

PROLOGUE

"How long?" Amos ben Sierra Nueva said desperately.

"Another forty-five minutes, esteemed sir," the technician answered in a voice flat with focused concentration.

Amos touched the pickup in his ear and turned back to the low hills ahead. They were covered in pine forest, or had been, until about an hour ago. Now they were burning, a furnace of resin-fueled candles fifty meters high. The invaders had barred their own way with the blast of beam-fire from the aircraft, but they seemed lazily indifferent about inflicting casualties on their own forces. Hie Bethelite nobleman ground his teeth in fury at that lordly disdain; unfortunately, it seemed justified.

For now. Most of the resistance to the Kolnari invasion had come from Bethel's planetary constabulary, and the Guardians of the Temple. Those few who didn't see the invasion as punishment for the sins of godless young Amos ben Sierra Nueva and his followers had, of course, resisted. The faithful had effectively offered their throats to the pirate knife. Sheer luck that Amos and those followers had been preparing even if their efforts had been made against the day when the Guardians came for them.

"Everything is in place, my brother," said the man beside Amos in the rear seat of the pickup. Joseph ben Said was a commoner worse than that, a bastard from the slums of Keriss but he had been the first of Amos' followers, and had proved to be the most loyal. Stating Not to mention certain skills, Amos reminded himself.

"Take me forward to the bunker," he said, and cut off Joseph's protest with a brusque chop of his hand.

The gunner behind the pintle-mounted launcher swayed as the driver gunned the fans and slid the vehicle down the dirt track. He was inexperienced; they all were. The Second Revelation had trained in secret with their hoarded weapons, preparing for the Second Exodus to Al Mina. Official Temple policy held there was no need to venture beyond Bethel when three centuries of valiant breeding left the Chosen still thin on the ground in the initial area of settlement. There had been no time to acquire much real skill with the tools of destruction. The measures had been insurance, really, in case the Elders actually were willing to use force to prevent the settlement of the Saffron system's other habitable planet Ahead, the fire throbbed and roared. The pines were a native variety; candlestick trees, they were called. They were explosively flammable this time of year, and the air was thick with the heavy resinous smoke. Dust spurted from under the car as they swung behind the bunker, just now thrown up with farming machines and covered with raw dirt. The driver backed and then let the vehicle settle on its flexible skirt, keeping the fans running and the gunner's line of sight just over the top of the mound.

"Good man," Amos said, thumping him on the shoulder before he hopped down and ducked to enter the bunker.

A display film had been tacked to one wall. It showed footage from a pickup located a kilometer down the road. Haifa dozen men and women in coveralls and caps were talking into communicators or hovering over a schematic display on a rickety camp table. In the bunker, the air was full of a crackling tension, louder to the nerves than the burning forest was to the ears.

Amos nodded \o...the officer, he reminded himself. No longer friends and retainers, but warriors.

"They are coming," Rachel bint Damscus said.

Her plain bony face was tightly impassive. She was an info-systems specialist, rare for a woman on Bethel, where most females held to traditional feminine careers like medicine or literature, Joseph made her a formal bow.

"You are well, lady?" he said.

She gave a curt nod, then turned back to Amos. "They hit the forest with some sort of indirect-fire incendiary weapon, and now they are advancing through it Powered vehicles. Fusion-bubble neutrino signatures, fairly heavy ones."

"They probably do not know how common bad fires are here," Amos said. He worked a tongue in a mouth gone dry. Bethel vehicles used stressed-storage batteries.

Rachel was holding up well, better than he had expected. She had a violent temper, and he suspected a buried streak of hysteria. She was also a daustrophobe: the bunker would add that distress to her burdens. The more credit to her, for conquering her phobia.

"They thought to mask their approach in the flames," he said aloud.

Their first ambush had killed several of the invader infantry. Even a few hours had shown how the strangers reacted to a challenge: strike back immediately with overwhelming power. He cleared his throat and asked calmly:

"How far are they from the mine?"

"Two kilometers and closing. Closing at twenty kph. Onscreen."

The view through the screen tacked to the wall trembled. That meant something was shaking the ground under the pickup, even though it was spiked to solid rock. Hills rose on either side ahead, everything on fire except for the narrow stream and the road beside it, down at the base of the massive granite slopes. Shapes were moving through the burning trees on the lower slopes. Dull-gleaming shapes, hard to make out against the background, as if the surfaces were adapting themselves, chameleon-fashion, as they moved. Low turtle-backed outlines, with long weapons jutting from their sloped forward plates, the barrels built up from coils or rings, some sort of wave-guide or electromagnetic launcher.

One fighting vehicle pivoted. The muzzle flashed, bright even through the hot-iron glow of the fires. The viewscreen fogged slightly as a pickup was blasted into plasma, then cleared as the system compensated by spreading input from the others.

