. Samante held the vox close to her heart and sniffed back tears. Greenie was just a clumsy little neuter. She'd seen hundreds of them while growing up and never given them a second thought. Why hadn't she ever realized how special they could be?

"Sé Dinisa!" Calios shouted from the other room.

Samante pocketed the vox and ran into Vida's bedroom, cursing as hot wax spattered against her fingers.

"What is it?"

"I have been monitoring the low-wave transmissions of the security forces at the Government House entrance. There has been an attack by a squadron of Leps. They killed most of the humans and are working their way up the West Tower."

"You don't think they're headed for the medwing, do you?"

"I don't know, Sé Dinisa. But we do know that Rico and Veelivar are a danger to the *ri*."

"Would killing Rico's body affect the part that's still connected to the Map?"

"I don't think so. But there's no way to know for sure. The *ri* obviously doesn't want to take any chances. Or maybe it's just being thorough."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know." Calios actually sounded a bit testy. "I'm a *zej*, not a warrior, Sé Dinisa. If

Jak were here, I'd defer to him."

"Well, he's *not* here and we promised to protect Rico. So we better think of something. How long will it take them to get to the medwing?"

"If they have a good map and are not interfered with along the optimum route, twenty minutes."

"How long would it take me to get there from here?"

"At least thirty minutes, depending on the conditions in the main longtube between the towers."

"There's no way to contact security with the Map down?"

"No. I can receive low-wave transmissions, but I don't have the equipment to transmit."

"Do you think the security checkpoints will stop them?"

"I doubt it. The Leps are well armed. Maybe the medwing's autogate could be energized independently of the Map, if the medwing has its own power source."

Samante remembered that the medwing lights had been the only ones working when the Map crashed. It occurred to her that the medwing was probably filled with injured people in addition to Rico and the other sever cases. Would the Leps bother to check every bed for their-prey? Would they only kill Rico?

"Can we get a message to the medwing?"

"You could activate your implant's emergency medpulse. I could show you how to modulate the pulse to send a crude message. But I doubt that anyone in the medwing would receive and understand such a message in time to save themselves. Even if the Map was fully available, it might take a long time for them to sort through all the emergency messages to yours."

Samante put her head in her hands. She didn't know Rico, really. She'd spoken to him a few times. He seemed nice enough, but worth throwing her life away? Vida would never ask that. He had been severed. The truth was, no matter what Vida wanted to think, the man was dead. What did it matter if the Leps disconnected the shell of his body from the lifebox? More serious to Samante was her worry that the Leps might kill all the sapients in the medwing just because they could.

"Another checkpoint of security forces has been overrun and destroyed. The Leps appear to be moving much more slowly up the West Tower than projected."

"Why?"

"I don't know." Calios sounded frustrated. "One of the security people said that the Leps were vandalizing as they went. Firing weapons into the walls. Maybe they're trying to damage as much of Government House as they can before the Map is up."

"At their current rate, how long until they get to the medwing?"

"About fifty rminutes."

"And you're sure that the medwing's autogate can stop them?"

"Reasonably sure," said Calios. "Riva may have anticipated such a defense and have prepared a counter, though. Again, I'm no tactician. I'm just an agent."

"We've, got to think of something. We promised Vida."

"I'm sorry, Sé Dinisa. I can't think of a better plan."

Samante suddenly flashed on the last night she'd spent with Pero. Most people thought he was homely and pitied him for that and because he had to defer to a younger brother with a fraction of his talent. Samante had seen a different side to Pero. She had known a man at peace with himself, who knew his place in the world and accepted it. The only time she'd ever

seen him uncertain, or emotionally false, was that last night with her, when he'd acted like he didn't ever want to see her again. She still wasn't sure if he was acting or genuinely hadn't wanted to be with her anymore. He'd held her, made love to her, and told her that the one thing he would always remember about her was that she kept her promises. He'd said he was sorry he couldn't do the same.

"Well, I sure hope you're right about how slow those Leps are going, because I'm going to the medwing, Calios. Can you print me out a map and instructions on how to get the autogate working?"

"Yes, Sé Dinisa."

"Don't forget to contact Sé Hivel Jons as soon as possible."

"I won't forget. Jeez, I'm not slippy, you know." Samante gave a quick laugh. "Sorry. If I don't make it back, will you do a favor for me?"

"Of course."

"Will you tell Vida that I would have been proud to be adopted by her?"

"Yes, I will." The revenant did a peculiar thing, then. It bowed to Samante and brought its fingers together in the rough shape of an eye, a gesture she'd seen Vida use sometimes. "The Lep force has overrun another checkpoint. Their movement rate has not changed."

"Okay, let's do this."

Samante spent precious minutes gathering up a few essentials, like a hand light and a shoulder-sack, while Calios printed out skims of maps and instructions. Then she headed out into the dark corridors of the East Tower more afraid than she'd ever been in her life. She wished she could have seen Pero, one last time, to find out whether he really loved her, like Rico loved Vida.

Dukayn met Karlo at the entrance to Deeplock. Even here, the Mapcrash had taken out all power, at least to the things that Dukayn deemed nonessential. He had rigged up a few battle lanterns that cast a shallow red light.

Karlo had lost nearly an hour getting down here through the chaos of Government House and he wasn't happy about it. If Dukayn were anyone else, Karlo would be in a furious temper. There were countless crises that awaited him up above, but at least he'd managed to isolate Tura's plague. Sé Hanna had been caught and executed, her body cremated after the autopsy found her clean. So, with luck, Vanna had been the only victim. They wouldn't know for sure until the Map was back up and they could systematically check the Sects.

"All right, Dukayn, I'm here. What was so important?"

Dukayn glanced at the two security guards behind Karlo and the men left instantly.

"Sé Karlo, I have information that Susannah and the Nomadia have just exited the Palace microshunt."

Karlo scowled and clasped his hands tightly behind his back.

"How could you know that? The Map is still down."

"I know. I'm not entirely sure how my source found out. But I've seen the drone images. I'm sure it's true, Karlo. I think we should launch the rest of the fleet immediately. They won't be expecting your reinforcements at Orbital for weeks, but our special shuntjammers can get there in a day. Not even the Hirrel will be able to stand against us."

Karlo studied Dukayn closely. There was something . . . off, about him. Of course, Dukayn was never a predictably sane man at the best of times. But there was no doubt in Karlo's mind that he believed what he was saying and Karlo was a man used to making decisions without a lot of useless introspection and doubt.

"All right." Karlo took a low-wave transmitter from a pocket and tapped out the launch code. "I've got to get to my flagship before it launches. Is this all you wanted to tell me?"

"No, I . . ." Dukayn actually hesitated. Karlo tried to hide his surprise. He had never seen Dukayn hesitate in all the years of their friendship; stretching back forty years to Kephalon. "Karlo, I have reason to believe that your son Wan is leading the attack."

"Wan?" Karlo would not have been more surprised if Dukayn had said that a saccule was commanding the Nomadia. "That's impossible." Karlo laughed. "Wan?"

"I know." Dukayn smiled slightly. The two of them were, again, in perfect synch. "But I have seen *Ket's Ribbon* at the head of Susannah's fleet. And I have extracted a believable confession from a spy who admitted the truth about Wan."

Karlo frowned. Confession? He didn't like the sound of that. There was a ring of falseness in Dukayn's voice. "How?"

"I'm afraid I was forced to torture the information out of the spy."

Karlo glowered at Dukayn, but what could he do? He had long since accepted the devil's bargain. Even the cardinal of Kephalon had approved of torture in certain cases. He wished that he had never been directly confronted with it, though.

"Who, Dukayn?"

Again, the man hesitated. Karlo felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Will you come with me, Se?"

He nodded, though he was itching to get out of here and join his fleet. The two men donned iso-suits and swiftly moved through all the levels of Deeplock security, until they concluded by walking the bar to Deeplock True in absolute darkness. The place might appear to be helpless and vulnerable, but Karlo had no illusions that Dukayn hadn't provided for a separate power source for all his deadly little traps. Karlo had to concentrate hard and move well to avoid them. Dukayn wouldn't presume to remind him of what and where the traps were. It was a sign of the man's respect. In a way, it was almost restful to give over all thought to pure physical demands. Karlo had a fleeting wish that he had never followed the path to fleet captain. He might have been an air-ken player, or even studied the Japat Way, like Dukayn. Or he might have been just one of the hundreds of thousands who died when the hellbombs fell.

As they moved through Dukayn's prison, Karlo heard moans, pitiful cries, and someone somewhere ceaselessly weeping. Familiar sounds. He'd heard them in the camps on Ri when he and Dukayn liberated the hundreds of humans who'd been kept there and tortured. So, a few Leps were repaid in kind. A small sin. But each scream for mercy cut into his heart. He was a violent man, but he'd never liked the idea of torture. That was a coward's tool.

Finally, Karlo heard Dukayn pause and activate some device. A moment later one of his cages came alive with light. To Karlo, it looked like a square of yellow suspended in a darkness more complete than space. Inside the cage a naked woman curled up in a ball. Her shaved head was tucked against her chest. Dukayn saw scars and welts and the boils of nerve toxins. She had not reacted to the sudden light. Dukayn touched a button and a siren like the wail of God pierced the air. Karlo whipped his hands over his ears. Dukayn let the siren scream for a full minute, until the woman uncurled and stood up, standing with her back to the far wall. Her posture was erect, though shaky. Karlo could see every mark of torture on her body. The sockets of her eyes were filled with scar tissue. She was mouthing words that he couldn't hear.

"The spy was Sister Romero," said Dukayn. Karlo's stomach twisted at the sight of the Itinerant reduced to a mindless shell of flesh.

Karlo reached out and, almost gently, put one of his massive scarred hands around the front of Dukayn's throat. He squeezed against the trachea.

"I ordered you not to harm her."

Dukayn didn't flinch.

"Yes, Master." And he offered no other excuse. Slowly, Karlo released him, reached up, and held the man's head between his hands, like a lover. He owed Dukayn his life many times over. He wasn't used to thinking deeply about his own feelings, but he understood that Dukayn was only a manifestation of Karlo's own needs. He had done everything for Karlo.

"Turn on the speaker," he said. Dukayn did so. "Sister, Dukayn tells me that you are a spy and that—"

"God Sees. God Sees. God Sees. God Sees. God Sees." She kept repeating the same two words, endlessly, in a voice that sounded like stones rubbing together. Karlo listened a little longer, then switched off the speaker himself, his eyes wide and hands trembling slightly.

He stared at her. The last time he'd seen her, she was a proud woman demanding faith for her Pope. Now, she was a broken thing. Karlo had never deliberately harmed a woman, but he remembered suddenly some things that Susannah had said about Dukayn, subtle hints. His gorge rose.

"Turn off the light," he whispered. "Turn it off."

They were plunged back into total blackness. Vanna once confided in him that she feared nothing but darkness. Sister Romero lived in that fear now.

"I'm going to my flagship," said Karlo, his voice sounding to his own ears like that of a child.

"Do you want me to join you, Master?"

"No, Dukayn."

He didn't have to see the man's face to know how hurt he would be by that. Karlo might be going to his death and his ni-Japat would not be at his side. But Karlo couldn't stand the thought of having this creature beside him for a moment longer. The worst, the very worst, was that Dukayn had done it all in Karlo's name.

"Are you sure, Master?" The barest hint of distress.

"Yes, Dukayn. Stay here. Defend Government House. Protect Vida." The thought of Vida reminded him that he would never have grandchildren to raise now, no matter what happened with Susannah and the Nomadia. He was going to have to kill his own heir. Karlo's hands closed into fists. He kept his voice steady. "Riva may try to strike now with the autogates down. When I get back ..." But he couldn't think of anything else to say. He just let his voice trail off.

Karlo reached a hand blindly into the darkness and, groping, found Dukayn's face. He caressed it once, brushing the angles of a face he knew as well as his own. Then he turned and left Deeplock as quickly as he could go. He never looked back.

The wiretrains weren't running in Service Sect, nor could Vida and Jak find a working aircab. The robocabs were either all in service or had been trashed in the riots. So, they were forced to walk through the Sect. Vida wore a ragged shawl and cloak and wished she'd had the wit to put on some kind of disguise before they left. All she could do was use a few Close tricks to change her appearance and hope people were too busy with their own worries to look closely at her. There were very few people out on the streets, in any case, and the rain kept them hunched in their own rain cloaks. Even through the rain and the mouth filter, Vida smelled wet ashes and melted plastocrete. Service Sect looked like someone had dropped a hellbomb on it. Smoke rose everywhere. Bodies lay crumpled and stained with blood and sporefall. And, to Vida's horror, she began to see signs that Vanna's plague had spread to Center Sect—piles of bones lay everywhere. She prayed that Karlo could find Hanna. Would the First Citizen really order hellbombs dropped here to stop the plague from spreading? She guessed she'd find out soon enough.

"Jak, I need to use a bathroom. Do you see any place?"

The Garang paused. His muscles were taut under his golden hide and his head swiveled constantly. He hadn't relaxed a bit since they'd left Government House. Somewhere, he'd acquired a heavy tri-stil pole that he carried like a staff. He said they needed a weapon less lethal than the one Wintershoal had given them.

"It would be safest if you would relieve yourself here, in the street."

Vida started to laugh, but realized that the Japat warrior wasn't joking.

"No thank you," she said. "We chief patrons have rules about that."

"Very well," said Jak, either not picking up on the sarcasm or choosing to ignore it. "That curry house has an external toilet that is within my line of sight and defensible. I will wait here, where I can watch all approaches,"

"Okay. Thanks."

The toilet was partially blocked by garbage from the restaurant. Vida climbed through the mess. A nest of vipers hissed at her, but scattered when she kicked at them. On the other side of the mound of old food, plastic shipping cartons, and heaps of unidentifiable junk, Vida saw an old male Lep with a few cheap bead necklaces clattering against his scrawny chest scurry out of an old box and scramble away from a sacculine neuter who was chasing him. Vida crouched down behind a screen of boxes and watched. Jak joined her a moment later.

The sacculine backed the Lep into a corner. The Lep cowered there wailing in Lepir. The sacculine came closer. Vida saw that the neuter was stumbling and now that she was watching it closely, she saw that it was very sick, its body covered with ugly boils. The sacculine let out whimpers from its sacs. It called out to the Lep with pitiful booms, begging for help. When it touched the Lep, the neuter's hands bled. It staggered away and Vida watched in horror and fascination as the sacculine went through the stages of disease she'd seen Vanna suffer. But the progress was much swifter this time and when it was done, the sacculine's bones dissolved to green dust and were washed away by the rain. Vida looked up at the Lep and saw that he, too, was showing signs of the disease that killed Vanna. The sores were small still, but the Lep's wails filled the alley. He must be in terrible pain.

Vida's bladder ached, but she couldn't relieve herself here and now. She and Jak stumbled back through the alley to the street.

"What is happening, Sé Vida?"

Vida put a hand on Jak's forearm.

"I think we know how Tura's spreading her plague."

"But why would Tura make a plague that would kill Leps and sacculines? It is humans that she hates."

"I don't know, Jak. But I hope this Falik really does know where she is and that Tura has an antidote, because if he doesn't, I think Karlo may be dropping a few hellbombs on our heads pretty soon."

Jak didn't reply, but she could guess his thoughts and they were no more hopeful than her own.

The two of them continued on and saw no more live sacculines, Leps, or humans. But they saw plenty of corpses. After an hour of walking, Vida felt as if her muscles were finally loose. She had spent all her life hiking around the Pleasure Sect and it was hard not to feel a secret twinge of happiness at being outside without half a dozen of Dukayn's pets surrounding her and herding her somewhere. Her mouth ached from the filter and she wished mightily that she dared take it out.

At twelve, they passed through the Center Sect auto-gate and into Service Sect. The guards at the autogate, a dozen heavily armed Protectors, were all dead, reduced to bones and cloth. Jak crouched down to study them. He was obviously interested in their weapons.

"Don't touch anything, Jak. We don't know how long the bodies remain contagious."

He nodded.

"There is no sign of the saccules."

"Yeah," said Vida. "It looks like Tura's plague completely dissolves them."

Why do such a thing? Why murder thousands of innocents? Clearly, Riva hated everyone, not just humans, and Tura was insane. Vida frowned. She wondered if the rest of Riva's followers knew that the plague killed Leps, too. Well, if they didn't, they soon would.

An hour later the rain abruptly stopped and the clouds parted. Both Jak and Vida paused in the street to tilt their faces toward the sun. The last time she'd seen a clear sky was back during the Festival of Calios, the day everything had changed for her. She wished she knew how her mother and friends were back in the Pleasure Sect.

The sun revealed that most of the dwells of Service Sect, never very clean to begin with, were entirely covered with fungus and moss now. The daily sporefall blanketed everything. Vida's boots were stained dark green all the way up to her knees despite the anti-fungals bonded to the material.

At last the two of them found a purple ribbon tied to a stanchion outside an alley in the Service Sect. Across the street, the burnt-out husk of the Gaze for this Sect still steamed. The dome of the Gaze looked like a marshmallow left too long in the fire. The odor of burned plastocrete filled the air, beyond the capacity of the mouth filters to completely screen.

Vida and Jak stared at the remains of the church. She didn't know what the Garang was thinking—probably wondering if the wreckage could hide attackers—but Vida felt a hollow pain at the sight. Aleen had not been a very religious woman, though the Schism Wars had been a consuming hobby. But Vida had always loved the daily gathers under the dome of the Pleasure Sect Gaze. When the skies were overcast—the usual case—the Gaze simulated the starfield beyond Palace's atmosphere. Vida could spend hours tracing the constellations, working out the microshunt routes, and imagining herself in her own shuntjammer out there among the stars. She wondered if Sister Romero knew what was happening in the city? But how could she not? No matter how deep in the swamp she'd gone to do her saccule research, surely someone would have come to tell her what was going on here.