"Well, that gives us a due to the sensitivity of their detectors," Joseph said. He leaned forward. "Everyone is out of there?"

"Falling back to the launching ground. There is nobody within fifteen kilometers," Rachel said. "We are closest"

"Do it, then," Amos said.

She touched a control surface. The screen flashed white and went blank. Half a second later an actinic glare flashed through the bunker, reflected in from the rear entrance but still bright enough to make their

goggles darken protectively. Sound and shock followed in a few heartbeats: a roar like God returning in anger, an earthquake rumble through the soil, then a wave of heat and pressure making their ears pop.

"So Keriss died," Rachel said absently, to herself. "Tamik saw it He said the flash was like the sword of God, and the waves a kilometer high when they broke over the Peninsula mountains."

"Everyone leave," Amos said quietly, glancing down at the watch woven into his sleeve. There was nothing else to say. Rachel's family had lived in Keriss, the capital city of Bethel. So had most of Amos' surviving kindred, and Joseph's, if he had any. "We will rendezvous in forty minutes at the shuttle." He paused. "And Rachel?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Well done. Very well done."

When they left the bunker, the pillar of cloud was already flattening out high in the stratosphere.

"SSS." The sensor overwatch AI filtered a possible message out of the interstellar background and passed it through to the controller of Station SSS-900.

"Hissing again, are we?" Simeon muttered absently at the subprogram, and turned his attention back to the simulacrum.

Napoleon had just pushed the British north of Nottingham. Wounded, exhausted soldiers sprawled across the fields where the defeated army camped, as the rain drained down, gray skies darkening over trampled muddy fields. Away across the rolling landscape fires still flickered, where dead men lay gaping around smashed cannon. The women were out with lanterns, looking for their husbands and sons.

A dispatch rider came clattering up to Wellesley's tent with news of the Jacobin uprisings in Birmingham and Manchester, and a landing of the Irish rebels. The big beak-nosed man stood in the open flap of the tent as the dripping militiaman saluted clumsily and handed over the dispatches, blinking in the driving rain.

"The devil with it," he muttered, turning to the maptable within and unfolding the heavy wax-sealed papers. "It's too bad. If we'd won that last battle... if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. Still, it was a damned near-run thing a very near thing."

He looked up. "You are to inform His Majesty that he and the royal family must take ship for India immediately. These " he extended the reports from his folding desk " are for Viceroy Arnold in Calcutta."

I concede, the computer said.

"Of course," Simeon answered smugly.

He switched his primary visual focus from simulation back to the lounge and looked down at the big holotable. An excellent model for use in war-gaming, the map of England was scattered with unit symbols. Finer and finer detail could be obtained by magnifying individual sectors right down to die animate models of soldiers and horses. Or tanks and artillery, for some of the other games. He focused: on a horse tiredly nipping at its neighbor on the picket line, on the stubbled gap-toothed face of a sentry yawning.

"SSS."

"What is that?" Simeon asked.

The answer floated up into his awareness from the peripherals; tightbeam signal, modulated subspace waves, picked up by one of the passive buoys out on the fringes of the system. A subroutine had flagged it as possibly interesting, Hmmm, he thought. Odd. It might just be the last fading noise from a leaking mini-singularity about to go pop. The things tended to cluster in this area, which was full of third-generation stars and black holes, though this one tasted like a signal. The problem with that was that there was nothing much out that way; nothing listed as inhabited for better than two hundred lights. Certainly no traffic into the sphere of Space Station Simeon-900-X's operations. He would have to see if anything more came of it. Presumably if someone was calling, they would try again.

Idly, he ran a checklist of station functions. Lifesupport was nominal, of course; any variation of that was red-flagged. One hundred seventy-two craft of various sorts from the liner Altair to barge-tugs were currently docked. Twenty-seven megatons of various mineral powders were in transit, in storage, or undergoing processing in SSS-900-X's attendant fabrication modules. Two new tugs were under construction in the yard. A civic election was underway, with Anita de Chong-Markowitz leading for councilrep in station sector three, the entertainment decks. Death in the Twenty-First was still billing as most popular holo of the month. Simeon sneered mentally, with a wistful overtone. Historical dramas were impossible for a serious scholar to watch because the manufacturers would not do their research.

It was not necessary to investigate much more in detail. With the connectors, shellperson Simeontyos SSS-900-X. Little awareness remained of the stunted body inside its titanium shell in the central column of the lounge. He was the station, and any weakness or failure was, like pain, intense and personal. As far as his kinesthetic sense was concerned, he was a metal tube a kilometer long, with two huge globes attached on either end.

The Abair was in. Simeon had docked the incoming ship with his usual efficiency but without his usual close scrutiny. He deliberately turned his attention away from disembarking passengers, refusing to study their faces, especially the faces of the women.