"Sé Vida?" Jak had untied the purple ribbon. She nodded to him and the two walked into the alley. Soon, they found the boarded-up facade of a scale polisher's shop. Jak found another scrap of purple cloth that led them to an access chute near the door. The Garang preceded her inside. He left the staff propped outside.

Vida followed him, crawling through the dark, taking shallow breaths to keep from sneezing at the dust and odor of old dyes.

Eventually, they came to a room whose furnishings had been covered with yellow plastic. The tiny shop was lit by a pair of amber growlights. A handful of Leps wearing colored ribbons tied at their waists studied them warily from a corner. One of them was a young female with the manner of an aristocrat. She stepped forward and spoke in cultured Gen, alert to every nuance of the Protocols. Jak stood close by, fist clenched over his weapon. The Lep didn't appear to notice.

"Sé L'var y Peronida? I am Pa Vin Zir. I'm so glad you came. I guess you really are the People's Factor." The other Leps in the room bowed. Zir's crest was high with obvious pleasure. "Pa Nor Falik is waiting for us in another place."

Vida liked the woman right away. She was clearly intelligent and sophisticated. The woman's scale pattern matched that of Pa Sar Tuz, who had delivered the message on the roof park. Obviously the two were related. Strange that their Line name was different. She wished she knew more about how Lep families worked. Vida tucked her hands into the crossed palm greeting that Molos had showed her once.

"I'm glad to be here."

"Well, Falik said to get you to him right away, so, if you'll follow me."

Zir led them to the back, where she opened up a door to what looked like a changing room with a few cracked mirrors. Zir stepped inside and Vida followed. There was no room for Jak and Vida turned to say something to him, expecting that Zir was about to operate a secret panel or something, when she felt a sensation like thousands of cold fingers walking over her skin. The next moment she and Zir were standing in another room with a black door and no other exits. Vida blinked.

"Don't be afraid, Sé L'var. It's only a transport gate. A bit of old Colonizer tech that Falik discovered." Zir drew out an amber pendant and the black door gave an audible click. Zir pushed it open, revealing a corridor hewn out of stone and lit by more of the amber growlights hung from the walls on a wire.

"Just call me Vida," she said automatically, but her mind was buzzing. Transport gate! "Where are we?"

"We're in the undercity. Please follow me."

"Wait. Where are Jak and the others?"

"Oh, they'll be along in a few minutes. It takes a lot of energy to operate the gate and we have to be careful not to reveal ourselves to the powermasters, so we always wait awhile after every use of the transport gate. We can wait for them, if you like."

Vida could hear a hint of coolness in Zir's voice. Surely this wasn't the moment to show mistrust. After all, the Leps could have killed both her and Jak at any moment if that was their intent.

"No, that's all right. Let's go see Falik." They headed down the corridor with Zir in the lead. "Oh, by the way, your brother was hurt in the roof garden, but he's going to be fine."

"What?" Zir turned around and her crest was low. "What do you mean?"

"The Lep who brought your message to me, Pa Sar Tuz. He was attacked by some humans, but he's going to be okay. He's your brother, isn't he?"

"No, of course not. We're not even related." She spoke in a tone of forced humor. "I suppose all Leps look alike to you?"

"Oh, no, I . . . never mind, I'm sorry. I made a mistake."

"Don't worry about it. It was an honest mistake, I'm sure," said Zir. But the woman's tone didn't match the words. She was furious.

The two of them kept going down the corridor in tense silence. Vida chewed her lower lip. Had she somehow made an error about the scale patterns? No, she could see Zir up ahead and the pattern of blue and silver whorls down the spine was almost identical to that of Tuz. Vida trusted her visual memory completely. Had she violated some etiquette by mentioning the family connection? That didn't seem likely. Leps were proud of their Lines. In Vida's experience, admittedly limited, it was a mark of respect to note such relationships. That left only one obvious conclusion. Zir was lying to her. But why?

"How much farther is it?"

"Not far," replied Zir, without turning around.

Vida glanced back down the corridor. Jak and the others were still not here. Could this be a trap? What did she really know about Falik? For that matter, what proof did she have that she was even being led to Falik? But if this Zir was her enemy, a confederate of Riva, why wouldn't she have killed her immediately? Vida suddenly remembered an earlier assassination attempt. She'd been wearing the force belt. So, Riva knew she had one, but not that she'd lost it after the attack. If they thought she still wore one, how would they try to kill her? Try to deactivate it, of course. Probably jump her from one of these side passages and pin her down while they looked for a release. What about Jak? Vida closed her eyes briefly and swallowed hard. They would have had no reason not to kill him. The loyal Japat was almost certainly dead.

Vida concentrated on listening carefully for approaching steps. Should she activate the medpulse in her implant? By the time anyone followed up on it, she'd be dead and her body disposed of and if she did that they might detect it and realize she'd seen through their ruse. On the other hand, maybe she was overreacting to a family dispute and a Lep with sensitive feelings. If Rico were here, he would give her a look and ask her to reduce the logic to a binary decision. So. If she was wrong about this being a trap, then the worst that could happen was embarrassment. If she was right, then her life was at stake. Conclusion: run like hell.

She had never seen any blueprints for the undercity. It hadn't even occurred to her to seek them out. So, if she tried to escape down one of these corridors, wouldn't they catch her in minutes? Maybe, but she had to try.

"Just around this corner, Sé L'var." How could she have failed to hear the venom in that voice?

"Okay. I'm really looking forward to meeting Sé Falik."

Vida clenched her fist once to prime the poison weapon that Wintershoal had given her. Another pump and she could kill any attacker. But she hesitated. Aleen had once told Vida that if she were ever in a situation where a client became violent, she was not to try to fight, but concentrate only on escape. Never engage an enemy whose resources are unknown, she'd said.

Vida sniffed at a side passage, but the mouth filter screened out any clue. She shrugged and bolted down the side corridor as fast as she could run. After a few precious seconds, she heard a commotion behind her and a voice screaming in Gen.

"Get her, you fools! Riva will peel you scale by scale if you let her escape!"

She'd been feeling foolish until then. Vida ran flat out, wishing that she'd taken better care of herself since coming to Government House. At this rate, she was going to collapse in about five minutes. She ripped out the mouth filter. She needed every bit of breath to run.

She made random turns and kept her eyes open for ladders and doors. Chances were good that her pursuers knew this level perfectly. How long would it be before she turned into a dead end or was caught in a trap? She ducked into an alcove to catch her breath. She tried to pant quietly and she kneaded the stitch in her side that felt like a third-degree burn.

This time, Calios wouldn't be able to help her. Unless. Hadn't Calios said that because she was a L'var, she always had access to the Map? If she could get to Calios, she had options, obtain a floor plan of the undercity, maybe, or summon help. She had to find a Mapstation before Zir's people found her and she'd need some time to use it. Vida grinned. Why not ask for the key to the local transport gate while you're at it? Her grin widened. Maybe she would, at that. Vida turned and ran into the darkness of another stone tunnel.

Garis crouched on a trefoil buttress staring out at the spires of Service Sect. From his vantage, the blue glowing needles of the twin towers, miles away, looked like arms reaching up in the twilight mist. He hadn't heard from Jevon in days and he was very afraid that she was dead. "Garis?"

He twisted on his perch in surprise. Pa Nor Falik, wearing his mismatched clothes and a floppy rain hat, had joined him on the slick buttress.

"Careful, Se. The tri-stil is wet."

"Hah. I danced on these things in the rain when I was a child."

Garis smiled, but felt great relief when the small Lep finally sat down.

"What brings you out here in the rain, Se?"

"Just Falik, Garis. No Protocols for us, yih? We're a heresy, hadn't you heard?"

Garis shook his head. "I don't know how you can be so cheerful about it, Se. Roha ordered your arrest."

"Cardinal Roha, Garis. Respect for his position, if not the man, all right?"

"Yes, Se, I mean Falik."

"Good. Now, what brings *you* out here in the rain? I thought we were all done with the tragic moping." Garis shrugged and looked away. He heard the Lep hiss softly. "Come, Garis. A burden shared is a burden lessened. This is Amin. If one of us is sad, who will believe this is the Church of Hope?"

Garis turned to face the Lep.

"It's just a girl, Falik. Just . . . I'm worried about her. I think she's in trouble and there's nothing I can do. She might even be hurt, or worse."

Falik spread his arms. He tilted his snout back so that the rain ran down his face and into his clothes, then faced his human friend again. Garis had learned to read the Lep's expressions a little. Falik looked stern. The leader of Amin might often seem to be foolish and silly, but he was neither. Garis had seen the Lep's fine mind at work.

"There is no shame in worry, but it changes nothing, helps no one." Garis hung his head and clenched his lips. "Garis, look at me."

It was a hard thing for him to do, but he raised his head. The Lep rested a ringed hand on the human's knee.

"You're not alone anymore. Amin is your gang now and we've got some rimmy chains." Falik's crest lifted and Garis couldn't help but smile. "Come inside. We'll talk about your lady and see what can be done to help her, eh?"

Inside the building, an abandoned warehouse converted into another of Amin's mobile churches, hundreds of Leps, humans, and saccules all pretended that they didn't notice the two of them coming in. The church was growing. This was only one of its meeting points. Yet, Garis knew most of their names and stories from the Tells at every meeting. His birth family might have cast him out, but this new clan was thousands strong and all of them cared.

Falik led Garis to a corner of the room, where a young woman wearing a very old and tattered blue work gown was soldering a crude series of connections to a fist of blueglass married to a datachair that looked like it had been through the Schism Wars.

"How's it coming, Eqi?"

"Almost ready. Unless they bring up the Map in the next five minutes, we should be able to hook up this tap without anybody knowing. The standby restrictions won't apply to us because this won't be a registered Mappoint."

The woman grinned, eyes sparkling. Garis remembered when this unguilded cybe had first come to a meeting of Amin. She'd been a strung-out addict, barely able to feed herself, let alone perform miracles of Map repair.

"I'll bet a lot of unguilded cybes are doing the same thing," said Eqi. "The Map's gonna have quite a load on it when it comes back up. It'll take the guild weeks to track down all the new Mappoints."

"Good." Falik leaned toward Garis and spoke in a loud whisper so pretty much everyone in the church could hear. "Anybody you'd like to make an implant call to?"

Since this is an unregistered Mappoint, Dukayn can't possibly trace it."

Garis felt his ears burn with embarrassment, but he gave a sharp nod. The renegade cybe ran some wires as slender as hairs to the implant at the base of his skull, then manually typed in Jevon's code. An awful hum was all that came back. The cybe jerked the wires out of Garis's jack before they could generate deadly feedback.

"What was that?" asked Garis.

Eqi looked at him, very serious.

"I'm sorry, Garis. That means the implant has been removed."

"Then she's dead."

"Or a prisoner in Deeplock," said someone grimly.

"It's the same thing," said Garis.

Falik rested a hand on Garis's shoulder. Everyone was silent as doom.

"My friends," said Falik in a casual voice. "I've been meaning to pay a visit to Deeplock for some time now. With this Mapcrash, there will never be another better chance to save those poor souls trapped down there. Anyone care to go with me?"

Falik's statement was met by a moment of incredulous silence. Deeplock had become a synonym for death. Suddenly they all smelled an odor like kaaleni flowers in bloom. Garis saw three sacculi neuter stand up and puff out their big front throat sacs. He nodded to them.

"I guess we've got a rumble," said Pa Nor Falik.

Talking to Barra and Damo had become increasingly difficult without Nimue acting as bridge. Once Nimue identified the threat at the microshunt exit and shifted into her primary function of defense, Rico lost the connection entirely. He couldn't even find the helix now.

Rico just floated in the Nimue Mapspace. He could think of nothing else to do. The Map was unavailable, Nimue was gone, and he'd lost his connection to Damo and Barra.

The Gate changed. Had he still been a being of flesh, Rico would have described the feeling as his blood catching fire.

"Welcome to the Land of the Dead, Rico."

He whirled around to see his cousin Arno, whose face was barely recognizable beneath ragged cuts. His eyes were pools of blood, yet he was smiling the old cocky grin. His dead cousin was naked, caked with old blood, face ravaged by the knives of the assassin, Vi-Kata. Dear God. The emotions restored by Nimue cranked up Rico's reaction to near hysteria. He had to calm down, regain some of that clarity of thought. But he felt primal terror and rage.

"What's wrong, kid? Not even a friendly hello for your murdered cousin?"

His voice came to Rico over a golden thread that connected the two -of them, the same metaphor that the Map used to show the connections between worlds on the hyperMap. Had Arno created it, or the Gate? The words came, not as sound but as digital information. The Gate was not only maintaining Rico's Mapbody, but also acting as a translation application, almost a mini-Map, with Rico as the substrate. It was like typing a conversation and yet hearing every nuance of thought behind the words. Rico sensed that the Gate was doing something else, too, something that it didn't want Riva to detect. It was important that Riva stay focused on Rico.

"You're not Arno," said Rico, unable to conceal his hate. "You're Riva."

"You don't believe I'm Arno? I'm hurt."

"Of course not. How could he have written a revenant that showed his physical condition after torture? Besides, he was my best friend. Did you really think you could fool me? Who are you really?"

"You might be surprised by what Vi-Kata made Arno do before he killed him. I could show you."

Rico hadn't known it was possible to feel such despair and fury. How could Molos have said all those wonderful things about Arno and now talk calmly of showing him vid of his death by torture? Rico would have done anything to see his cousin alive again, but not like that. Never like that.

"What do you want, murderer?"

"I want the *giu*, of course. You don't have anything else of value."

"Forget it."

"I can offer you something in return, Rico. I have access to tech that not even the Colonizers understood. I can merge you back with your physical body. Wouldn't you like that?"

"I don't believe you," said Rico. To touch Vida again? To hold her in his arms? To have a second chance at life? Oh, God.

"Of course you do. Come on. The *giu* doesn't even belong to you. It pretended to be a tool of your clan all those years, just to hide from me."

The savaged and bloody visage of Arno changed into the image of an old gray and green Lep perched in an intricate websling.

"Who else are you?" asked Rico. "Jeri the Jade-wing? UJU Prime?"

Riva hissed laughter.

"I've never heard of Jeri. I'll confess to Prime, though."

Rico hung astonished and silent in Riva's Mapspace for what seemed many minutes.

"You're kidding. That's . . . that's crazy. Why would you do that? You're a Lep."

Riva spread her arms and continued to speak in yet another voice, using stilted, old-fashioned Gen.

"What better way to recruit converts to my cause?"

"You're insane." Riva laughed.

"You know, you're not the first person to point that out." An image of Arno returned, this time before the torture. His lips were set in the old crooked grin. "Last chance, cousin. Give me the *giu*."

"Why do you want it? You've certainly tried to destroy it enough times with those candles of yours."

"Rico, Rico. The candles aren't just destructive metas. You must have guessed that by now. Other than Arno, you're the brightest human I've met. You must have worked most of this out by now." Rico said nothing. "No? I'm disappointed in you. Well, I'll give you this one for free, cuz. The candles were primarily made to seek out the *giu* and freeze it for me. Their main function for years has been to find and trap *gi*, which they've done splendidly. Not even the *zei* could have done as well. The destructive application was just lagniappe."

"Why? What is the *giu*? Why do you want it?"

"Do I look like a datablock?" Riva sounded so much like Arno, it was eerie. The Lep certainly didn't sound anything like Molos, in any of its incarnations. "Time's up, kid."

Riva melted again into the burned and bloody image of Arno.

"What's it gonna be? The *giu*, or eternity being chased by candles? Once they catch you, they'll shuck you off the Gate like the shell off a *dus*. Unfortunately, that might damage the *giu*. Release the *giu* voluntarily and I promise you that I will merge you back with your body. I always keep my promises. The saccules can vouch for that."

Rico ignored Riva. Obviously, Molos was trying to confuse him, trick him. Rico could feel the essence of the Gate inside him. Could they even be separated at this point? He thought there was little beyond Riva's abilities. Again, he imagined touching Vida again, making love to her, holding her, kissing her hair, her lips. But he also remembered vividly that moment when Hi raised him up to master, how he'd made a silent promise to put the Map before anything, even his own life. Is this what it meant to believe in honor and duty? Arno died for the Map. Could Rico do any less?

"No, Riva. No deal."

"Well, that's loath, if not entirely unexpected."

The Gate turned Rico's bones to ice. Candle coming. No. Candles. A whole sect of them, it felt like.

"Send all the candles you want. You'll never get the Gate and I'll keep looking for a way to destroy you, even if it takes a hundred years."

"A hundred years? I've written metas that took longer. You don't have a chance, Rico."

"We'll see. Arco-dev-doublezig."

The meta wrenched them out of Riva's Mapspace and into an evasive traveling pattern. The heat of the candles flared behind them so hot that Rico felt as if his skin were on fire. But the Gate outran them and Riva's tools were soon far behind. On the other hand, Riva had done something to block access to the hyperMap level. No meta would open the way back to Nimue. He would have to find another way to contact people.

Rico thought about what Riva had said. An eternity being hunted by candles, while everyone he knew and loved grew old and died? He couldn't face that. Maybe it was time to start thinking seriously about committing an absolute suicide. But only if he could take Riva out while doing it. If he was going to die, he wanted his death to count for something. He wanted his last act to be in service to the Map. He wished he could talk to Vida one more time, tell her that he loved her. Would she forget about him, fall in love with someone else? It was a bitter thought and made his heart feel cold as stone.

Enough self-pity, kid. It was Arno's voice in his head, as clear as if the man were standing at his side. Rico mentally blinked. What the hell? He wasn't imagining it. Arno was really talking to him.

Arno?

The best part of him, Rico. The part you loved and Riva stole.

The Gate. The Gate had learned how to talk to him from Riva's use of Arno. Rico felt a flare of something that was partly joy and partly grief.

It's good to have you back, Arno.

Yeah, yeah. Don't get sappy on me. Now, what are you going to do to stop that nut, Riva?

I don't know, Arno. Molos is too—

Molos? Do- you really think one Lep cybermaster could do all this? Do you think even Molos could write those candle metas? Come on, cuz. Use your head.

Yeah, right. Besides, what would Molos want with the Chameleon Gate? It's more the thing an AI might—

Rim-kick, cuz.

Nimue? No, of course not. It had to be an AI with Palace access. It had to be <grin> Caliostro.

Rico felt the *giu* start singing inside him.

Of course. Of course. There were gaps and questions, but the answer was there. Rico felt a flush of shame that he had so quickly assumed that Molos was Riva. If he ever got out of this, he'd find the Lep and apologize to his face.

So, if Caliostro was Riva, there must be a pseudolattice somewhere. The mindcore at Government House could handle part of the job, but it had been destabilized and its output was carefully monitored. Riva must have another mindcore hidden somewhere on Palace, shielded and defended. Could he find it?

Come on, Rico, you're almost there, buddy.

How, Arno? How can we find it. How can we locate . . . ah! So simple. If Riva could track the giu, well, the reverse must be true, eh?

Rimmy, cuz.

The Gate had some volition, but it needed a sapient mind to direct it and a plan for facing Riva. If he could find the Mappoint hidden in Palace, and survive Riva's defenses, well. Absolute suicide in the middle of the Riva pseudo-lattice should put an end to her, for good. The Gate couldn't do it. All those years, hiding in the Jons clanspace, waiting for someone who might join with it to defeat Riva ... it must have been a nightmare for the *giu*.

The nightmare's over. We're going to kick Riva's ass.

The Gate answered Rico's mindtouch with a triumphant blare of soundless music and they hurtled down into the oblivion of the Map, toward victory, or death.

Roha was dying. The sores on his arms were small, but over the course of the last few hours he had felt them grow and with each passing minute the pain increased. He had seen what the last stages looked like, yet he felt completely calm. It had to be shock.

He was in the medwing of the West Tower with the few dozen remaining Lifegivers and they were all frantically working on isolating the retrovirus, with no luck. Despite years out of the microbio labs, Roha knew well enough how to identify and type a phage. It had taken Roha and his assistants less than an hour to determine that the virus was designed to bore into the ribosomes of cells devoted to creating life-extension enzymes and transform them into killers. The longer a sapient had been using the life-extension drugs, the faster and more virulent the disease. Even with all the resources of Retreat, Roha doubted that a cure could be found before every Not-child on Palace was dead. The plague must have been sent by Tura, but if so, she didn't care who died from it. Leps everywhere were being felled by the plague.

"Your Eminence?" Roha's factor, sweating and trembling, rushed up to him at his microscope.

"Yes, Dav."

"We've worked out the vector." The man looked like someone had punched him several times in the stomach. "Well?"

"Your Eminence, it's the saccules . . . the neuters."

"How can that be?"

"The neuters have an unusual mastery of their pheromones. The person who created this plague, linked it to a specific enzyme set. Once ingested, either orally or by settling into an open wound, the virus detaches from the pheromone carrier and enters the bloodstream, turning into a phage. Fortunately, the saccule has to be quite close to effectively transmit the virus."

"Pheromones ..." said Roha.

"Yes, Your Eminence, a specific set. If a saccule is afraid, or angry, or aroused, it emits this set."

Dav tried to show Roha the scan images, but Roha just shook his head. Aroused?

"Cardinal Roha?" The brittle voice of one of Dukayn's pet security guards snapped him out of his daze.

"What? What is it?"

"There's a young woman at the entrance. She's claiming that an attack squad of Leps is on its way to this medwing. She insists on speaking to the person in charge. I . . . haven't been able to contact any of my superiors at the atrium checkpoint. Would you . . . ?"

Roha clutched his crimson robe of office closer to him and tucked his hands into the sleeves. The boils hadn't reached his face yet, but it wouldn't be long.

"Of course, Lieutenant. Bring her to me."

A moment later a wild-eyed Samante Dinisa stood before him, speaking too fast to follow her words. She looked like she'd been through a war. Her clothes were torn, her face bloodied, and her eyes were wild.

"Calm down, Sé Dinisa. Is Sé L'var with you?"

"No, Your Eminence." She paused to take a few deep breaths. Finally, she seemed to gain a measure of control. "What time is it? That fool of a guard wouldn't tell me."

Roha glanced at Dav, who jerked out an heirloom flat-clock from an inner pocket.

"Twenties, Se."

Dinisa stepped forward and snatched the flatclock from his hand.

"The *exact* time, you idiot," she said. She blinked at the numbers and nodded. "All right, all right. We have a few minutes, if Calios's projections are right."

"What are you talking about, Dinisa? What is this nonsense about a Lep attack squad? And where is your patron?"

She came to Roha and although she was much shorter, Roha took a step back from that fiery look in her eyes.

"A squadron of armed Leps is on its way here, probably to destroy Sé Rico's lifebox." She waved her hand to stop him before he got more than a word out of his mouth. Roha had never been silenced by a factor before in his life, and the Lifegivers around him had amused looks on their-faces. "Never mind how I know. They're heavily armed, Your Eminence. Your guards won't be able to stop them."

Roha glanced at the lieutenant who had turned pale.

"All we have are stunsticks, Your Eminence."

"I know a possible way to stop them, but I need a very good tech and I need one *now*."

Everyone just stood around staring at each other.

"Will I do?" It was Dan Motta.

"I sure hope so." Samante pulled out a crumpled skim and smoothed it out in front of him. "Can you activate the medwing autogate using this circuit?"

Dan scowled at the paper for an agonizing handful of minutes in which everyone, including Roha, seemed to be holding their breaths.

"Yeah, yeah. I can do this. It's just a matter of bypassing the safety interlocks, really. I'll need some time, though, and some microtools."

Samante glanced at Dav's flatclock. "You've got about five minutes."

Dav stumbled over to Motta with a double handful of tiny tools scooped up from an operating tray.

Meanwhile, Dinisa ran over to check Rico's lifebox. Roha met her there.

"Sé Dinisa, I must trust you to deliver something to Sé L'var."

"Of course, Your Eminence. But, well, I'm sure you'll be able to give it to her yourself." She looked at him, grimly. "I mean, if any of us survive this, we all will."

"To be sure. Nevertheless." He handed her a flatplate that was sealed with a code. "The code phrase is the subject that Vida and I never got around to discussing. She'll understand."

"I'll see that she gets it, Your Eminence."

"Thank you."

While everyone else watched Dan Motta open up the autogate controls and start working, Cardinal Roha slipped out the entrance to the medwing. If he was going to die, he wanted to die with someone he loved.

* * *

In the main hangar, Barra saw that Nimue had already taken care of informing Pero about the threat. The entire hangar bay was filled with a tactical hologram that Pero and his officers moved within. Barra's techs were rushing around preparing for an emergency evacuation. Her subordinates hadn't noticed Barra's return. Once they did, she wouldn't have a spare moment to think, so she took the opportunity to go to Pero. His soldiers blocked her at first, but Pero waved her through. He was wearing battle armor, scarred and weathered. Pero had been little more than a child during the Great War, but he had fought. His lantern-jawed face had gone from ironic amusement to a kind of frightful bleakness. The man had resigned himself to death. And why not, if he was taking his little force of a few hundred ships out to face that monstrous phalanx of the Nomadia?

"Sé Barra, I don't know how you got Nimue working, but good job. She's already activating anything she can in the Spine. The Nomadia will have to divert a good part of its force to deal with Nimue's defenses. We have a slight chance of slowing them long enough for the rest of the fleet to arrive."

"Are you joking, Sé Pero? It'll take weeks for ships to come."

Pero smiled grimly. "Do you think Karlo has been idle all these years on Palace, that the massive funding of military research was for nothing? Take my word for it. The reinforcements will come in time."

Barra glanced at the multitude of colored lights drifting in the sphere of the tactical hologram. She had no idea what any of them meant, or how to interpret them, but she did know that space battles were a tortuously long and deadly kind of war. The vastness of space made ship-to-ship fighting nearly impossible, so most space battles were decided by guessing an enemy's movements and mining the path. Everything depended on timing.

"First off, Sé Pero, it wasn't I who got Nimue working. If anyone deserves the credit, it's Damo."

"Damo? Huh. Well, good for him. Do you have any idea whether her full array will come back?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

The man shrugged. Two officers came up and spoke to him in Helane. Pero answered and sent them off.

"Time's almost up. I'm launching what I've got. We'll find out in a couple hours if those stories about the Hirrel being able to shuntjump over minefields are really true. Time for you and your staff to evacuate back to Palace."

"I'll send the rest of them, but I think a few of us should remain behind, in case we need to do some emergency work on Nimue."

Pero stared at Barra.

"Sé Barra, my father's reinforcements will pick a point ahead of Susannah's armada and start laying hellbomb mines to slow their advance on the planet. Orbital is expendable."

"Possibly. Or maybe the Hirrel will stop once they realize that Nimue is active again. And there's one other possibility." Pero crooked an eyebrow. "Maybe there's a chance for peace. The Hirrel have never participated in a war. They may come to their senses in time."

Pero gave a nasty laugh.

"Who was it who said, 'Hope for peace, but fire first?'"

"Somebody with a bloody sense of humor," said Barra.

"Hm. Now that you mention it, I guess I said it."

Pero moved off to talk with more of his officers and Barra met with her people to begin the evacuation. She hoped the Hirrel didn't share Pero's sense of humor.

* * *

Ri Tal Molos was deep in the undercity. He had managed to avoid Dukayn's patrols and was now far away from the entrance point he'd used below Government House.

He paused to sit on a shelf of stone and rest. After a few minutes, he flipped on a hand light and studied his portable map. The map, if it was accurate, should have led him to Riva's hiding place, based on the location he'd learned from breaking into Zir's secret files. The map showed the route to all of her secret rooms, including the meta chamber that contained her candle metas. But somehow, he couldn't find the connecting corridor. Instead, he was sitting in just another crudely carved tunnel under the Service Sect with no hint of where to go next. The tunnels went on for miles under the city of Palace, often ending in dead ends where animals nested.

The old Lep rubbed his back against the ancient stone. The dyes he'd used to disguise his scale markings itched and the sensation was driving him crazy. Molos dipped automatically into his pouch of Geriose, but stopped himself. The drug eased the constant, terrible pain in his leg and would make the itching bearable, but it also dulled his senses and he needed to be completely alert now. He thought it unlikely that he would ever get close enough to Riva to slash her throat, but he could at least shave the odds a bit in his own favor. It was the least he could do to honor poor Rico's memory. The look on Samante's face when he told her that it was his fault haunted him. He hadn't thought it possible that he could feel any deeper misery of shame until that moment. The interpreter had always honored him so.

Molos sighed. He might as well head back to the surface. Perhaps he could find another route to Riva. Perhaps the map in Zir's files was just another of Riva's ruses after all.

Molos took a deep breath and levered himself up with his cane. Then he went stock-still and sniffed the air again, more carefully. The old Lep widened his eyes and opened his nostrils as wide as they would go. Something, some very faint smell . . . yes, there was a human nearby, very near, a human whose smell he knew. Molos rushed to the walls and used a handheld detector modified from a blackbox card to search for a hologram-disguised entrance, or the energies of an autogate. There must be a door mechanism of some sort nearby. Yes! He found it in moments, near the ventilation shaft. The blackbox located a powered lock on the other side, but no access from his side of the corridor. Molos climbed up on the shelf of stone and put his snout right up against the shaft.

"Sé Vida?" He tried to pitch his voice through the grate loud enough for her to hear, but low enough to not attract Dukayn's patrols. There was a long tense moment of silence.

"Molos? What the hell—"

Molos felt his crest lift at the astonishment in that voice.

"Sé Vida, there is a door below the air shaft, where my voice is coming from. Do you see it?"

"I ... no, there's no light, I can't see anything. Just a second. Yeah, I can feel the outline of the door."

"Excellent...Can you locate the lock mechanism? It should be about four feet from the floor on your right."

A pause. "Yeah, I found it. It's a sealed box, though."

Molos cursed. Here he had a blackbox that could open the thing easily, if only he could get it to the girl. The shaft! Too small to travel through, but maybe the blackbox would fit.

"Vida, I have a device that can unlock the door. I'm going to push it through the shaft. Can you reach it?"

"I don't know. The bars on the shaft are pretty close together. I can get part of my hand through. I can feel the bottom of the shaft with my fingers. Aleen always did say I had skinny fingers. Lucky thing."

Molos spent a precious few moments configuring the blackbox to emit a magnetic pulse in what he hoped was the right polarity. Molos took a deep breath and offered up a silent prayer that the shaft was not too long. His own fingers were too stubby to fit more than the tips through the vent on his side.

"I'm going to pitch a blackbox card through the bars on my side to your side." He rested the card on the middle bar and after another quick prayer, poked it as straight as he could.

"Ow! Did you have to throw it so hard?" she said crossly. Molos murmured an apology. There was an agonizing moment of silence, then, "Hah! I've got it between my fingers. Okay, I've got the card. Now what?"

"Just hold it up to the lock and say, 'Rico.' "

There was a pause. She replied in a voice as near to tears as he'd ever heard. "I understand."

Blinding light flashed on at one end of the corridor. Molos raised a hand and squinted. Shadowy figures strode forward out of the light. Humans. Dukayn's people.

"Hey you, Lep! Stay there."

"Hurry," said Molos.

There was a click and the door slid open. Vida L'var stood there, squinting in the light with one hand holding the blackbox against the lock mechanism. Molos stumbled through the door and snatched the blackbox away from the lock. The door slid closed and the lock engaged with a thump. Seconds later the shouts and curses of the security people came to them through the vent.

"It won't take them long to get equipment to break through," said Molos. He turned on his hand light and illuminated the flatplate with the map data he'd stolen from Zir. "We need to figure out where we are—"

Vida snatched the flatplate from Molos's hands and scanned it, scrolling the map in all four directions very quickly. After a few seconds, she paused.

"What's this lattice icon?"

Molos studied the section of the map that Vida was pointing to. He was eager to get out of here, but something about Vida's tone and attitude made him throttle his impatience.

"That is Riva's meta room, where she runs her candle programs."

Vida handed the flatplate back to Molos.

"There are no exits," she said.

"Not on the map," agreed Molos. "But there must be a way out of here. How did you get down here?"

"A Lep named Zir brought me here through something she called a 'transport gate.' "

Molos stood dumb for a moment.

"That's impossible," he said. "Transport gates could only be operated by a functioning AI; there are too many dimensional variables for any normal sapient to calculate."

Vida started to say something, but they heard the sounds of more people arriving outside the door.

"Follow me," she said, grabbing one of his hands. "And turn off that light."

He did as she said. The next moment the two of them were running through near total blackness as fast as Molos's bad leg would allow. After the first few sudden turns down side corridors, Molos was utterly lost. Vida never hesitated, though, not even to check the map.

"Where?" Molos gasped.

"The meta room," she answered, panting a bit herself. "I have an idea. Now, save your breath."

Molos ran behind her and regretted not using the Geriose.

The Minu appeared on the vidscreen of *Ket's Ribbon*. "Nimue is awakening," said the Hirrel leader.

"Oh, really? Thanks for the newsvid," said Wan with a disgusted shake of his head.

He had twenty-nine ships drifting powerless in space and twice that number had suffered mysterious system failures. If Nimue got all her remote stations working in time, all of them would be stopped here. Everything depended on the Nomadia outrunning Nimue's activation.

Wan glanced at Susannah, who showed no sign of concern. Leni was still in their stateroom, working on the Spagyra. He said that there was something in there about AIs, though the primary focus of the thing was genetics and life extension. It was a long shot, but maybe they could find a way to fight the AI.

"We never prepared a scenario for taking on Nimue," said Wan to the image of the Minu. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Nimue misunderstands. She will know us soon. The *Zhu-i* is at hand. You must send the *Brektzhu* to us now. There is still time."

"We'll send it when the fleet surrenders."

"Now. It must be now. You promised."

"Not until Karlo's fleet surrenders. If you try and take it by force, we'll destroy it."

The Minu was silent for some moments. Wan stared at the weird black helmet that covered his head. Could he even see out of that thing?

"All rivers flow to *Zhu-i*." The Minu vanished from the ship's vidscreen.

Wan swiveled his seat to face Susannah.

"What was the Minu talking about?"

Frowning, the woman began to speak rapidly to Marte in Relzhu. Wan could only follow a fraction of the conversation because they had switched into the religious dialect, which he had never bothered to study. That was a mistake. Wan felt a chill. You didn't get more than one when taking on Karlo Peronida.

"What?" he said.

"I don't understand all of it. Apparently, the *Zhu-i* is a prophetic event, but Marte says it's only a metaphor, the idea of many rivers joining. She has no idea what's going on. I didn't know about this." Susannah's habitual expression of calm disdain shifted into one of bemusement. "I think we've just found out why the Hirrel agreed to our alliance, though. Are you going to send the Spagyra over?"

Wan was about to reply when Jale turned to him.

"Sé Wan, we're detecting a surge in the shuntlines. It looks like Palace is about to bring their Map fully online and restore the hyperMap. They'll be able to call for help."

"It'll take at least a week for the other worlds to put together a reprisal fleet. By that time,

it'll all be over."

"Sé Peronida, long-range telemetry reports that Karlo's main fleet is on its way. They have some kind of improved propulsion. They're traveling at better than ten times our best velocity. They will join the forces on Orbital in days."

"But what about the g forces? What are they using for fuel?" Wan had hoped his improved inertia cancelers would give him the edge, if it came to a fight. Now, it looked like the odds were back to even.

"Unknown."

Damn it. Karlo had kept this secret from him. What else had he kept hidden? A new weapon? Old military tech?

"Sé Wan, the Hirrel are holding station. They are not moving to meet the fleet."