Radon's replacement as Simeon's brawn was on this ship, and all he knew was her work record and her name. Channa Hap. Probably from Hawking Alpha Proxima Station, Hap being a common surname for those born in that ancient and wealthy community. He wasn't entirely sure. He'd fought Radon's retirement too hard to have much personal interest in his replacement. All right, I was sulking, he told himself. Time to get with the program. He'd established a subroutine to trash the applications of replacements. That hadn't been personal, merely a ploy.

He hadn't wanted her, but they were stuck with each other now.

Liners docked at the north polar aspect of the two linked globes that made up the station. The tube was; kilometer long and half that wide, more than enough for the replenishment feeds and a debarkation lounge fancy enough to satisfy the station's collective vanity twenty meters on a side and fifteen high, lined with murals, walled and floored with exotic space-minec stone, with information kiosks and everything else a visitor needed to feel at home.

"I'm Channa Hap," a woman said to one of the kiosks. "I need directions to Control Central."

So that's her. Long high-cheekboned face, mediumlength curling dark hair.

"You are expected, Ms. Hap," the terminal said. It had a mellow, commanding voice syndicated from several of Simeon's favorite actors, some of whom dated back to the twenty-fourth century. "Do you wish transportation?"

"If there's no hurry, I'll walk. Might as well get used to the new home."

"This way, please."

She nodded. Simeon froze the visual and studied her; tall, athletic. Dressed plainly in a coverall, but she had presence. Nice figure, too, if you liked subtle curves and rolling muscle. A fox.

In an amazingly short time the door-chime signaled a request for admittance. Feeling as nervous as he had when meeting his first brawn, Simeon said, "Come," and the door swished open.

Channa entered. He dived in on the viewer to what he thought of as normal conversational distance. That was an advantage sometimes, since softshells couldn't get to their psychologically comfortable distance with you. She had delicate, clear-cut features and earnest dark eyes, and the curly black hair was swept back from her face in a disciplined no-nonsense fashion. A vid-show heroine. Perfect! he thought. He got things off on the right foot. He switched on a screen with his own "face" the way he'd imagined it, ruggedly handsome with a tan, a Heidelberg dueling scar, level gray eyes, dose-cropped blond hair and a Centaur jets fen cap and spoke aloud:

"Hubba-hubba!"

The dark eyes widened slightly, "Excuse me?"

He laughed, "That's ancient Earth slang for 'sexy lady.'"

"I see."

The words were so dipped Simeon could almost hear them ping on the deck as they fell through a short silence.

Ah, geez, he thought, this is going really well. "Urn, I meant it as a compliment." Why didn't they send me a male brawn? he asked himself, conveniently forgetting his request form. Male bonding he knew about. "Yes, of course," she said coolly. "It's just not a type of compliment that I'm particularly fond of receiving."

She's got a nice voice, Simeon thought uneasily. Pity she seems to be a bitch. "What sort of compliments do you accept?" he asked in a tone of forced jocularly which wasn't easy to manage through a digital speaker.

"I accept those that deal with my quick learning ability, and my efficiency, or that acknowledge I'm doing a good job," she said, moving further into the room and taking a seat before his column. Until she had finished speaking, she did not look directly at him.

"The sort of compliment you'd give a servomechanism, if you gave servo-mechanism compliments," he said.

"Exactly." She smiled sweetly and folded her hands.

"You've an interesting attitude, Ms. Hap," he said, laying a little stress on the ancient honorific. If she wants to get formal, Ftt show her formal. "Most of the women I've worked with didn't object to an occasional compliment on their appearance."

She raised her brows slightly and cocked her head, "Perhaps if they objected you simply dismissed it as being part of an 'attitude.'" Simeon thought He'd gotten lonely these last weeks without Tell Radon. He'd begun to anticipate the/un he'd been going to have with a new brawn. Someone to talk to.... How could they have matched him with this... ice princess? They knew he was easy going, sure, but he'd given them a very good idea of what he was looking for in a brawn. Exact specifications, which Channa Hap hadn't met, fully. Was someone in Central taking advantage of his good nature, somehow hoping he could straighten her out, or maybe loosen her up?

"I find your attitude rather interesting," she murmured, narrowing her eyes. "Have you checked your hormone levels recently?"

"That's a rather personal remark...." Maybe they just want me to blast her out an airlock when nobody's looking. " 'Sexy lady' isn't?" She smiled and raised a sardonic brow.

"That was a compliment, intended to put you at ease. Have you checked your own hormone levels lately?"

There was silence.

After a moment she sat forward and looked at him levelly. "Look, even though it hardly seems worth the trouble of officially submitting my orders to you, on a practical level we may as well just admit that, for the time being, we're stuck with each other. You need a brawn and I'm here. I'm well trained, experienced and hard working. We don't have to love each other to work together."

"True, but it gets a little cold trying to maintain your distance with someone you see every day. It would be a lot easier if we could be friends. Look, why don't we just erase what just happened and start over? Whaddaya say?"

She pursed her lips, then smiled. "I'm game. But let's start slow, and we'll avoid the personal remarks for the time being, okay?" She cocked her head at him and raised an eyebrow. "You start."

"Hello, you must be Channa Hap. Welcome to the SSS-900-C."

"Thank you. I hope I'm not interrupting." "Nah, I always have time for a pret... colleague." He detected a slight narrowing of her eyes. "My, you sure are efficient looking."

"Well, and so are you, you're so steely and all." "Funny, I was just about to say the same thing about you."

She stood up. "This isn't going to work." "My fault. I shouldn't have said that. Look, you must be tired from all the travel you've been doing. Why don't you settle in, look around, relax a little things might look different"

"This has nothing to do with my being tired or your hormones...."

"What is this fixation you have with my hormones?" "Shut-up-and-listen-to-me." Channa was giving him a look that he could almost feel. She paused and held up her hands, sitting down again. "Just listen," she

said earnestly. "I think that it would be best if we put our cards on the table. I haven't studied your files in full yet," she admitted with a tired smile. "I just couldn't make myself do it. But I do know quite a bit about you." She leaned back and crossed her long legs. "I know that you have a fair amount of influence and a lot of contacts at Central Admin. And I know that you called on just about all of them in the matter of your brown replacement." She gave him a severe look. "You made yourself famous on just about every level."

He was a little lost here. He had kicked up quite a fuss when they forcibly retired Tell Radon, but what did it have to do with her?

"In case you're wondering why I'm bringing this up," she continued.

Geeze, Simeon thought, that's eerie! She can't possibly read my mind. Can she?

"It may interest you to know that I have my own contacts at Admin. And they've told me that you came up with a list of qualifications that were extremely hard to fill. In fact, I was the only candidate who did fit them, with the glaring exception of the age qualification. I hear that I'm four years too young for this post."

"Well, you see..."

"Excuse me, I'm not finished. I was also told that you went over my service records looking for black marks, and that when you couldn't find them, you went looking for shadows that you could pretend were blackmarks...."

"Hey! I don't know who you were talking to."

"Bear with me a few moments longer," Channa said, holding up one finger. "Then you can have your say. I'm not going anywhere." She looked at his image on the screen for a moment with narrowed eyes, and when he remained silent she nodded. "I've been told that all you need do to ruin the day of almost any Admin executive is to mention my name. The feeling you appear to have left behind you as the smoke cleared on this was that where there's smoke, there's fire. And that if you, well-known and respected brain that you are, would object so strenuously to my assignment to the SSS-900, despite the fact that I fit all but one of your many qualifications, then there must indeed be something seriously wrong with me."

"Oh." He honestly hadn't thought about that. He'd been so intent on saving Tell from forced retirement that no other considerations had seemed important. Channa Hap as a person had never entered into his thoughts.

Channa continued speaking, "I told myself that it probably wasn't personal."

God, it's weird the way she can pick up on my thoughts like that!

"I told myself to keep an open mind. If you had only greeted me as a fellow professional, then I think I could have let the whole mess be forgotten. But the first words out of your speakers show that either you can't discern the difference between a compliment and a lip-smacking, smarmy, personal remark, or your campaign to get rid of me continues."

"Now wait a minute!" Simeon said. She opened her mouth to speak and he overrode her. "It's my turn. Okay, you said I'd get a turn and I'm taking it." She raised her brows and gave him an open-handed gesture, giving him the floor. "I don't know who your informant is, but they've got it all wrong. I'm going to assume that you know the system well enough to realize that whoever came up for consideration was

going to be gone over with a fine-tooth comb. A space station the size of a small city requires versatility. I'm going to assume that you're mature enough to know that twenty-six is very young for this posting. Tell was thirtyeight when we came here, and that's the general age I was looking for. I don't think, given the importance of the SSS-900, that I'm being unreasonable. But, I suppose that to someone uninformed, the in-depth investigation could look like a campaign to discredit you. That was honestly not my intention, nor is it my intention now. If my greeting was a little too familiar, I apologize, but I had no way of knowing what dark suspicions you were harboring, I'm really very open, Ms. Hap."

She smiled amiably and nodded. "Mmhm. This entire charming explanation of yours is predicated on the assumption that my informant is someone's secretary." She shook her head sadly. "No."

Gulp, maybe I did go a little far.... "Urn..."

"You can rest easy," she assured him. "I'm very good at what I do. As you well know, I have an almost perfect record...."

Actually, you do have a perfect record, Simeon thought miserably. "... so, whether we actually get along or not, the station won't suffer. And I promise you that I'm not going to just up and disappear on you once you've gotten used to me. Because I have it on good authority that, after what you've done to my career and reputation, I'd have to bribe and sleep my way into a secondary assignment on the meanest asteroid-mining outpost at the farthest reaches of the explored galaxy." She rose and said, "I'd like to look at my quarters now."