"Sé Peronida, Pero's forces have reached the ecliptic," said Ket in his gravelly voice. "Should we send seekers at them before they drop their mines, or try to disable Nimue and just take the losses from Pero's forces?"

They all looked to him. Ten years of preparation had brought them to this point of treason and possibility. All their plans might depend on this one decision. Damn Nimue. How could anyone have predicted that the Cyberguild would get the AI back online in a few days after the thing had been dead for years? Wan's cybe experts had all assured him that such a thing was impossible.

Wan closed his eyes. So, are you going to fold, boy, just like your father would expect? Wan opened his eyes, forced himself to smile and speak casually.

"Nimue is the real threat. I have contingencies for Pero. Send the seekers at Orbital." After a moment of thought, he turned to Susannah. "Tell Leni to take the Spagyra over to the Minu. The Hirrel will come."

Vida had always loved to run, to feel the wind in her hair and the world moving fast around her. She'd pretend to be a shuntjammer and take imaginary journeys to every world of the Pinch and to the places she read about in Aleen's history flatplates and dreamed of from her beloved holo-novels.

Molos had surprisingly good wind, and if his leg hadn't been crippled, he probably could have kept up with her. But as it was, they had to stop too often so that he could massage the muscles in his crippled leg and take Geriose for the pain.

Eventually, however, they found the corridor Vida was looking for. It turned out to be the only one with working lights. The meta room was here. Unfortunately, it had guards, two Leps standing at the entrance holding persepes.

Vida pulled Molos close to her and they crouched out of sight around a corner.

"We have to get in there," whispered Vida. "Any ideas?"

Molos's crest lifted.

"I could offer a dance-challenge."

There was a disturbance at the other end of the corridor and voices approached. One of them spoke mostly in Gen. It was Zir. Vida and Molos pressed close to the wall and listened carefully.

"—yes, I know," said Zir, irritation plain in her voice. "Dukayn was bound to discover that we were here eventually. Fortunately, Riva prepared for this. Send the *siis* neuters to them."

A Lep said something to Zir in Lepir, and there was no mistaking the fear in his voice. Vida wished she could ask Molos to translate, but they didn't dare make a sound.

"No, I'll tell Riva myself about the L'var." Zir was afraid, too. "Where is Tura?"

Someone answered the question and Vida clenched her teeth. By God, if she got out of this alive, she was going to spend the next six months studying Lepir. Vida glanced at Molos. His crest was low.

Suddenly there were shouts and the distinctive sizzle of weaponry. Vida snuck a glance around the corner. A dozen Leps, including the guards, were facing off against a massive group of gray-suited human security people. Zir had pulled out a pendant of some sort and was running toward the entrance to the meta room. Vida rose to a crouch. The noise of the pitched battle would cover her. She turned to Molos, fixing the Lep with her gaze.

"You heard them say where Tura is?" she whispered. He nodded. She smiled at him. This might be the last time she ever saw him. "Rico is alive, Molos."

She looked back at Zir and the moment she started to step through the entrance to the meta room, Vida dashed from cover and leapt after her, arming her hand weapon. She had a momentary glimpse of Zir's eyes widening into twin black moons. What Vida hadn't realized was that the entrance was actually an autogate.

It felt like electrocution. She fell through the autogate like a sack of stone and lay on the ground, unable to move as Zir approached.

"Kill her now, Pa Riva Zir." It was the voice of Riva, filling the air like thunder. "She is not wearing her force belt."

The transport gate felt like having a million insects crawling over your skin. After weeks in the Palace swamp, Jevon knew that feeling too well.

She looked around, blinking her eyes. She was standing in total darkness. She smelled smoke in the air, but nothing else.

"Where the hell are we?"

"I do not know, Jevon," said Nju.

"The remote said this *mertir* was in the undercity, near Deeplock. But I thought there'd be light."

A large callused hand reached out to close around her wrist. Jevon yelped and jumped back.

"It is only I, Jevon."

"Oh." There was a sudden burst of odor, like a dozen roses crushed at once. "Uh-oh. I think the saccules came with us."

"Yes," said Nju, irritation in his tone, "I can smell them. Follow me. I believe I detect a draft of air this way."

Jevon stumbled along behind Nju for a bit. Then, remembering Dukayn's lessons, she closed her eyes and let her body move. The body is always in darkness, Dukayn said. It is only the mind that learns to think with its eyes. Before long, Jevon was no longer stumbling and she began to feel a sense of familiarity. Nju sensed the change and released her wrist.

"You move with extraordinary quietness, Jevon."

"Shh. Let me think."

But it wasn't thinking she needed to do, nor even listening. She raised her hand up to her eye level, though, of course, she couldn't see it. She turned her hand so the palm faced her and held it motionless in front of her eyes. Control. Follow the lines of the palm, the force of the soul moves through every turn. Balance. Bring the force to the center of the palm. Peace. She brought her palm to her heart. She stood that way for a long minute. Then one of the saccules made a noise of concern and patted her rump. She spun, knelt, and put her palm

unerringly where the saccule's heart must be. Peace. The saccule must have smelled a change in her scent, because it let loose its own odor of kaaleni. Jevon stood up and took a deep, centering breath.

"All right. I know where to go. Follow me."

She removed the stained and tattered boots that had served her so well in the swamp and let her bare feet conform to the stone of the floor. Don't resist the stone. Eyes tightly closed, she let her feet follow each twist and break in the earth, as if reading the rock. Dukayn had often made her strip and walk to Deeplock in just this fashion. Her feet remembered the way. Eyes deceive. The body never forgets.

Nju and the saccules trailed after. She heard them behind her, but didn't let the sound distract her. Keep moving. Don't bury the memories of Deeplock. Live them. Let the path bring you back.

It took several shakes for Nju to make Jevon stop. Her eyes flew open and she saw that they were in Deeplock One and there was light here. Nju had stopped them well short of the entrance. Jevon saw no guards, but that didn't mean much. Dukayn would have this approach monitored.

She realized that she still had her hand pressed to her heart. She let it fall away. Nju faced her. Her two saccule attendants came, too. Then Nju did a strange thing. He brought his fingers together in the rough shape of an eye.

She'd seen that gesture before, but couldn't remember where.

"Well done, Jevon. Dukayn is an evil man, but he did teach your body correct movement."

Jevon crossed her arms and looked away. Yeah, Dukayn had certainly taught her body well. She closed her eyes briefly and remembered what Nju had told her. She couldn't lose her temper now, or let her balance waver.

"All right. That's the entrance to Deeplock True and there are a hell of a lot of traps in there."

"Describe them for me, then—"

Just then, a group of two dozen sapients, mostly human and Leps, came bursting through the Deeplock auto-gate. Jevon had time to notice only that they were all wearing colored ribbons tied to their waists, when a familiar stocky figure with iron-gray hair came into view.

"Garis!" Without thinking, she dashed out to meet him.

He saw her and the look of pure happiness and love erased every thought from her head. Jevon's saccules ran with her and one of them, moving slightly ahead of her, tripped the first of Dukayn's nervedicer mines. The saccule stopped, gave out one short high-pitched scream, and collapsed to the ground, letting out a burst of death-stink. Jevon froze. Nju caught up to them and Jevon threw out her arms to stop him and the other saccule.

"No one move!" she shouted.

Everyone in the room went stock-still. She looked down at the dead saccule and blinked back sudden tears. No time for that. All these traps would be armed and on their time sequence now. She had to think fast if she was going to save their lives.

"Okay, there's a master kill switch inside Deeplock True, but there's no time for any of us to reach it but me."

One of the Leps, a little one who wore a comical variety of mismatched clothes, spoke up.

"Well, Sé Jevon, it looks like the rescuee is going to have to do all the work."

Jevon smiled automatically. A few others laughed.

"Don't worry, you'll have plenty to do in about six minutes. Dukayn's security people will be here with a lot of weapons. I should have the traps out here shut off by then." Jevon turned

to Nju. "It'll be up to you to protect these people. I'm counting on you." Nju's oddly angled features writhed into a very unusual expression. It looked like the Garang was trying to imitate a human smile.

"Have no fear for us. This is what a Japat lives for."

"Dukayn always arms these traps after he goes in." She looked intensely at Nju. "He's in there, probably with the prisoners."

"You will face him."

Jevon's whole body shivered. Just the thought of Dukayn, of his eyes, his terrible hands, made her want to vomit. She turned to face Garis. He spread his hands when their eyes met and then, slowly, brought one hand close to his heart. He mouthed the words "I love you." She matched him, then she turned to look closely at the seemingly featureless floor between her and the entrance to Deeplock True. She took a deep breath and began to run, letting her memory teach her reflexes when to jump and twist.

Behind her, she heard the sounds of fighting and the powerboom of an angry saccule. But she couldn't turn to look, couldn't pause or even think until she'd made it to the door.

A moment later she punched in the code and rushed through. She slammed her palm against the master kill switch. She had five minutes to hit the next one. With shaking hands, she donned the iso-suit and mouth filter, then stepped through the double doors into absolute darkness. One of her now booted feet found the edge of the bridge across the chasm.

"Hello, Jevon." Dukayn's voice floated to her from the other side of the room. "You are moving well today. I believe you are ready to be my wife."

The closer he came to the Map, the faster Rico moved. It was still entirely black. Where were they going? There was no Mappoint anywhere. Where—

The Gate plunged them *through* the Map and beneath it, to another world, under the Map. They flew through a place of swirling color, a medium that felt like the inside of a meta. Rico felt as if he could do anything, make anything, go anywhere. What is this place?

Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to be inside the substrate, inside blueglass? Is this rimmy or what, cuz?

Rico remembered the first time he'd ever walked the Map. Hadn't there been a moment, just before he'd entered transition space, when he'd sensed this? Arno had laughed at him when he'd told him what he felt. But now . . . this was real Mapwalking. This was the place every cybe dreamed of, the pure realm of potential, the place where you didn't need metas.

Too soon, they passed through this level to another pitch of blackness. The sensation reminded him of the moment when Nimue had left him. This place was empty, useless. But the Gate carried them on, farther and farther, until, in the distance, a speck of red grew visible. They hurtled toward it and the Gate sang in his veins again, a helpless song of longing.

There, suspended in the abyss, was a crimson AI lattice. But not the subtle helix of Nimue. This one was a mutation, a deformed amalgam of shapes welded together into a deformed pillar of red, like a candle left out in the sun. It was a topological monstrosity, an abortion. The Gate halted, unable to go farther. A moment later, from all directions, above, below, at every compass point, white columns of fire glittered and approached. Candles. Too many to count. It was time to absolute. But Rico hesitated. Here, at the moment of ultimate decision, he was afraid. Was there really a God who would take up his tiny spark of a soul and weave a star from it? Or was this the end of him? Of everything?

The candles were getting closer. The Gate was so cold in his bones that ice would have seemed like fire. There was no avenue of escape. But escape had never been his intention. Rico searched deep for courage, and thought of Vida. I loved you, he thought. Oh, God, please let my death mean something.

"Rico-total-absolute."

Zir aimed a weapon at Vida's head.

"Zir, Riva isn't a Lep," said Vida. Zir paused, her crest rippling. "Did you know that Tura's plague is killing Leps, too?"

"Liar!" shouted Zir.

"Kill the L'var, my faithful daughter. Don't listen to her lies."

But Zir hesitated. In that hesitation Vida guessed volumes. She still couldn't move a muscle, but she could speak and she did, words tumbling one after the other.

"Riva isn't even a sapient. It's a piece of a damaged AI that's gone insane."

"Lies!" Riva screeched. "Lies!"

Zir brought the weapon closer. But her hand was trembling. Yes. The Lep must have known, or at least guessed.

"Zir, I can prove it."

'Tyi'kk'it' di-yo viiri'a'aki't! Kill her! Kill her, damn you!"

The Lep wavered. Her crest went flat and her eyes black. She was going to do it. "Calios!" Vida yelled. "At your service, Veelivar."

The revenant appeared in one of the Mapstations, replacing a bloody icon of a Riva meta. Zir spun up and fired at the sound of the revenant's voice. Vida used that moment to make her biggest gamble, a pure guess based on a wisp of a hunch.

"My name is Vida L'var. I am a recognized priority deen. I am ready to begin my repair function."

Light exploded in her head.

Damo tried to adjust the shape of the room several times to regain contact with Nimue, but though he refined the touchpoint to exquisite sensitivity Nimue wouldn't talk to him. Rico was gone, too. The cybes Barra had promised him hadn't come yet. But they wouldn't be able to help with this anyway.

There was a whisper of something, though. Someone was trying to communicate with him, but not Rico or Nimue. Damo couldn't think what shape would make the voice louder and anyway, if he made too many changes to the structures in the room, he wouldn't be able to talk to Nimue again, ever. But he definitely wanted to hear the new voice better. He wished Barra were here. He had never known anyone who understood blueglass like she did.

The voice sounded so sad, but hopeful. It echoed with lots of extra meanings under and over the words, like Rico and Nimue. Maybe it wanted to talk to Nimue? That was one of the things it wanted. Damo rubbed his chin and frowned. That might be possible, but he'd have to ruin the touchpoint. Barra might not like that. He remembered again how she had called him a cybermaster. The memory filled him with joy. He was guilded! Maybe Father would be proud of him. A cybermaster. Well, if he was a master, didn't that mean he could work on things if he wanted to, if he thought it was good for the Map? He had a feeling that the voice was a good thing, no, a *necessary* thing.

The whispers were fading, probably because Nimue had transferred so much of her attention to the satellites of the Spine, so the resonance in this touchroom was losing coherence, becoming too attenuated.

Damo gathered up all his tools and set to work on the lattice he'd created around the touchpoint. He didn't know exactly what the new shape should be, but there were transition topologies he could use to find the proper configuration. He just had to keep all the dimensions straight in his head and rotate the axis so he could see all the facets. The hard

part would be doing it fast enough and in the right order. If Nimue broke this connection before the mysterious voice made contact, then the whole room would have been ruined for nothing. But Barra wouldn't hit him for that. She'd be disappointed in him, though. And Damo understood, suddenly, that such a thing would hurt him worse than any of Father's blows. But it just made him more determined to succeed. He was a cybermaster and masters never gave up.

But it was much harder than he expected. As he worked, he began to get the feeling that he was moving too slow. The whispering voice was slightly clearer, but no closer to talking to Nimue. Nimue was forgetting about this connection. She was too excited about being a defense AI again. She was forgetting Rico and Damo. There wasn't enough time. AIs moved too fast when they were thinking about their jobs. He was going to fail. Damo flinched, but no one was going to hit him this time for failing. Barra had been so proud. She was counting on him. Damo clenched his teeth and decided to skip the transitions and make a guess about the right shape.

* * *

"Rico-total-absolute!" Nothing happened.

"Rico-total-absolute!" he repeated, a third time.

Still nothing. The suicide meta should work anywhere, anytime. Every cybe made one their first day on the Map. It was the most important lesson of their careers. The Map is more important than any one sapient's life. The Gate was silent in him, as if his blood had ceased to flow.

The image of an ancient Lep appeared before Rico. The candles were far away, paused in their attack. Riva was holding them back. But they would be here in moments, once she released them.

"Foolish," she whispered, cold and sibilant. "A meta requires substrate and a difference of potential, the first lesson every cybe learns. But you came very close. You did well, for a human."

Riva let out a surprised howl, and suddenly Calios appeared, hands on his hips.

He wore a blue cybe work gown with the L'var sigil and the Jons family crest. His hair flowed free over his shoulders and his black skin glowed with joy and life. He was grinning like a child who's found the chocolate.

"Ah, the coward comes out of hiding at last," said Riva. "The *zei* and the *giu* are mine, after all these years. Welcome home, child."

The revenant looked around, completely at ease. "So this is where you've been chuffing, Riva. Gotta say, your lattice is looking mighty loath. Hi, Rico."

Another Mapbody appeared. It was Vida, down to the red hair and green eyes. Rico stared at her. She stared back.

"Vida?"

Her lips quirked up in that half grin he knew so well. "Hey there, handsome. Come here often?" But she turned serious immediately. "Calios, I'm ready to start the repair, but I don't know what to do."

Rico felt the heat of the coming candles, though they were still a long ways off. But they would be here soon, in seconds.

The black-skinned youth bowed to Vida. His eyes had changed into twin pits of golden wisdom. There was sadness and love in there.

"Well met, Veelivar."

"Tell me what to do now, Calios. How do I repair Riva?"

"That's up to you and Rico. I'm just the gatherer. My time is done." Calios sighed and

reached out his hands to both of them. Rico and Vida automatically clasped his dark cold hands. Rico felt the Gate come alive again, its song burning through him, as if an explosion of light were traveling through his veins. "I had a rimmy time, no lie. Good-bye, Veelivar."

Calios transformed into a braided rope of silver between them, a shifting Mobius that merged into their hands, building a bridge between them. Rico gasped as he realized that he and Vida were now directly linked and *their thoughts mingled*

The leader of the armored Leps was killed instantly as he rushed into the arch of the medwing autogate. The others paused outside in confusion. After a few minutes of silence, Samante heard them concentrate their weapons on the autogate. Could it withstand the attack? The autogate was set inside the wall of blueglass. But who knew what kind of weapons Riva's Leps had? She looked around at the hundred or so techs and Lifegivers. They were all looking to her as if she were the only answer to their questions. She led them as far from the door as they could go and everyone huddled in a rough circle.

"I think," she said, "now might be a good time to pray."

Dan Motta reached out to grasp the hand of a Lep on one side and a saccule on the other. They all joined hands. Samante closed her eyes, wincing with every explosion and sizzle of weapons fire.

"We're going to die," someone whispered.

Samante squeezed the hands holding her own. People were crying, praying, swearing. She could think of nothing to do or say.

"Does anyone know any songs?" asked Dan Motta.

"I know a song," said Samante. The people huddled in a corner of the medwing fell silent. All eyes turned to her. Pero used to love to hear her sing.

"Go ahead," said Motta gently. She cleared her throat. For you, Pero, wherever you are.

"Tiaiai uani i zhuris ..."

At the sound of Dukayn's voice, Jevon's knees turned to water. The metal of the bridge beneath the supple material of her iso-suit felt slick and narrow.

"Dukayn ..." Her voice trickled from her throat like water. She couldn't move, couldn't think. Oh, God. You coward. But she inched back from the edge of the bridge. "Please don't hurt me."

"Do you remember our first time together? I didn't know then how much I would come to care for you, Jevon. But I was drawn; I knew I had to mark you. It was only when I felt you climax that I knew that you were meant for me. You liked the blood in your mouth. Don't deny it."

Jevon dropped to her knees, arms shaking with rage and shame. She hated him so much.

"I can hear you breathe, my love. I know that rhythm so well. Come share it with our children in Deeplock True. I've missed you."

"No."

"I've been gentle with you, Jevon, but there are other ways. Don't force me to use them."

"Please." Jevon heard the fear in her own voice. How had she ever imagined that she could defy him? "Please, Master."

"You are mine, Jevon, body and soul. I love you. I know you don't love me, yet. But you will. For now, all you need to do is obey. Just obey me and I will cherish you. Our love requires pain, but trust me, I'll use it well. I know how to please you."

Jevon's stomach twisted and she hunched over with dry heaves. She felt filthy, small, and weak.

"I'm the only man who will ever touch you again. You have been marked by a Japat. What human would want you?"

Jevon looked up into the darkness. No. Another man had touched her, had held her gently. Garis. Jevon felt again those strong arms pressing her to his chest, the kisses as soft as a feather over her flesh. He had let her feel his own fear and shame, too, had trusted her heart. That was the love she wanted, not Dukayn's. She stood up. She still trembled, but kept thinking of Garis, who thought she was beautiful and brave. And Nju, who believed in her courage. And Thiralo, who had told her that God would not fail to see her, no matter how black the darkness.

She remembered what Nju told her about Dukayn, about the Japat Way. She couldn't remember the Garang words, but she remembered what they meant. That would have to do.

"Sé Dukayn, I reject you. You are not a complete man. You have failed the test of the bridge. You are not a Japat."

There was dead silence.

"Ah, you've been talking to Nju-tok. But you don't understand what you're saying. I am Japat. Nju has spent too many years without drinking blood. Do you know that he has never found a mate? Nju is not a complete man."

But wasn't there a hint of uncertainty there? Yes, she thought there was. Jevon climbed up on the bridge and started across, legs shaking, almost cramping. Garis.

"There can be only Garang on this bridge. I am Garang. You made me Garang."

The words echoed strong in the darkness. Jevon stepped forward without the slightest waver in her balance. All those years hating anything that wasn't human, and now here she was claiming the alien, embracing it. Almost, she felt like laughing. Dukayn had found her weakness and made her think it defined her. She had hated herself, found someone to punish her. But that wasn't who she was anymore. Garis loved her. Nju respected her. Thiralo cared. She didn't have to be the small, hateful thing she saw in the mirror.

"I am Garang," she said. "What are you, Dukayn?"

She heard him move forward, because he wanted her to. Her heart skipped a beat and she wobbled, but then she thought of Garis and Nju again and her balance returned.

"I've killed more men and women than you can imagine, girl. I fought ten Japat on the bridge and defeated them all. I walked for a year alone and never spoke. I gave my heart-oath—" His voice trembled with emotion and broke. "How dare you question me. You're going to suffer, Jevon. I love you. But you have to suffer now."

"You made me Garang, Dukayn, but you're not Japat. A Japat doesn't torture. A Japat doesn't lie. A Japat doesn't hurt his mate for pleasure." Jevon thought about what Dukayn had said and took a gamble. "You've broken your heart-oath, haven't you, Dukayn? I am Garang, Dukayn. You are nothing. I am *huyiu*, but I reject you. There can be only Garang on this bridge, not faithless ni-Japat."

"No," said Dukayn. "I ... I had to lie to him."

He was moving more slowly now toward the middle of the bridge. Jevon kept approaching, not daring to pause.

"I am Garang, Dukayn. I choose my own mate. He must be Japat. You are not Japat. Only Garang may be on this bridge."

She walked forward, always forward.

"No. I am Japat. I am a complete man. I ... the force of the soul moves through every turn . . . I—"

Jevon was within a few feet of him now. She could hear his harsh breathing, almost feel the heat of his body. He could kill her easily now. He would kill her.

"I am Garang," she said softly. Dukayn made a low, strangled noise and inched backward on the bridge. "Only Garang may be on this—"

She heard Dukayn stumble, then fall from the bridge.

"Sé Wan, Nimue has frozen the Nomadia and Pero's fleet," said Ket.

The command staff of *Ket's Ribbon* was small, just nine people, and none of them showed a hint of fear or regret. Wan felt such pride in them.

"Can she stop us?"

"No." That was Yola at tac. She had an odd accent, Varani maybe. Funny the things you noticed in battle. "We're already inside the arc of the Spine. But Karlo's fleet is laying mines and they outnumber us two to one."

"It's a good thing you put those slave engines in the other ships," said Purser Jale. She gave her stone-rattle laugh. "About half your captains have tried to defect since Karlo's fleet left Palace orbit."

The slave engines were a little trick that Wan had picked up from Karlo, actually. He had learned a lot from his father. Know your enemy. He will teach you how to kill him. Words of wisdom from a savage pretending to be a First Citizen.

"When will our seekers hit Orbital?"

"One hour fifteen minutes," said Yolo.

"Has Pero sent any interceptors?"

"Yes, Se, but not enough. At least a dozen will strike Pero's command and control center."

"Good. Give me the tactable."

The tactical holotable displayed a double sphere of ships between Wan's forces and Palace. This was a simplified simulation, of course, but Wan recognized his father's favorite formation. It was an obvious opening position, flexible and tactically fluid.

They were badly outnumbered and Karlo's ships had obviously been improved in ways that it made Wan nervous to contemplate. On the other hand, he didn't have to face Pero's half of the fleet and his ships had their own useful modifications. He'd hoped to avoid a battle, but that was no longer possible. He'd wanted to see Karlo's face before he killed him, but that, too, was a lost hope. Now, it was a death struggle and he intended to win.

"Put a red marker on the flagship."

One of the ships in the armada glowed crimson. Wan stared at it, a little surprised by the white-hot fury that seized him. You'll never hit anyone again. Dukayn would be in there, too, praying for the chance to lick a little of his master's blood from his palm. He hoped the two of them knew that Wan was their adversary.

He leaned back in the command chair.

"Send the detonation codes." His palms were damp, but he didn't dare wipe them and reveal his fear.

If those codes didn't work, then they were all dead. Wan believed himself to be a good tactician, but he was no match for Karlo, especially with greater numbers and loyal officers.

Wan clasped his hands in his lap and wished Leni were at his side, but it was better that he was safely with the Minu. Leni's pilot had orders to keep him with the Nomadia, no matter what. Wan had always planned that, though he hadn't told Leni. He hoped it wouldn't matter.

Minutes crept by. Battles in space were often like this, slow-motion hell, ruled by the physics of mass, fuel, inertia, and time. There was no such thing as an instant reaction.

"Sé Wan!" said Jale. "What?"

"The Nomadia has launched a shuttle to Orbital."

Wan frowned.

"What's the telemetry?"

"It's the Minu's personal shuttle. It'll arrive a few minutes ahead of the hellbomb seekers."

Wan felt the breath disappear from his lungs. What the hell was the Minu up to? Was Leni on that shuttle? Too late now. Too late. Oh, damn. He had to put his fear away, bury it, as he had infinite times when Karlo started swinging his fists. He had to focus, play the part of the warrior, as he had played a drunk for all those years. Leni, oh, no. Killing Karlo and Dukayn would mean nothing if Leni wasn't alive to share the triumph.

"The codes should be received in four more minutes," said Yolo, her voice squeaking a little with excitement. Wan wasn't the only one with nerves at a fever pitch. The minutes crept by, no one immune from sneaking looks at the flatclock on Ket's captain's chair.

At the fourth minute, the holotable flared briefly and half of Karlo's fleet vanished from the simulation in a second. The red dot of the flagship remained. Wan felt a peculiar mixture of disappointment and relief. It wasn't over yet. But they had just won a major victory.

Susannah came to Wan's chair. As always, she acted nonchalant, but he saw the beads of sweat on her brow and lip. Their treason was no longer an idea. At least two hundred people had died in those soundless explosions and many more would die before they were done. Without the Nomadia to back up Wan's forces, the battle was too even. Karlo would never surrender now, and his officers would follow him into hell and beyond.

"Will we fight ship to ship?"

Wan shook his head. "Doubt it. Karlo will stay back and lay a new spread of mines with different det codes. By now, he'll have realized that the Nomadia is frozen, that Nimue is back online. If I were him, I'd send ships into the microhunt for help and try to avoid a direct fight, try to whittle our forces down to a balance. He'll probably develop a staggered attack formation to test us. He'll keep hunting for our fracture point. And he'll find it. Karlo is a genius at knowing the point of weakness. He knows he can beat us in a fair fight."

Ket swiveled his seat to face Wan.

"Well, Peronida?" the gravel-voiced man demanded. "How do you plan to deal with him?"

Wan smiled grimly. "I don't plan to fight fair."

i/we see now. it's like a skeleton of broken bones, but the bones twist through time, (iloveyou imissyou ineedyou) do you hear the gi? weeping, (iloveyou)

the bones must be reset, we have to reshape the lattice but not only physically, we have to sculpt a soul.

how?

candles coming, hurry, hurry.

riva is trying to cut away the zei. move away, too many threads, too many . . .

what can we do? meta? won't work, break the lattice, how? (iloveyou) hurryhurryhurry

join the lattice! like calios? YES! merge, (makelove) become . . .

candles almost here! Hurryhurryhurryhurryhurry

Aleen looked out the massive window of her bedroom in The Close. She hadn't slept for twenty-two hours, but the nightmares and worries drove sleep away. The Boulain of the Pleasure Sect was so filled with sapients that Aleen couldn't see the street beneath them and still more people were flowing in. Aleen had ordered the festival rockets sent up and people from as far away as the Motta farms would see them and come, she hoped.

The Colossi sprayed every entrant with a chemical mixture. Aleen had seen hundreds of people with the first and second stages of what was being called "Tura's Death" go into remission. Quarantine Sect was the only hope for survival for the citizens of Palace. By the hysterical tales of the refugees, it sounded as if only one in ten had survived the first stage of the plague, before they realized that the saccules were the vectors. Aleen sighed. People were slaughtering the neuters out there in the Sects. Only Aleen's quick thinking and trained Protectors had managed to save the few thousand neuters of Pleasure Sect from death at the hands of the refugees, despite the obvious fact that they couldn't possibly be carrying the plague.

Irina and Porro were establishing quickfabs along the Straight. She saw lightpoles going up. The crowds were still in shock there, milling around, but soon they would begin to panic from the overcrowding. There had been no rain all day, but there would be. And how would they deal with the sporefall? Makeshift mouth filters maybe. A hundred more logistical problems waited to be solved, and any one of them might lead to a crisis.

The Pleasure Sect had a theoretical capacity of one hundred thousand sapients. According to Tia's calculations, they would pass that limit by morning. How could they feed all these people? The Colossi were letting no one back out.

What if the Map remained dead? If there was any one thing that might give all those refugees hope, it was a functional Map. Hivel was working desperately on that. If anyone could bring the Map back, she'd bet on him. She wished he were here now, though. All these lives depended on her decisions.

As Aleen gazed down below, a riot started on the Boulain, just outside The Close. A pair of Protectors went down under a howling mob. Another wedge of Protectors were doing their best to hold their position; they would never reach those two men in time to save them. There was nothing she could do but watch. Her hands clenched into fists. This must be what it had been like during the Schism Wars.

"Aleen?"

"Yes, Tia?" Aleen didn't turn around. "We've filled all the rooms in The Close ..."

"Except this one."

Tia knew very well how desperately Aleen guarded the privacy of this one space. All those years of selling her body to strangers and the money and power had become less important to her than simply owning a space of her own where no one dared enter. It was privacy she craved, to have one place where she could be free.

"No one expects—"

"Bring them in. There are plenty of blankets in the storeroom."

"Aleen?"

There was a different tone in Tia's voice, one that Aleen understood too well.

"They're saying that the plague hit first in Government House."

"I know, Tia." Aleen rubbed at her eye, ashamed of the tears. "See if you can find our emergency supplies of coma gas. Maybe a few canisters will calm those fools down."

"Yes, Aleen," said Tia.

"And, Tia, make sure that our saccules are safe."

"I will." The other woman left. Vida, this is the end of an age. I pray that you live through

it.

Karlo climbed out of his slingchair and down to the command level of his flagship.

He nodded and smiled as he walked the perimeter of his flagship's control room. He paused frequently to put a scarred hand on some man's shoulder at ops, or to massage the shoulder of a woman at tac. He said nothing, nor did any of these men or women speak a word to him. He simply made contact with the fifty souls in their slingchairs. When he was done, he climbed back up the slender ladder to his own slingchair in the center of the sphere, suspended from the whip arm of an arcline. He belted himself back in. The tactical holodisplay glowed crimson in the blue in the center of the room. He didn't need to see it to know precisely what the location and movement were of all Wan's forces. Karlo settled into his seat and every muscle relaxed. He was calm. He was at peace. The fire that had raged in his blood all his life was banked for the moment.

"My friends," he said. "We face a clever enemy, but not an experienced one. He has some courage, a fair understanding of tactics, an excellent grasp of strategy, and a formidable force. On the other hand." He paused to sip water. He knew these people as well as he knew himself. He could smell their eagerness. But like a spirited vavr, they must be reined and directed. "On the other hand, his ships are clearly operating with slave engines, which indicates a shallow capacity for independent reaction on multiple fronts, and a lack of flexibility. Also, such an arrangement inevitably creates certain formations around the mastership that inevitably offer many opportunities for feints, threats, and pressure. These military intersections are well understood and very difficult to counter.

"We will, therefore, not attack *Ket's Ribbon*, but aggressively fail to do so."

"They'll still be forced to defend against the potential," said Wintershoal, who was sitting in Dukayn's vice-command chair.

"Yes. *Ket's Ribbon* will die, but we must choose our moment well. Their commander knows my thought. He will not attempt to defend against false strikes. But he will respond to the absence of threat." Karlo donned his commset and his gentle smile faded to nothing. "He will flinch."

The fleet moved forward.

Rico passed through a moment of sublime connection with Vida into darkness. Then she was gone, ripped from him like skin from his face. Now he hung alone—stripped of Calios, the Gate, and Vida—trapped in a hellish Map-space.

The world was filled with cascaders, hundreds, thousands, and all of them diseased at their core. Their icons were ugly, some were cancerous spheres, others irregular balls of vomitous tissue, or snowflakes as if drawn by a diseased madman. Some kind of heat, like an ancient fever, beat against him in waves. From the core of a cascader that looked like a burst heart swam a familiar figure, cloaked in blood. Arno.

Vida cried out in horror and pain as Rico, Calios, and the Gate were torn from her like fingernails from her hand. (*ilove—*) Darkness.

She stood on the Boulain, naked and shivering from the cold. The Festival of Calios had come again, but this time it was a dark night carnival under a perfectly clear star-filled sky. The crowds wore clothes from some ancient Rim play and there were sapients out there from races she had seen only in history books. Vida snuck looks at the stars. She'd seen them this clearly only a few times, except in holos and flatplates.

Children rode on their parents' backs. Jugglers and dancers entertained, while fireworks and bubbleflares burst all around. Music played. Everything was so detailed and clear, etched into the world around her. The smells of frying *dus* and mulled *kiviu* mixed with sweat, perfume, and the ever-present musty odor of Palace itself. A multitude of voices filled the air, whispers, shouts, laughter. She was wearing an old pink wrap shirt, fluffy trousers of wool, and her favorite walking sandals. A small part of her wondered if she was dreaming, or living this

moment. Her memory was so powerfully vivid. There were always times when she wondered what was real and what was remembered.

It was the Festival of Calios, every sound, smell, and touch. A glad time. But as she paid closer attention to the details of this nightmare, the awful truth became clear.

The children's screams were not for joy. When Vida could see their faces, there was only naked terror. The jugglers whirled the heads of saccules through their arcs and the dancers moved with broken limbs. The music was simultaneously melodious and jangling, the players consumed by some scale of tones from a febrile mind.

It was like her nightmare as she lay in the medwing after the Lep attack, but worse. Those were only dreams clothed with childhood traumas. These were the hideous images born out of a crazed mind. Out of Riva's mind?

A bubbleflare burst near her with a crack like the snapping of a bone. An eye tumbled out of the air and rolled to her feet. She stared at it, unable to turn away. She knew that torn and bleeding eye, that serene hazel eye.

"Romero," she murmured and her stomach clenched.

She whirled away to vomit into the grass. The bile burned her throat and filled her nostrils. What kind of dream was this? She and Rico had plunged into the heart of the Riva matrix. How could they be in a place so ach-ingly *real*?

A young Lifegiver paused to smile at her. His face was gray and his eyes completely white. His mouth opened and instead of teeth Vida saw maggots filling his throat, squirming inside him. Her stomach twisted again, but this time she mastered her reaction. It was Lennos, the innocent young Lifegiver who had died because of her.

"Blessings upon you, child," he said, and every word spit maggots out of his mouth. They wriggled in the air between them and burst like bubbleflares, coughing out a familiar smell. And now, finally, she knew that smell. It was Roha's perfume, the one he soaked his handkerchiefs with. But it was laced now with the musk of a saccule. It had always smelled like that, but she'd never realized it, until now.