"Yeah.. -just," Simeon slid the door to the brawn's quarters open, "just settle in. We'll work this out, Ms. Hap you'll see. I'm not as bad as you seem to think I am, I'll check out your allegations and see if I can make things right. Okay?"

She looked from the open door to Simeon and back again. She sighed as she walked to the door. "No, I think it would be better if you just left things alone for a while."

"Ms. Hap," Simeon called. She turned. "When a new brawn comes aboard, station protocol recommends a little informal gathering of the department heads. I've arranged one for this evening at 20:00. That is, if that's all right with you?"

She nodded and smiled. "I think that's a great idea." The door to her room slid shut behind her.

"I can't keep her level! I can't keep her level!"

Amos ben Sierra Nueva leaned forward, gripping the edge of the console as if he could force strength down the commlink and the beam to the stricken transport "Do not panic, Shintev," he said, firm but calm. "You are too close to your destination for panic."

Panic seemed to be the order of the day. The bridge of the Exodus a minor substation control center for three hundred years was in pandemonium as the refugee technicians struggled to activate and improvise. There was a hissing puncture right through the pressure hull where they had slammed a steel tube for the coaxial feeds to Guiyon's shell. None of the big cargo-bay doors were operable so they had had to lash the surface-to-ship transporters to the exterior of the ancient ship and climb in through service-hatch doors. The air was thin and cold, dim with the emergency lighting, full of the smell of fear and sweat and scorched insulation.

"Excellent sir. I think that the enemy has detected us," a voice said from one corner.

"You i At n A?"

"I am not sure!" the technician wailed, on the brink of tears. "They are moving... yes! They have detected us!" Amos' head whipped around. Then the link from the last shuttle began to transmit only a long highpitched scream. He looked back again to see a face rammed into the pickup, plastered there by centrifugal force. Flesh and pooling blood rippled across the screen before it blanked out.

"They are gone," Amos said into the sudden hush. "Decouple the remaining shutdes. Prepare for boost"

Another chorus of screams protested that they were not ready.

"The engines are on-line," Guiyon's calm deep voice said. "That will suffice for now."

Amos turned and punched an override. "Prepare for acceleration! Acceleration in ten seconds from mark. Mark!"

A speck of light blossomed across one of the exterior fields.

"They got Shintev," somebody whispered. An extraorbital fighter, bouncing across the surface of the troposphere like a skipped stone had gotten dose enough to launch a seeker missile at the out-of-control shuttle.

"Attend to your duty!" Amos snapped. Later there-will be time far prayers, and for tears.

Force pushed at the ancient ship. Humming and snapping sounds vibrated through the hull. Exterior feeds showed gantries and constructs bending and breaking under a strain they had never been intended to endure. The ground-to-orbit shutdes were breaking away as well, and a few figures in spacesuits.

Damnation, Amos thought, looking away. They mere warned! So many lives rested on his shoulders.

The great cloud-girdled shape of Bethel began to shrink in the rear viewscreen. The visible face of the planet was obscured by dust and flame from the fighting. Acceleration flattened him into his chair as he read figures from the flickering screens.

"Guiyon!" he said. "We are moving too slowly!"

"Peace, Amos. I am trying to yes, I am venting the life-support tanks." Tens of thousands of kilotons of water were jettisoned. "That will help us. And hinder the enemy."

"What force pursues us?"

"Five ships of small to moderate size. I think they ai the enemy sentinels. None other are in position or rigged for pursuit."

"Will they be able to intercept?"

"I do not know. But I must stress the engines, and there will be casualties among the passengers."

"Do what must be done."

The weight pressing into his body increased until his bones creaked from the gravity that the antique compensators could not handle. The actual gravity would crush.

Behind the Exodus, half the universe vanished in a blaze of drive energies. The hull did not hum anymore: it creaked, with occasional rending and crashing noises as components which had weakened or reset during the long years as an orbital station came apart under the stress and crashed sternwards. Somewhere a child called for its mother, again and again.

"What can we do?" Amos asked.

"Little, until we clear the gravity well," Guiyon answered. "Pray, perhaps, since that was your custom?"

One by one, the refugees lifted voices in chant.

Patsy Sue Coburn glanced over at a silk-clad Channa Hap. Channa was sipping champagne and listening politely to a medical officer who had backed her into a corner to tell a story that seemed to involve a lot of cutting motions. The room was full of station bigwigs, section representatives, department heads, company reps, merchant captains, the odd artist or entertainer. Trays floated about at shoulder height, loaded with beverages, canapes, and stimulants. Everyone seemed filled with a new enthusiasm for conversations they'd had a hundred times before, as if the new brawn had reinvigorated old topics. Patsy Sue felt the warmth of Florian Gusky's presence even before his deep voice rumbled softly in her ear. "So... what do you think of the new girl?" Patsy looked at him out of the corner of her bottlegreen eyes and flicked back her long blond hair. His jaw was thrust forward and his thick neck was hunched into heavy shoulders, accentuating the rugged cast of his features. A big man and nearly as tough as he thought he was. Gusky was an enthusiast for Revival Games, particularly rugby; he looked ready to tackle Channa.

Or stomp on her with cleats, she thought. "I think the new woman's elegant," Patsy replied. And makes me wish I'd been a little more restrained, she added to herself. Her own Junoesque figure was squeezed into a tight red sheath with a deep cleavage and a slit skirt. Her ashblond hair her own natural coloring with the barest tint of help from modern technology was woven with ropes of black pearls.

"I think she's a snob," Gusky said decisively.

"She seems a bit reserved," Patsy allowed. Who wouldn't be, dropped into this mill-and-swirl?

"She seems shallow."

"What is yer problem? Y' lookin' at the woman like you think she's got the legs of a cockroach under that gown. I've neva known you to make snap judgments. Do you know somethin' that needs tellin'?"

He looked into his drink, frowning. "No... it's just... Simeon's awfully quiet" He looked up at her with concern in his brown eyes. "That's just not like him."

She grinned and flicked her blond bangs aside. "Well, this will be quite an adjustment fer him after all," she said. "He an' Tell Radon were together for decades. Maybe he's missin' him and doesn't feel like bein' at a party."

Gus nodded, pursing his lips. "Yeah, or maybe he wants to give her a chance to shine...."

They both looked down for a moment and shuffled their feet. They looked up at the same moment and

said, "Simeon?" simultaneously, and then burst out laughing.

"You called?" The familiar image bloomed on a screen beside diem.

"Ah! Oh, hi, Sim, we, uh... we..."

"We were just saying you're kinda quiet tonight," Gus finished.

"Well, with most of my senior staff here at the party, I'm sort of pulling double-duty," Simeon said listlessly. "Excuse me," and he was gone.

Patsy and Gus looked at each other in amazement, then turned to take a new look at Channa Hap, now being introduced to a cargo specialist.

Gus shook his head. "What did she do to him?"

Patsy smiled. "Trimmed his sails good and proper."

"This was not a match made in Paradise," Gus muttered.

"Oh, I dunno," Patsy said, narrowing her green eyes thoughtfully. "The woman has style, Gus. This place could use some style. Look at this party. When was the last time you came to Simeon's place and got somethin' besides beer and pretzels?"

Gus looked at her in amazement "What's that supposed to mean? Are you telling me you can be bought widi the right canapes?"

"No. Chocolate truffles maybe, but not synthesized fish eggs on carbo wafers." At his growl she continued more seriously. "What I'm sayin' is, this place is more like a boys' camp dian the hub of culture and science and business that it could be. She'll shake us up all right, but maybe that's a good thing. It's goin' to get a lot more interestin' around here."

He went back to glowering. Patsy went over to Channa to compliment her choice of the Rovolodorus' Second Celestial Suite as background music.

"Glad you like it, Ms. Coburn," Channa said. Her smile had the slightly artificial quality of someone who has spent the last few hours fending off would-be favor seekers. "You're from Larabie, diough, aren't you?"

"I left," Patsy replied. "Didn'tlikethedown-home music tfiere, and I get so sick of the Miner's Rant and the other Pioneer Stomp stuff Simeon plays. No offense, Simeon."

"None taken" a voice said out of the air, the "n" fading into silence.

Channa's next smile was more genuine. "I'd have thought the chief environmentalist would be in favor of stability," she said.

"I get so sick of watchin' algae breed," Patsy said, and they both laughed. "Maybe diat's why I had four husbands in a row just to show I wasn't a unicellular organism."

"Goodnight," Channa called as the door swished shut behind the last departing guest. The big circular

room looked even larger with the crowd gone; the holos on the walls had reset to restful underwater scenes with tropical fish.

She turned toward Simeon's screen image on the pillar a brain's body was there, after all, and it had become a matter of courtesy in brawns to address diat position even if the brain could hear them anywhere on the station. She stood a moment leisurely studying the large Sinasian tapestry that was tastefully draped across his column.

"That's a lovely hanging," she said at last "I've been admiring it all evening." She clasped her hands behind her back and walked slowly towards him. "Thank you," she said softly. "This party was very pleasant, Simeon, and a thoughtful gesture."

Once you, loosened up a tittle, Simeon thought in some surprise, you were fun, too. If I can just keep you half-tanked, we might be able to get along.

"Well, everyone is more relaxed at this sort of gathering," he said, "divorced from their official positions. You get to see the social side before you have to contend with the professional."

She nodded. "I had just enough time before they got here to glance at everyone's records. I didn't want to make the same mistake with them that I made with you."

"You didn't read my records?"

"No," she said archly, "I wanted to be surprised."

"So did I," he admitted.