Lennos snatched up her hand in a grip, clammy and cruel, and thrust something into her palm. He snarled at her, bringing his mouth, dripping maggots and blood, close to her face. "Blessings for the festival. In the name of Riva." Lennos vanished before her eyes.

Vida looked down at her palm. In her hand, a small heart, dark with blood, lay beating. As if it were made of the most delicate ice, it melted in her palm. Viscous blood dripped between her fingers to the ground. The smell was overpowering.

"Vida!" shouted a guttural voice.

A Lifegiver wearing Lennos's robes was looking at her from within the obsidian darkness of a hood. The shoulders were huge lumps, the hips flared. The figure pushed back the hood to reveal the features of Vi-Kata, the Outcast. But the assassin's eyes were no longer that of a living creature. The sockets were filled with a deep red light.

"Vida." She heard a terrible caress in that voice. "Welcome home." She turned and ran.

Molos had heard the Leps say where Tura was, but that wasn't the same as finding her. He didn't have Vida's remarkable sense of direction or memory. Even with the portable map and his hand light, he got lost several times in corridors that all looked and smelled the same to him. Also, his lame leg was afire with pain and not even the Geriose eased it.

With all that, his heart was light. Rico was alive! Vida couldn't possibly have known how those three words would change everything for him. Vi-Kata, Nalet, had killed hundreds of sapients during his life. Molos had never killed anyone. He believed that only with clean hands would he be welcome by God and, maybe, God would listen to him speak for Nalet, for his lost brother who had only wanted to belong.

Molos blinked and looked around. Apparently, traveling the corridors in a state of distraction was good for his sense of direction. He could see the tracks laid in the floor that the map said

led to an old mine deep in the earth. But they also led to the Testing Room, where Tura must be.

He followed the tracks. The walls of these corridors were different, smoother, and there were niches where devices had once been. He paused to look closely at one of these niches and found that many of them had extremely small holes for fiber conduits. At a guess, he'd say that the conduits probably led to one of the fusion generators below the twin towers. So, the mystery of how Riva maintained power down here all these years was solved. The Colonizers had made the undercity a parallel world. Or, rather, the aboveground city had been built on old bones.

After a long descent into a cold and damp section of the corridor, Molos found the door to the Testing Room. Carved in the lintel were glyphs, a parody of the sort of thing Lep families put above the doors to their homes. True Leps etched proud Moments. Riva had carved the story of her love of genocide. Molos read it all, though it took a long time and stretched back many years. The conclusion had been burned in the lintel mere hours ago. When he touched the letters, they were still warm beneath his scales. The end of the story was the end of everything. Riva meant to kill every sapient being in the Pinch.

Molos used his blackbox to open the lock on the door. He pushed it open and entered the Testing Room. All the lights were on and he saw the thousands of glasteel cages that filled the cavern. And he saw their occupants.

"Eye of God," he murmured, his claws made digging motions.

"I'yik't aak'k't siik, Molos," said a dry voice, speaking in Old Lepir. A wizened female Lep tottered into sight. She leaned on a warped cane. No. It was the thigh, bone of a Garang.

"Ziyya' taiai dio-diais, Tura," replied Molos. "May we speak in Gen, my wife?"

The image of Arno was naked and kneeling. His face was not yet destroyed by the knives of Vi-Kata, but a few cuts had been made. His hand was twisted and the bones of his fingers shattered. There were bruises around his throat, wrists, and ankles. He looked up at something and raised one hand, palm out in a futile gesture of defense. The hand was crushed and blood oozed from the fracture points. Rico watched, silent and horrified, as the torture of

Arno continued without hesitation, until his cousin was reduced to a shuddering ball of broken flesh. Yet, his face was not yet ripped. He was still alive. He flinched at something, but slowly unfolded his body and knelt again until he was staring directly into Rico's eyes.

"My name is Arno Jons y Perres and this is my . . . my will." It was Arno's voice, all right, and this time Rico didn't think it was Riva in disguise. He sounded like he hadn't slept in days and his words were slurred as if his tongue and mouth hurt to form words.

"No," Rico whispered. "No. I don't want to see this." But he didn't look away as Arno spoke.

"I acknowledge Riva as my master. I ask for the death of a thousand cuts. I beg for this honorable death, though I don't deserve it."

Rico's throat closed and his hands clenched into fists.

"I am filth. I have eaten my own shit and drunk my own piss. I am . . ." He collapsed.

Another image of Arno appeared, clearly a later one. There were many more cuts on his face and bones broken there. His hair had been torn from his skull in clumps. His hands looked like they'd been scrambled in a meat grinder.

"m 'arbuchzh, ahh." An invisible blow was struck. Arno reappeared, more terribly marked. It was like seeing a time lapse vid of a nightmare. Arno spoke with infinite slowness and care, though obviously every word had to be formed around broken teeth and a torn tongue. "I'm garbage. Deserve t' die. Sorry for crimes. Sorry. Love Riva. Love Riva . . ."

He repeated this several times and wandered through a long litany of his crimes, the Lep children he had personally massacred, the evils that he had visited on the Ty Onar Lep. It

went on and on, periodically interrupted by Arno's fainting, then reappearance with still more terrible wounds. Rico was weeping, sobs wracking him. A tiny part of his mind wondered at the fact that his Mapbody was now capable of so much physical activity, but the greatest part of him only grieved and watched, unable to turn away.

The confession and torture continued, until Arno muttered one last mumble and collapsed for the final time. There were no more images of him after that. The shapeless lump of blood and bone lay motionless before Rico for a long time. Rico nodded at the corpse of his dead cousin. He thought about that last mumbled phrase and a grim smile touched his lips.

"I'm surprised you found that so amusing, at the end."

Riva materialized before him, this time in the guise of Calios. But Rico was too attuned to the pieces of Calioastro's mindcore lattice. She couldn't fool him with disguises anymore.

"Vi-Kata never knew you were just a sick AI. I wonder what he would have thought of that?" asked Rico.

Riva showed no reaction to Rico's penetration of the Calios disguise.

"The assassin was a gullible fool. It is so easy to convince others to kill. All they ever want is a good excuse."

"Why? What's the purpose for all this? Do you just hate humans?"

"Rico, Rico. Apparently, you didn't use your moment of *qizei* with Vida very efficiently. Didn't she tell you about the plague? I don't just hate humans. Didn't Vida tell you about Tura?"

"No." But she had, of course. Rico just needed time to study those cascaders behind Riva, time to think of a plan.

"Strangely enough, I don't believe you. You wouldn't be stalling, by any chance? Hoping for a miracle?" Rico met the other's gaze directly and shrugged.

"Well, yeah, now that you mention it."

The false Calios laughed, loud and long.

"Honesty. I suppose even I can be surprised by a human occasionally. All right, I'll tell you my motivations, if you'll tell me what Arno's last words meant. I could tell they meant something to you."

So. Maybe that whole horror show was only intended to satisfy this one bit of idle curiosity.

"He said, 'The Map moves.' "

"Ah. And this means?"

"It's kind of hard to explain. Tell me your story while I think it over."

"Fair enough." Riva dropped the Calios disguise and transformed into a saccule, so old that the veins of its sac were purple and its body was gray and mottled. "Do you remember that garbage base where Arno found the audio feed of Vi-Kata accepting the order to kill himself and Vida?"

Rico frowned and thought back. It was so long ago, but yeah, it was coming back to him. There had been a whole lot of saccule data from the time of the Colonizers, census data and the like. He and Hi had worked on it, but the main question had always been, who put the audio information there for them to find?

"Yeah, I do remember that. *You* didn't put the audio there, did you?"

"Of course not. Get a grip. Why would I sabotage my own plans? No, the *zei* did it. It was a clever bit of misdirection that fooled you all too well. All along, Calios has helped you, guided you, but always hoping that he could stay free. That clue in the garbage base was a

masterstroke. He must have been very annoyed that none of you ever worked it out. Well, Arno was close. Didn't you ever wonder why I wanted him killed?"

"I guess." Rico studied the cascaders and every passing moment made him more and more sure that there was no way he could defuse them.

"Rico, I'm not going to indulge your subterfuge if you're going to be inattentive."

"Sorry," he said automatically. An unwilling smile crept to his lips.

"You're polite, not abysmally stupid, and honest. I could almost like you."

"Something I've been wondering for a long time, were you the one who turned Nimue back on, just before the Mapcrash?"

"Unfortunately, yes. A small miscalculation there. I didn't think she'd bother talking to you. She was never very interested in anything but defense and as I recall, she thought cybes were useless, an opinion shared by most AIs, incidentally."

"Oh."

"In the Rim, you would barely be considered competent to use the Map. You so-called sapients of the Pinch are savages compared to your betters on the other end of the macroshunt. They had morals and lived by them."

"Right. You were telling me about the saccule data."

"Hmph. Be that way." It was strange hearing Arno's voice coming from the saccule's mouth. Very strange. For the first time, it occurred to Rico that Riva often used Arno and his voice. Maybe the AI had liked him, too. "It was not the audio feed of the assassination contract that was of real importance. It was the saccule data."

Rico blinked, completely focused on Riva.

"But why? It was just Colonizer census stuff."

"Ah, Rico. You should have studied the data more carefully. You would have discovered a very interesting statistical anomaly. Before the Colonizers came, there *were* no saccule neuters. The truth was there in the data, plain for even the dimmest cybe to see, if he had bothered to give saccules a second thought."

"What? But that's impossible. The saccules are native to Palace."

"The *gendered* saccules are native. But where did the *neuters* come from, eh?"

Rico sat in stunned silence for a long time.

"Are you saying ... do you mean that the Colonizers made the neuters?"

"Rim-kick, cuz," said Riva, voice turning bitter with old fury. "They came to research. They built their hidden stations in the swamp, drilled their undercity, and studied the natives. They brought AIs to help, because when a race is on the cusp of sapience, an AI always came to guide them to civilization."

"Calioistro," whispered Rico.

"Yes. I was to be their guide. After the study was done, I would stay behind, watch over the saccules, and someday, perhaps thousands of years in their future, perhaps even in the month of Timber of this very year, I would have spoken to them for the first time."

"But the macroshunt closed."

"And the researchers became Colonizers. With the Rim forever out of reach, the infrastructure critically damaged, and the swamp a hostile environment, they wanted slave labor.

"What could be done? Enslaving sapients was a terrible crime in the Rim. Someone had a vision. I could tell you her name, but it would mean nothing. Her family, however, you know."

"L'var," said Rico. "Because they couldn't leave an AI aware of their crime."

"The closing of the macroshunt created a neutrino shock wave that damaged all the AIs in the Pinch, including Calioostro. But they would all have recovered eventually, as long as the Coordinator functioned. Unless a L'var entered the lattice room unshielded."

"Calioostro fragmented."

"A schism of the Lifegivers agreed to use their genetic skills to create a mutation in the swamps that would not be too obvious to the other races who had settled with humans in the Pinch."

Rico buried his head in his hands. Two thousand years of slavery and the deliberate stunting of the potential of an entire race of beings, not to mention the wanton destruction of the AI assigned to help and guide them.

"I understand," he said.

"You know, I believe you think you do," said the saccule, its face split into a ferocious grin. The cascaders all began to unfold simultaneously. "And now, your end of the bargain."

Rico looked on a world filled with countless metas about to fulfill a terrible destiny. A single one of these things had nearly killed him before.

"Arno and I always thought that the Map was more than just a tool, substrate and Mappoints, icons and metas. It was an idea about cooperation and hope. That's what it means. You never give up, because there's always a chance that things will change, even the Map."

"Well, that was disappointing," said Riva, "although typically human, I suppose."

In the midst of the cascaders, a helix appeared, golden and beautiful. The voice of Nimue called to him.

"FRIEND."

Vida was in the longtube again, but this time it was far larger and longer and none of the striplights worked. The vers she remembered were here and their squeals were so numerous and loud that she had to cover her ears. They were ahead of her. Behind her, the shape of Vi-Kata blocked the hole, though the diameter was fifty feet or more.

She ran, her sandals slapping against the tube until she found herself in the midst of the vers, hundreds of them, thousands. The biting vermin squirmed in drifts up to her calves. She imagined her legs from shins to toes stripped of flesh, but still she ran. The exit of the longtube retreated, shrank to a single point of light, and Vi-Kata came closer, closer. Rico! Calios! She stood motionless, the vers climbing up her legs, thighs, biting, drawing blood. I need you! Oh, God, save me. But they were gone, taken from her.

A figure appeared before her, a tall woman with one red eye and a stern and forbidding aspect.

"Aleen! Mother?"

In the next instant, she was gone.

But the sight of Aleen brought her back to herself. I'm the daughter of Aleen Raal, and we don't quit. Vida's panic broke. She remembered the canister of protec she'd brought with her into the longtube that other time. She undipped it from her belt and sprayed it on the vers until her feet were clear again. Then she turned and ran and now she ran as she had as a child. I'm a shuntjammer, Tia! Watch me, watch me! I'm faster than anything. She outran the closing longtube, bursting through the exit and swinging up to a roof park, all in one fearless motion. Watch me, Tia!

Light stung her eyes. She blinked and shaded her eyes. She was in the East Tower roof park of Government House on a day without overcast. The twin towers thrust into a cloudless

sky, matching violet with deeper violet. She was alone. Vi-Kata hadn't followed her here.

She saw right away that this roof park was very different from hers. The plants were sparser, mostly native species out of flower. There were no benches. The airhopper pad didn't exist.

There was something else, too, a feeling that she'd moved into a memory instead of a thought, that this place was not yet a danger to her.

She walked to a railing and looked out on Center Sect. The Sect was gone. The multitude of spires, flailtowns, everything was gone. No wiretrains or airhoppers. The city extended a few miles in every direction, but where dozens of Sects were, was only swamp.

Down in the barren area, there were a few burned-out dwells here and there, a small farm and something else so strange that it took her several moments to truly see it. The actual earth of Palace, which had been covered by various kinds of blueglass substrate for thousands of years, showed through. It was brown and gray. There were no people anywhere.

She turned again to look at the majestic spire of the East Tower. There was something different about that, too, but she couldn't quite work it out. But she felt drawn to the towers. Something she needed was in there, an answer. She started through the roof park, but paused when she glimpsed a familiar figure. The old saccule gardener, Whitey, that she'd saved from euthanasia and put to work here. Whitey was pruning something. Vida crouched down to watch. It was a daalenerry, Vida's favorite flower. The sweet scent filled her. The neuter moved with deliberate care, every motion considered and correct. For the saccule, the slow pleasure of gardening was the same as her swift shuntjammer joy. Vida reached out to touch the gardener. It turned around and fixed her with a gaze of blood-red. Its mouth was twisted in a grimace of hate.

"I could have let Vi-Kata have you, but I want you to know, to understand, first." The saccule spoke with Riva's voice, full of resonance and fury.

Vida leapt up and stumbled back. Whitey turned back to the daalenerry and now it was not a flower, but rather Greenie. Whitey scythed the neuter at the knees and, again, Vida heard that powerboom of agony, smelled the reek of death-stink.

"It was your fault. It was always your fault. L'var."

Suddenly the roof park was filled with neuters, or rather many duplicates of Greenie, all carrying little knives.

"Go ahead and run," said Riva.

She turned and ran into the East Tower. Her memory guided her. It didn't matter that nothing looked the same. The shape of the tower hadn't changed. It couldn't change. But something fundamental *was* different. She stopped dead in a hall and stared at the walls. The mural. The intaglio braided art that everyone said had been part of the twin towers from the beginning. It wasn't there. But she remembered it well enough. In her restless travels throughout Government House, she'd seen pretty much every wall in both towers and what she hadn't seen she remembered from the holos that Calios had shown her.

She had to run, escape. She could hear the booms of the saccules not far away. But where could she run *to*? What was the point? Riva controlled this Mapspace. It was stupid to try to outrun her. And there was something about the tower walls that she needed to understand.

Why was that design missing? Why had Riva left it off the walls? And then she saw and heard Vanna's final moments, as clearly and horribly as the moment when they'd occurred..

"Coze ehn wahl." Codes in wall? Was that what she'd been trying to say? Vida closed her eyes and concentrated. The mural had always intrigued her because there was something vaguely familiar about it. The saccules were coming closer, their stink almost a physical presence. She ignored them. The braids of the mural were so long, even her memory found it hard to keep the whole miles-long stretch of them visible in her mind while she randomly played with them spatially.

She bent them, twisted them, rolled them, and stretched them, all while sensing the approach of the saccules. They could kill her. Somehow they could do that here. The mural had a shape it wanted to be, she knew it. Frantically, she tried one after the other, always keeping the whole immense string visually intact. Then, she twined two of the designs and saw that they complemented each other perfectly. In a blink, she understood and finished the merging of the two main mural strands, joining them as she and Rico had been joined, into a helix. A double helix.

Damo made the final cut and the voice disappeared. Had it found Nimue? He had no way of knowing. He sat there for a little while longer, then he put down his tools and stood up. He'd done all he could. There was going to be a battle, he knew. He wanted to be with Barra. Damo reached out and didn't quite brush the touchpoint.

"I hope you found your friend," he murmured. Then he left to be with the woman that he was already starting to think of as Mother.

Just then, Orbital was rocked by an explosion.

Ket's Ribbon performed a dropstop and arc, a trick with the inertia cancelers that Wan had only read about in his tactical manuals and would never have considered actually ordering. The maneuver was all that saved them from the cloaked seeker that hurtled past them at near c. Karlo had undetectable seekers that could travel close to the speed of light. Wan shook with reaction, but he retained enough presence of mind to speak.

"*Diiai a iaz, Marte.*" The Hirrel sang out a warble of pleasure. She was *enjoying* herself. Wan turned to look at a grinning Ket. Did that man have anything but ice in his veins? He had chosen his command staff well. Win or lose, *Ket's Ribbon* would be remembered. "You were right, Ket. She *is* the best damn pilot in the Pinch."