She laughed. "Then I guess we do have something in common after all. We can both screw up. Goodnight, Simeon."

Smiling, she gave one last wave at the column as she went into her room.

She has a nice laugh, Simeon thought, as the door swished closed behind her.

Phew, Channa thought.

She thought again, and took several recondite pieces of equipment out of her bag.

When these showed that the sensors in the walls weren't activated, she was slightly ashamed of herself for being so uncharitable about Simeon.

"There is no chance of repairing it?" Amos ben Sierra Nueva said.

"Crapulous none," the technician rasped. "Esteemed sir," he added, wiping at the lubricating fluid on his cheek.

They both backed out of the corridor and dogged the hatchway. A subliminal hum surrounded them; Amos was alone among the refugees in knowing that was a bad sign. Misaligned drive, no surprise after the colony ship had spent three centuries doubling as an orbital station. It was a miracle that the engines functioned at all, and a tribute to the engineers of the Central Worlds. A double miracle that they were holding up under the unnatural stress of maintaining subspace speeds past redline for so long. Guiyon's

doing.

"We will just have to economize on oxygen," Amos said firmly.

"Stop breathing?" the technician asked.

"Coldsleep," Amos replied. "That will cut down our consumption by at least half. A small crew can manage the ship. It was designed so. Guiyon could run it alone, if need be."

Sweat from more than the exertion of crawling along disused passageways glistened on the man's brown skin. Amos forced himself to breath normally as he walked back to the command deck. His chest felt heavy but it was impossible to detect any COg buildup yet Purely psychological, he told himself sternly.

"There is no chance of repairing the machinery," he said to the assembled command group. A few of them grunted as if struck. "At the current rate, we will exhaust the available air supplies two-thirds of the way to our destination."

"Why was the ship not properly maintained?" someone half shouted.

"Because this was an orbital station with unlimited supplies and an algae tank!" Amos snapped, then brought himself back under control. Of necessity, they had had to dump the excess water in the tanks. Too much mass to haul when speed is essential. "We lost more supplies, too, when the enemy hulled us."

"This is our situation," he said, deliberately calm. "We have to deal with it. A hundred lives and the fete of Bethel depend upon it"

They aU nodded. There was no way the Kolnari fleet could have been kept secret, even in backwaters like the Saffron system, if there were any witnesses after they left a world. Given time on Bethel, they would hide their tracks the same way.

"What... what about coldsleep?" Rachel said, licking her Hps.

"A possibility presently to be considered," Amos said. "Giriyon?"

The brain's voice sounded inhumanly detached as always. There were four centuries of experience behind him, and abilities no softperson could ever match. Amos shuddered slightly. Abomination was the most charitable term the Faith used for such as he. Control yourself, Amos chided. Guiyon rescued us all. He is our onfy hope. The stress was bringing back archaic fears.

"Marginal," Guiyon said. "Possible. We should concentrate all the personnel in one or two compartments, pump the atmosphere from the others back into reserve, and begin coldsleep treatments immediately." He paused. "We are not properly equipped internal temperature control is very uncertain. There is a risk of substantial casualties."

"Do it," Amos said, with the ring of authority in his voice. He could sense the others relaxing. The menace was still there, but someone was taking steps. Now, if onfy I had an authority figure, he thought wryly. I suppose the responsibility has to stop somewhere. "And may God have mercy upon us."

"Amen."

Amos waited until the others had filed out to begin reorganizing the hundred-odd refugees.

"The enemy?" he asked softly.

"Four ships," Guiyon replied. "One turned back, I think, with engine problems there were discontinuities in its emissions. The remainder are gaining slowly. I am running the engines over the specifications as it is, but they were never designed for this sort of usage. My estimate is that we have escaped so far because the Kolnari ships are carrying extra fuel mass and suhtight maneuver engines. They are also not redlining their propulsion systems."

"Will we have enough lead-time to reach Rigel Base?"

"That is impossible to calculate," Guiyon said. His voice was slowly taking on an extra tinge of animation, like a piece of rusty machinery that turned more smoothly when warmed up after long disuse. "Too much depends on intervening factors mass density in the interstellar medium, the enemy's actions, and what awaits us. We still have several possible destinations, but there may have been changes since the last update. My data is very old."

"As God wills," Amos said reflexively.

"Indeed."

The data-input jumped and fizzled through the jury-rigged inputs. Pain jagged along Guiyon's nerves in sympathy with the overstressed fabric of the ship. Anxiety ate at him as sector after sector went blank, a spreading numbness like leprosy.

Behind him, the rosette of pursuing Kolnari ships was mostly hidden by the blaze of his own drive energies. The sleeting energetic particles of their beam-weapons were not probing and eroding at the drive coils of the ancient, crumbling vessel. Ghost memories of the ship when it was young and strong haunted him, confusing his responses. His own nutrient and oxygen feeds kept slipping past redline, and each time the emergency adjustments took longer to swing the indicators back.