There was a ripple of laughter in the control room, but the tension returned instantly. Karlo was, not to put too fine a point on it, kicking their collective ass and not just because he had brand-new military tech like cloaked hellbombs. Wan had always assumed that Karlo would attack *Ket's Ribbon*. There were all sorts of good reasons to do it strategically, but mostly, he had believed that once his father knew Wan was there, he would immediately come to administer a metaphoric whipping. But Karlo had mastered his temper and chose to nibble at Wan's forces instead, a plan that was inexorably crushing Wan's forces. This was a fine time for the old street fighter to learn how to keep from hitting his son.

"We need a new strategy," he said, a little surprised that his voice was steady. "Karlo isn't going to bite on the slave engines, so the *Ribbon's* special maneuvering capabilities are useless. I want to hear your thoughts."

"We could concentrate everything on the flagship," said Jale. "Without Karlo, we have a better chance. That might be worth the losses."

"I say we unload all our hellbombs at Palace at their highest speed and spread," said Yolo. "That'll force them to shift into full intercept. We could retreat back through the microshunt. Ket knows unmapped shunts we could use to stay free until we're ready for another try."

"Let's back up and join the Nomadia," offered Ket, his gravelly voice sounding as if he were discussing the best way to open a bottle of whiskey. "If we're surrounded by the Hirrel, I doubt Karlo would have the balls to fire on them."

Wan nodded at every suggestion, though he had already considered each one and rejected it mentally for a variety of reasons. He rotated his chair to face Susannah and lifted an eyebrow.

"Challenge," said Susannah softly.

She had been silent since the beginning. Sometime during the battle, she had resigned herself to death; he could see it in the emptiness of her gaze, the icy composure that was now only a mask for defeat. But now, a bit of fire had returned. Wan remembered their first meeting, ten years ago. It was this very expression that caught his eye. He leaned toward

her. "Yes?"

"Karlo will take a personal challenge. He'll find reasons to support it, but he'll take it because he must. He is a Kephalon man. There is no other way for him."

"How?"

Susannah smiled. "In Helane." Wan smiled, too, nodded. "What?" But he already knew.

"Air-ken."

The others all started babbling in confusion, but Wan raised a hand. He was shaking his head and laughing.

"Susannah, Karlo was a fool to let you divorce him." He stepped out of the command chair. "Jale, I'll need an iso-suit and jet packs."

"You're not serious?"

"Oh, yes. Susannah's right. He'll take this challenge and a lot of death will be averted, on both sides. Susannah, I want you to issue the challenge."

She inclined her head graciously.

"What happens if you lose, Peronida?" demanded Ket.

Wan walked up to him and put a hand on the dwarfish captain's massive, muscled shoulder.

"I'm not going to lose. But if the old man gets lucky, then you get everyone out of here to safety."

"Wan," said Yolo. "Karlo was the best street fighter on Kephalon."

"I've been playing air-ken since I was old enough to walk and I was taught correct movement by a sadistic ni-Japat. Karlo has never fought in a weightless environment. I think I've got a better than even chance. His reflexes aren't going to do him a lot of good in space."

"Don't be so sure," said Ket gloomily.

"I agree," said Susannah. "Remember, I saw him fight in his youth. He adapts."

"I'll be careful."

Wan looked around the tiny control room. He finally understood the special love Karlo had always felt for those who fought with him. These strangers had become his family. There were times, pretending to be a drunken fool, that Wan had wondered if Karlo or Dukayn would learn of his treason and kill him before he had a chance to show what he was really capable of. He'd have been remembered then as nothing but an alcoholic waste. Now, whether he lived or died, no one would laugh at his memory.

"What a story this will make for the history holos," he said. "If I don't come back, make me sound good in the lies you tell your children."

"*Zhur, Wand,*" sang Marte.

"We flow," replied Wan.

"We flow," chorused the others.

If only he could have held Leni one more time, told him he loved him. Well, he'd just have to do it when he came back.

Molos hobbled to a bench and slumped there with a sigh. Tura, obviously blind, found her own perch directly across from him. Neither spoke for a long time.

"I'm sorry that I could never give you children," he said.

"Death, all. The saccules are dancing, the great flow ends here."

"Tura, will you tell me how to stop the plague?"

"Puz, i'y'iik'it haio."

"I'm not entirely surprised. I did wonder if you might have an antidote just for the pleasure of refusing it. It was worth a try. I don't suppose you have the Spagyra?"

"Nih, puz." Was there a hint of regret? No.

"I loved you, Tura. Our children would have been grand dancers."

Tura hissed her mad parody of human laughter and her crest lifted. She sang in Old Lepir and Molos's own crest stiffened. It was a lullaby that she had sung for him when they were first married, before the madness.

Molos took out his weapon, armed it, and rested it on his thigh; He waited until she had finished the song.

"May God see you well, my love," he said, and fired.

There were only a dozen people left on Orbital when the tactable warned of coming seekers. Pero studied his holo-sphere. He'd already launched all his interceptors. Nimue had proven unexpectedly useful, but Orbital was doomed. Barra was handling the evacuation. Most of the civilians were already en route to Palace.

One of the interceptors met a seeker and Orbital was buffeted by the shock wave of the explosion. Reports began to flood in of damage everywhere, of casualties. They couldn't take another of those, let alone a direct hit. Pero glanced at the casualty list and saw to his dismay that Barra was one of the dead. She'd died quickly, at least.

His telemetry confirmed that the mastership of Susannah's attack force was *Ket's Ribbon*. But he hadn't needed that information to recognize Wan's style in the formation. His brother was leading this force. He had to give the man credit, he'd fooled everyone, Karlo, Dukayn, Vanna, Pero. But knowing that Wan was the mind in the mastership suggested possible strategies. Would Karlo go for *Ket's Ribbon*? Pero wouldn't. The mastership was an illusion of weakness. He concentrated on the display moving through it, thinking. Yes. If he were Karlo, he'd go for the perimeter, draw the eye outward. Then, at the right moment, the cloaked seeker. Too bad they hadn't been able to make more of them.

"Pero, we should leave," said one of his officers.

Nimue regained power to most of the Spine, but she had no defensive capability for Orbital itself. Those hellbomb seekers from Susannah's fleet would destroy what was left of the AI. And then? The Nomadia outnumbered the entire Palace fleet by at least ten to one.

"Why haven't the Hirrel tried harder to get through?" he wondered aloud.

His command staff, used to his ways, ignored him.

The holodisplay flared briefly, then showed a new configuration. Half of Karlo's fleet was gone. Also, a single small craft detached from the Hirrel Nomadia and moved at near c for Orbital. Was it a weapon, a hellbomb disguised as a shuttle, or the representative of peace?

Suddenly Damo came running into the hangar. Pero's mouth dropped open. He'd assumed his brother was evacuated with all the rest of the noncombatants. But he caught his reflex in time and kept his face impassive. He would never forget the look on Barra's face when Damo flinched away from his eldest brother. Nothing in his life had ever made him feel so ashamed.

"Pero, the shuttle is within range of our weapons. Should we fire."

"No!" yelled Damo. He clutched at his brother's arm. "No, Sé Pero. Nimue's friends are coming. You have to let them land."

Pero studied his youngest brother. Barra had found the key to opening up his heart and mind. Clearly, there were wonders there. But he couldn't afford to make a decision based on sentiment.

"Are you sure, Damo?"

"Yes, Se."

Pero straightened and looked around. Less than a score of people met his gaze, but they were all men and women who had been through the fire with him. They'd support any decision made. He thought of Barra, who had shown such respect for his strange, fragile brother. Pero had learned from his father at an early age that every great general has a moment like this. What would Karlo do? Pero smiled a little. The old man would damn all logic and go with his gut. He nodded to himself.

"Let the shuttle land," said Pero.

Damo's shoulders slumped in relief and he let out a big sigh. If asked, Pero couldn't have entirely explained why he didn't do the obvious thing and blow the shuttle away. "Sing, or do not sing." It felt like the right decision.

The shuttle landed not long after and a single sapient came out. It was a skeletal figure wearing a featureless black helmet covering its entire head. Pero had seen holos of this person. It was the Minu, the master of the Hirrel Nomadia.

"Welcome to Orbital," said Pero.

"We are well met at the moment of *Zhu-i*."

"Uh, hello."

The Minu shifted its gaze to rest on Damo.

"I know that voice. You are the one who opened the door to Nimue."

Damo blushed and moved a little back behind Pero, suddenly tongue-tied.

"Yes, he is," said Pero.

The minu brought its hands together to form the rough shape of an eye. "We flow."

The Minu stepped up to Pero and extended a hand, a gesture it had obviously learned from study. Pero took the hand and shook it. The Minu pumped the hand three precise times, then released it.

"I have the *Brektzhu*. May I bring it to Nimue?"

Pero hesitated for a fraction of a second, sensing the held breath of every man and woman in his command staff. Give the commander of the Nomadia access to their best line of defense? Madness.

"Sé Damo will take you there," said Pero.

Damo looked up at Pero. Was there any hope that his eyes would ever lose that broken caution? Pero hoped so. Because now that Barra was gone, Damo was going to need him more than ever before.

With Pero in tow, Damo led the Minu to the room containing the mindcore lattice. The two humans donned iso-suits, but the Minu didn't bother. It entered the room and removed a blueglass crystal from a black pouch. The Minu touched the immense protective cylinder around the lattice and it dissolved away, like blue smoke, revealing the heartbreakingly fragile crystalline lattice within.

The Minu stood before the lattice for a short time, then reached forward and slid the *Brektzhu* into a gap in the lattice.

"Yeah," murmured Damo. "That's a better shape." The lattice flared and suddenly it became a column of whirling golden light. The Minu bowed. "*Zhu-i*," said the Minu.

A golden helix floated in the great hollow core of the East Tower. Vida heard it singing to

her. The sacculles were near. Vida climbed to the railing, bent her knees, and leapt into space in a long exhilarating dive that ended in the helix. There was a thunderous moment of light—

Rico didn't hesitate, but flew to the Nimue helix, grinning at the music. The cascaders fell away, unable to approach the AI lattice. He flew into the core of golden light. There was a deafening chorus of sound—

i/we are joined again (neverweren't).

here is the map of Caliostro, the double helix, (iloveyou)

*it's an icon running a soulmeta . . . it's so beautiful, let me shape it for you. (iloveyou)
the qiu is the soul the qi are the thoughts the zei binds the L 'var is the map the cybe is the
tool the Minu brings memory all rivers flow*

*look at the qi, they're like rivers of light flowing together and the qui is the love and the zei
binds the other AIs are all awaking, my love, do you hear them?*

*here they come . . . oh, oh, here they are blue-redgreengold musicmusicmusicmusic
rivers flowing together (iloveyou) many rivers become one river . . . (zhu-i) WE FLOW*

Zir stared around a room where the red metas had transformed into gold. It was impossible.

"Pa Sar Zir?" said a voice much like Riva's, but calmer, warmer.

"No."

"Riva is gone, Zir. You know. You understand."

"No." It couldn't be. "Grandmother Riva?"

"I'm sorry, child. There was never a Riva, only madness wearing many faces."

Zir spun and saw the L'var girl lying motionless on the floor. Was she dead? She aimed her weapon at her.

"No, Zir."

The voice still held some hint of Riva, enough to make Zir pause. She lowered her head.

"Was that true, about the plague?" she whispered. "Yes, child."

"Tura made the plague to kill Leps, too?"

"Yes, Zir." Zir nodded.

"Good and faithful daughter," she murmured.

After a moment, she took off her amber pendant and necklace and let it slip from her hands to Vida's chest. She dropped her weapon, too.

"Wait, child. There is hope—"

"I'vi'Ri," said Zir. Her crest lifted. Vi-Kata, my love. Are you there?

She stepped into the autogate and died instantly.

The Map opened its eyes and light returned to the world. Every sapient with an implant in the Pinch heard the same thing: *ZHU-I*. A new AI was born.

Nimue-zhu disabled every hellbomb in the Palace system in the same moment that the seekers arrived at Orbital. She reached out her thought through the hyperMap and turned off

the hellbombs in every other planetary system, too.

* * *

Karlo and his son floated hundreds of feet apart, both wore bright yellow lights around their waists. Wan spread his hands. One fist closed around a curved knife. Karlo spread his hands, too. They were empty. He had always fought his battles bare-handed. That was all the ritual a Kephalon man needed before beginning the business of killing.

It was a strange fight, whirling around in the bowl of night like specks of dust. How many people ever saw the stars like this? Karlo realized immediately that Wan possessed the superior skill in movement and depth perception. There was no point in Karlo trying to outmaneuver him, or prepare his own attack. His only hope was a hand-to-hand grapple.

An hour crept by as Wan ceaselessly circled, feinted, and dodged, tirelessly prodding for a moment of weakness or inattention, so he could thrust in with that knife, cut the iso-suit. Meanwhile, Karlo did nothing but flow with every movement, sometimes matching Wan, but usually offering apparent vulnerabilities, pretending to overreact, then instantly correcting. Wan was never fooled. It was turning out to be a good fight. This could go on forever, except that both of them had limited amounts of fuel for their suit jets.

Wan fired all his jets at once, hurtling directly at Karlo. A dozen previous times, Karlo had met the threat the same way, retreat and a sudden vector change. This time, he hung motionless until Wan was completely committed. Then, he fired his own jets and attacked. Wan tucked into a ball and his suit jets blew him to a different angle. But Karlo had guessed the move and gambled all on Wan firing down and to the left. Since he was a child, Wan always flinched down and to the left. But Wan spun, anticipating his father's blow.

Karlo felt an explosion in his head as his implant came to life.

ZHU-I

Both men were stunned. One recovered first. The knife flashed. A suit was torn.

The Map had returned. As his faceplate filled with blood, Wan grimaced. "Would've beaten you, if—"

But he died before finishing the thought.

Karlo floated beside the corpse of his son and heir. "Yeah," he said. "You might've at that. It was a good fight—He used the knife to cut his own iso-suit, too.

The lights all came on in Deeplock True and Jevon spent what seemed an eternity simply standing there and looking at those cages. Then she went forward, unlocking doors, using the codes that only she and Dukayn knew. She paused when she reached the chamber where a scale polisher had been tortured. Inside, a man still lived. He hugged her when he was released.

Last, she found a cage with a human woman in it, a woman who had suffered more than any other sapient in Deeplock True. She lay motionless in a corner of the cell. Jevon recognized her immediately.

"Sister? Sister Romero?"

There was no movement. The Leps who could still move and speak were gathered behind her. She heard them muttering, full of worry and love for this woman. These Leps, who had suffered so terribly, still had a place for love in them.

"Sister?"

The ragged figure shifted slightly toward them. "God Sees," she murmured.

The Leps carried her in their arms out of Deeplock True. Jevon preceded them, guided them. When they came to the bridge, she looked down, but saw no trace of Dukayn. Had the mines destroyed him? They must have.

At the entrance, Falik and his forces were waiting, but much reduced. Falik himself bore terrible wounds.

"We won," said Falik. But there was no triumph in his voice. "But we lost so many."

Jevon felt a clutch at her heart, but then Garis came to her and wrapped her in his arms. Joy and relief filled her heart. For a moment there, she'd been certain that he was dead. Jevon smiled as she saw the surviving saccule attendant waddle up to her, carrying his spear in one hand and some food in another. She gave the saccule a quick hug.

"What about Thiralo?"

"He will live," said Falik.

Jevon felt something cold loosen in her heart. She had been so sure that Thiralo would be lost. "Where's Nju?" she asked.

The Lep holy man met Jevon's gaze directly. "I'm so sorry, Jevon. Nju was killed. Dukayn came out of Deep-lock. He had a force belt, but turned it off to fight Nju. Nju hurt him very badly. He would have killed him, I think, but Dukayn activated his force belt at the last moment and killed the Japat instead. Perhaps the shame of such a cowardly act made Dukayn leave. Or he had other more important business. In any case, the Garang saved us all."

Jevon remembered how Nju had been so calm and accepting about the approach of Thiralo's death. But she couldn't do the same. Tears snaked down her cheeks. She held Garis close for what seemed a long time.

"Nju would want his body taken home to his mothers and sister." Jevon looked up into the eyes of Garis. "Will you go with me, to the Garang homeworld?"

"Anywhere," said Garis.

"But first, I have to see if my mother and Ben are all right."

"I'll go with you."

All the lights in the undercity came on suddenly. The Map had been reborn.

"This is Tarick Avon reporting for Pansect Media.

"The Medguild reports that the antidote to Tura's plague provided by the Colossi of Quarantine Sect is proving ninety-five percent effective. Casualties in all the Sects are extremely high, but there have been no further deaths this week

"According to the office of the Interim First Citizen, all infected saccule neuters have been found and where possible, inoculated.

"Accurate figures are not yet available, but the Bio-guild estimates that one hundred and nineteen thousand sapients died in the crash, and virtually all of the neuters in the city of Palace are gone.

"A special funeral service will be held this week presided over jointly by Sister Romero and Pa Nor Falik, who Romero has appointed acting cardinal, until the Pope can meet with his advisers to select a successor to the late Roha d'Tele-Tres.

"The Cyberguild requests that sapients wishing to speak to Zhu-i queue their requests to their local cyber-master, until parallel operation voicepoints have been constructed. Guildmaster Jons will speak to Palace on all channels later this week to answer questions regarding the Pinch's new AI. Sé Jons will also speak at a special memorial service for Sé Barra Jons today. That service will be broadcast on all channels.

"Stay tuned for more breaking news on the station that tells you more."

The services were long over and the mourners gone. No sound disturbed the night, save for

the patter of a light rain on the leaves of the speartrees and the cheerful warble of a jadewing. Two figures—one tall, the other much shorter— crouched near the gate lock and, a moment later, passed through.

Memorial pillars in countless sizes and styles filled the cemetery, composed of everything from leaded glass to tri-stil. Some of them were needle thin and reached up dozens of feet into the air, groping toward the home of all souls, the mystery of space. Others were squat and thick, like the stumps of trees. All were inscribed with names, dates, and the long chain of heredity that ruled the lives of the men and women whose cremated remains were stored within.

One pillar, made of blueglass, glowed a soft blue in the twilight. The two intruders came to the blue pillar. It was a simple cylinder, a few feet high, nothing fancy. The taller figure reached out a hand to touch the surface. The glow limned the man's hand like a glove of fire. He just stood there for a full minute, so that he seemed another sculpture in the garden of death. Finally, he lowered his hand and spoke.

"Goodbye, Mom," said Rico. Tears of regret, of anger, were locked inside. Maybe one day he'd be able to let them flow. For now, there was only bitterness and loss like an endless hunger. Had her soul been reborn as a star? As a child, he'd believed in the transformation with all his heart. And now? Well, he was no longer a child.

He turned to the boy beside him, touched his shoulder. The boy didn't react. "Do you want to record something, Damo, while it's still blue?"

The boy said nothing. He hadn't spoken since returning from Orbital. The media speculated about him constantly, the fabulous prodigy who had helped bring *Zhu-i* into existence. Damo was on a fast track to master in the Cyberguild, now that Hivel Jons was sponsoring him. A lot of people thought he was likely to be the guildmaster one day. Rico wasn't so sure. Damo seemed too remote from the world. But maybe that was only the shock of Barra's death.

"She cared for you, Damo."

He glanced up at Rico and blinked, as if only then realizing that he wasn't alone. Then he stepped forward and leaned close to the blueglass pillar. Rico saw his lips move, but didn't hear the words. The boy stroked the blueglass in a way that reminded Rico achingly of his mother.

The two stood there together, silently, for a long time, until the light rain grew heavier and the blue glow faded to an echo of starlight. Then they left, moving through the forest of memory like troubled thoughts.

Aleen found Vida on the roof park, as she'd expected. Her daughter's red hair was bound up with a green ribbon. Pa Nor Falik had started a bit of a fashion trend, it seemed. "Vida?"

The girl turned from a tree she was pruning. Her eyes were red. She rubbed her eyes and blew her nose.

"Hi. I guess I look pretty awful."

Aleen perched on a nearby bench.

"It doesn't matter what you look like anymore. Your career as an ornament is over."

Vida smiled, but the smile faded and something in her eyes went away.

"In the holonovels, everything works out for the heroine at the end." She leaned against the tree.

"You've done a lot, Vida. I don't understand why you promoted your factor to patron, but she seems to be doing a splendid job. All your friends from The Close are here in Government House, guilded, and adopted as L'vars. They've let us out, Vida. No matter what else you've accomplished, freeing us from Pleasure Sect is something to be proud of forever."

"Do you really think they'll close the place down, stop enforcing the genetic purity laws?" Vida asked.

Aleen shrugged. "Probably not. It was gratitude for your heroism."

"And for the way you saved so many by making Pleasure a refuge," added Vida. "But they'll forget. They made exceptions for Karlo, too, once upon a time. But you notice he never did get the office of First Citizen made hereditary. People on Palace like things to stay the same."

"Well, in any case, now that I'm here in Government House, you can bet I'll work to keep Pleasure open for good. I have a few friends, you know."

Vida smiled.

"If this stupid planet has any sense, they'll make you the new First Citizen."

"You've done wonders to help the refugees and the families of all the people who died."

"I guess I can't stop thinking about the ones who died. Jak, who was always so loyal, so brave. We couldn't even find his body. Cardinal Roha might have been a bad man in a lot of ways, but he was always a good friend to me. Greenie, who saved my life. Even Vanna deserves to be mourned; she died thinking of Palace, instead of revenge. And so many more, TeeKay, Barra ..."

"You can't bring them back by brooding about them. Try to remember them well, instead."

"It's hard not to brood. I feel so empty now, like half of my soul is dead."

"Rico?"

"He won't answer any of my letters," she whispered. Aleen picked a blade of grass and twirled it in her hands.

"Hi tells me that there's no hope Rico will ever walk the Map again. The sever destroyed that part of his brain.

He's lucky to be alive. *Zhu-i* merged him back with his body, but the brain was too badly damaged to be repaired."

Vida looked at her mother.

"He's still taking the drugs, though." It wasn't a question, but Aleen nodded anyway. "Where is he, Mother? Please tell me. He was living with that cybe Pukosu for a while, but now not even *Zhu-i* knows where he is and she's been searching everywhere. Sister Romero keeps telling me not to give up, but how can I keep trying if he's always running away? And everyone helps him hide, or does anything he wants them to. I think there isn't a cybe in the Pinch who wouldn't die for him."

That morning, Aleen and Hi had woken in the same bed. He'd asked her to sign his contract again and she refused, as she did every morning and would for every morning to come, until something changed. But what was she waiting for, really? For her mind to catch up to her heart, or the other way around? Pero and Samante had signed a contract within hours of his return to Palace, no second-guessing, no worries, and nobody gave that marriage six months. Nobody but Vida, who believed the two of them would be together forever. For once in her life, maybe she should just accept a romantic notion. She hated to break a promise to Hi, but she had a hunch he might not mind.

"He's at Gate Six, Vida, Interstellar Sect. He's been accepted by the Interstellar Guild. His shuntjammer is leaving in a few minutes. He's disowned his family and resigned his guild. He's running away. Hivel yelled at him for two hours and got nowhere. Just between you and me, though, Hivel tore up his resignation papers. Why don't you go and tell him?"

Vida put down her pruning shears and just stood there with an expression of such loss and emptiness that Aleen felt her own eyes burn with tears.

"He doesn't want me, Mother. He's made that pretty clear. I won't go running to him now, like some lovestruck moron. I won't be humiliated. I'm a chief patron, for God's sake."

"Maybe he'll come back." But Aleen had never been the sort of woman who knew how to tell a comforting lie.

Vida turned away and crossed her arms at her chest.

"Please ... I'd like to be alone."

Aleen stood up and reached a tentative hand toward her daughter, touched her shoulder. Vida rested her cheek against the hand.

"Thank you, Mother. I guess you were right all along. Love is for fools."

"No, Vida. I was wrong. The kind of love you and Rico have, well, it's rare and not foolish."

"He doesn't want me."

"Show some spirit, girl. When a man acts like an ass, you tell him. Don't just hide away and mope." Vida gave a small chuckle. "I'll think about it."

"Hell, Vida, if I were your age, I'd put on some sensible clothes, pack a carryall, and sign on to that jammer myself."

Vida laughed. "You'd be running the ship in a week."

"Go to him, Vida."

She shook her head, picked up her shears, and set back to work. An old white saccule shuffled up to help and the two worked silently together, like partners in a dance.

Aleen left the roof park, but there was a fire in her eyes and if Hivel had seen it, he would've known to stand clear. A number of other people were not so wise and suffered for it in the next few minutes.

Molos watched as the workers tried to smooth away the damage done by the squadron of Leps who had attempted to break into the medwing and kill Rico. They'd obliterated the intaglio mural, doubtlessly on Riva's orders, to destroy that crucial key. According to Samante, that bit of typical Riva thoroughness had saved the lives of everyone in the medwing, including Rico, by delaying their advance up the West Tower.

They replaced the ruined art with tri-stil plaques, each one inscribed with the names of sapientia who died during the crash and as victims of Tura's plague. There were thousands. Each name was the death of a dream, the end of someone's story. He felt a need to be here, to witness and pray.

There were one or two saccule neuters helping, but they weren't collared and no one spoke a harsh word to them. With the revelations about the Colonizers, the saccule sapientia movement was gaining a lot of steam. Whether they were declared sapient or not, though, Tura's plague had destroyed almost all the neuters in the Sects and Falik had forbidden the buying of more. The world had changed. Many had died, but at least one bright hope had been born.

"Molos!"

He spun to face Aleen Raal, who looked mad enough to spit.

"Aleen?"

She poked a finger at his chest and he backed up a step, favoring his bad leg.

"Hivel has tried endlessly and failed. He made me promise to stay out of it, but I won't let my daughter lose her love."

"You are referring to Rico?"

"You owe that boy, Molos. We all owe him, the entire Pinch. Vida couldn't make the new helix by herself. Yet now he's slinking off alone into space like a damned martyr. You're the only person I know with a more developed martyr complex. What are you going to do about Rico?"

Molos briefly considered a number of replies and most of them led to him missing most of his crest and a few teeth.

"I'm going to convince him to stay?"

"Good answer. He's at Gate Six. I've already had Tia delay his shuntjammer as long as she can. The Interstellar Sect is sovereign territory, or I'd go down there and arrest the little fool myself and slap a little sense into him."

Molos opened his mouth to say something, then changed his mind. He had a vision of himself under arrest. That red cybereye looked mighty baleful.

"I'll be going now."

Aleen nodded.

Molos shuffled down through the West Tower and spent all his cash to hire an aircab. The journey to Gate Six was a sobering one. The crash, plague, and riots had devastated much of Center Sect. It would be many years before it recovered. But *Zhu-i* was already at work with the other AIs to regrow the blueglass. The new Map was going to be something pretty spectacular.

The old Lep hobbled as fast as he could to Gate Six and there he saw a crowd of sapients wearing Interstellar white in a shouting match with a gray-suited man. Off to the side, one gaunt young man wearing a white robe that hung on him like a shroud sat on a carryall with his head in his hands.

"Sé Rico?"

The man looked up and his eyes were so empty and dark that Molos had a sudden memory of Tura.

"Only Rico now, Sé Molos." His voice rasped. He shook, as if shivering in a cold wind.

Molos settled down next to him.

"I have seen cybes going through withdrawal. When was the last time you used the drugs, Rico?"

He grinned shakily. "Week, two? Don't know."

"I'm glad you stopped. They were killing you."

"Well. I got to thinking about Arno again, how he died with everyone thinking he was an addict ..." Rico met Molos's gaze and the lie dribbled away. "The truth? They didn't do any good. I can't even sense the Map, no matter what I use. And they didn't kill all the rest of my feelings, like I hoped. In fact, they made me think and feel too much. Arno always said that the drugs give you everything but hope. He was right, as usual."

"You were ready to the for the Map, but you're not willing to live without it? Is that it?"

"What am I, without the Map? After *Zhu-i* merged me and I woke up in the medwing, I went to see Juqa, Tomas, and Sygel. They couldn't stop telling me how wonderful I was. Rico Hernanes the cybe who helped bring a new AI into the world. Pukosu practically begged me to take her on as a patron-track. Everyone thought I'd be back on the Map, that I'd be running the Cyberguild. Everybody. But now, they all look at me like I'm a cripple—"

Molos's crest lifted slightly and he dropped a scaly hand to his twisted leg. Rico blushed. "I'm sorry, Molos, I didn't mean—"

"Have you spoken to Sister Romero?"

"No."

The Itinerant had come out of Deeplock as close to death as any human being could be, but she lived. Blind, horribly maimed, but alive. And the Leps of Deeplock True told stories about her, how she had defied Dukayn and never broke, deflected his hatred from the Leps to

her, prayed with them beyond madness. The Leps called her Grandmother Romero. And the humans called her a saint. The Pope left Retreat for the first time in a century to come and nurse her with his own hands. Rico knew that she'd asked for him, but he couldn't imagine ever approaching a woman of such courage, when he was just a useless coward. Rico couldn't help but remember when they found the bones of Roha in his secret room on the bed beside a saccule he had killed. So many people had committed suicide in those terrible days. But not Romero. She had clung to the light of her God.

"Hivel loves you. And do you think Barra would have allowed you to disown your family if she had lived?"

Rico lowered his head and rubbed his brow with one hand. Molos noticed the symbol tattooed on the back of his hand, a double helix.

"Heya, Jons!" yelled a gravelly voice. "We've got the clearance. You ready to jam?"

Rico nodded. He stood up, offered his hand to Molos who clasped it in both his own.

"I promised myself that I'd say something to you, Sé Molos, if I ever got the chance. I guess this is it. The thing is, well, I'm sorry." Molos cocked his head in puzzlement. A ghost of Rico's old grin touched his lips. "I thought you were Riva for a little while. I even thought you tried to kill me."

"I might have thought the same, if I'd been severed as you were. Please don't give it another thought, my boy. If I can't convince you to stay, then may you fare well. I will work all the rest of my life to find a way to bring the Map back to you, Rico, I promise. I only wish—"

"YOU!"

Both men spun around to see a tall, red-haired woman wearing a silver wrap shirt, tough linen pants, and old scuffed boots come striding toward them. She was carrying a bag that could be the twin of Rico's.

"Vida," said Rico in a tiny voice.

Vida marched up to him. They were almost the same height, but Vida practically thrummed with righteous fury. She poked him in the middle of his chest.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Um."

"Shut up. You promised that you'd never leave me, no matter what. If you were unguilded, I was going to be your guild. And you were going to be my shuntjammer. Remember that?"

"Well, I—"

"Shut up. I don't care if you're a cybe, or a gardener, or a scale polisher, or a bubbleflare salesman. You and I belong together and how dare you go and leave me . . ." Vida's voice broke, but she didn't cry. "We were there, in the center of everything, Rico. There were no secrets. It was love and . . . music. No cybe is ever going to do that again. No sapients will ever do it again. We helped an AI be born. Maybe we can't have children, maybe we'll just be roaming jammers, but we can love each other and we can see the Pinch together, like you promised."

Rico just stood there, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

"I was a cybe, Vida. Now, I don't know who or what I am. You've always known who you were. Are you sure you want to be with me?"

Vida looked at him, hard, then pulled him to her and they kissed, for a long time.

"Rico, are we leaving, or what?"

Rico and Vida separated. He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, a huge smile on his face. She looked at him with an expression that made Molos remember his youth.

"Yeah, Ket. I guess so."

Molos still didn't know why the Interim First Citizen had chosen to pardon the crew of *Ket's Ribbon*, although he knew it had something to do with a man named Lenobai who lived now among the Hirrel. There was a story there and someday he might just ferret it out.

Vida grinned, took the pendant from around her neck, and put it around Rico's.

"What's this for?"

"This way I'll always have my Eye on you." He laughed, but she went on, in a more serious tone. "The man who gave this to me was killed by Vi-Kata. His name was Brother Lenos. I want you to remember that, and remember that *you* are alive. Maybe you're not a cybe anymore, but that doesn't mean there's nothing to hope for. Remember what your cousin Arno said—"

"The Map moves."

"Yeah," said Vida. "And we flow."

"We flow," he agreed.

"Where are we going?" asked Vida.

"I don't know."

"I've always wanted to go there," she said. "Come on, you two, the launch window is closing." She kissed him again.

Epilogue

My Dearest Vida,

I am trusting that Samante Dinisa will give you this flatplate and that you will remember that it is the Schism Wars that we never finished discussing.

By the time you read this, I will be dead. I have Tura's plague in second stage. Before it's too late, however, there are three things I must tell you.

First, I must, regretfully, report that the attack on you in Service Sect was arranged by a member of UJU, not Riva, as everyone assumed. Anja le-Yonestilla opposed your People's Factor show and I believe she must have harbored some hatred toward you over your marriage to Wan. I have taken steps to punish her, but I wanted to apologize to you personally for this outrage. Please don't judge the ideas of UJU by the murderous actions of one overzealous fool. I hope someday you will understand the pure elegance of Perfect Separation. I regret that I will not be there to discuss it with you.

Secondly, you must be told that your mother has a genetic defect, though your genotype is clear. I told Karlo of this long ago and he has some plan for hiding the truth so that you and Wan might still have children. Seek him out, when you can. Find out what he planned. Some may call you cull, but I knew your father, Orin, and I know you. If anyone's genes deserve to be passed on, it is yours. I wish you had known Orin. He was wise and kind and brave, much like you, my dear. He was my friend.

Finally, I will tell you a secret that Orin and I shared in our youth. There is a world that wanders through the Pinch, a thing that the Hirrel, who were here before any others, called Wall, or at least that is the translation of their alien word in proper Gen. Perhaps it is only a

legend, or a dream. The Hirrel are often seduced by metaphor. But the knowledge in the Spagyra is said to have come from Wall and it may well hold the secret to repairing your mother's genetic flaw, so you could legally bear children.

Orin and I found a bit of Wall and it was our secret. What it is and what it means, we never knew. Orin and I always dreamed of traveling the Pinch in a shuntjammer on some great quest. I have placed this trace of Wall within the Eye you have worn around your neck so faithfully for so long. I think you will find it interesting.

Good hunting, child.

I regret nothing in my life, except that we never had the opportunity to finish our talk. May God see you well.

Your Friend, Roha

Weeks passed, miserable days spent hiding from people who had formerly obeyed his slightest whim. Dukayn considered revenge, but nothing awakened the old fire in his blood. Only dust ran in his veins now. He had broken his heart-oath and committed the sin of a coward's murder of a fellow Japat. He had lost any hope of regaining his balance. Jevon was gone. Karlo was dead. There was nothing left for him but to haunt the undercity. He found others down there, madmen and murderers, but left them in peace. He was done with killing. Had he wished he could have remained down there, free, for years, a dark thought troubling the mind of Palace.

One day, however, someone found him down there, one who knew his heart and his needs. A bargain was struck, a shuttle stolen and the two left Palace for the only place in the Pinch where Dukayn could hope for peace.

They tracked a pair of tiny satellites tumbling in the oblivion of space. Without a word or backward glance, Dukayn left the shuttle wearing only his force belt and carrying a hand jet. Within moments, he found the floating corpse of his master and the traitor, both locked in a frozen embrace. He kicked Wan's body away as hard as he could and prayed that some moon would drag the traitor to descent and ashes. Dukayn tied his own arm to that of Karlo's iso-suit.

"She was a false love, I know that now," he said. "I love you, Master."

He deactivated his force belt.

Inside the shuttle, a woman sighed.

"Good night, *ki-omu*," whispered Susannah Nikolaides. "May God see you well."