We will not make Rigel Base, Guiyon knew. He would not, and the ship would not. And if they could, the softshells on board most certainly would not. / must select an alternate destination.

If there is one.

"Is it really necessary to inspect in person, Ms. Hap?" the detection systems chief said. "We have a virtual system for remotes," he went on helpfully.

"No substitute for hands on," Channa said with determined cheerfulness.

She reached up to the hatchway and chinned herself, sliding into the narrow inspection corridor. "Hand me up the toolkit, will you?"

Two hours later the chief stood rigidly as Channa finished her checklist. His skin was a muddy gray under the natural brown, and he seemed to be shaking slightly. "... and deviations are more than thirty percent beyond approved," she said crisply.

"Ms. Hap" the luckless bureaucrat said, trying to cut in once more "those long-range systems are purely backup. They haven't been used since the SSS was commissioned!" At her raised eyebrow, he continued hurriedly, "Besides, I'm understaffed, and "

"Chief Doak," she went on. "Regular personal inspections are standard procedure in all installations of this type. I don't care if the equipment is used infrequently. Backups exist for an emergency when they had better be able to perform the functions for which they were designed. And I don't care if you send in the remotes every so often. Machinery does what you tell it to do, whether that's the right thing or not. Experienced technicians are supposed to have a feel for their equipment. Your people obviously don't. This isn't satisfactory. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Ms. Hap," he said woodenly.

Bitch, she read in his eye. That's /me. You have your right to an opinion of me, and I have a right to expect you to do your work, she thought, turning and striding briskly for the door.

"I don't care what anyone says, Ms. Hap. I think you're going to do a great job."

It was one of the communications technicians. Channa smiled pleasantly at her and said softly, noting her name tag. "Frankly, Ms.... Foss, I don't give a damn wAoi you think. I'm only concerned with the quality of your work. Which, at the moment, you're not doing." She continued down the corridor.

"Excuse me." Simeon said to Channa when she was out of earshot "Yes?"

"Did you have to be so nasty to her?"

"Simeon, it would be unprofessional of me to allow people to choose up sides like that. We can chew out a section chief, but interfering in the chain of command is petty and divisive and causes morale problems. Perhaps I'm not going to be here very long, and I'm unwilling to leave that sort of mess for someone else to sort out \bu've got to nip these things in the bud."

"Nipping is one thing. You cut her off at the knees."

"Oh, I see. You think I was unkind."

"You were\ In fact, you were downright cruel."

Channa stood a moment, hands on hips, looking down thoughtfully. Then she shifted her weight and crossed her arms. "Simeon, I noticed that Tell Radon was here twelve years longer than standard retirement date."

"He wasn't ready to go," Simeon replied suspiciously.

"But six years ago he submitted his resignation,"

"He changed his mind and withdrew it. I wasn't about to force him out. He's a friend."

"Un-hunh. Well, when I glanced over some of the meeting records for the last few years, I couldn't help but notice that everyone behaved as though he wasn't there. On the infrequent occasions when he did make a contribution, it was immediately questioned. Or don't the words 'Is that right, Simeon' sound familiar?"

"So what are you getting at?"

"I'm getting at the basic difference in our styles, Simeon. When I'm cruel, it's to prevent more pain further down the line. When you're cruel, it's to get your own way."

"What!"

"Surely you know that consideration for a friend can go both ways? Maybe Tell Radon stayed because he knew you would prefer it that way. You've had things your own way around here for quite a long while now. I don't imagine you were looking forward to breaking in someone new. Some stranger who might want to do things their way instead of using the nice, smooth routines you've worked out over time."

"Where are you getting this bullshit?"

She shrugged. "It's that you just got so used to seeing him humiliated on a daily basis that you didn't notice it anymore. Either way, it probably felt the same to him."

"I know him, Hap; you don't. If Tell had a problem, he would have said something. Why would he suffer in silence when he knew he could come to me?"

"Have you looked at the recordings?"

"I don't have to look at anything. I was there."

"They'll confirm what I've said, you know."

You coryciuin-plated bitch! "Has it occurred to you that you're biased? You've been finding fault with me since we said hello. Let me tell you something, omniscient one, you can't get a good impression of Tell from the recs. He hated the damn meetings, 'Hell,' he used to say, 'these frigging meetings make my brain melt.' He rarely spoke at meetings. They just weren't his style."

"Was it customary to question his every comment when he did speak?"

"You're making a simple request for confirmation sound like attempted murder."

Channa bit her lower lip. "Simeon, the recs will confirm that what I saw is there, very plain to see, unmistakable, dear, obvious. You might find a review of the meeting recs illuminating. Okay?"

After a moment's reflection, something in Simeon opened like an eye and he saw a bitter twist to Tell Radon's mouth. Tell had always described it as "gas," but...

"You fight dirty, Channa," he said.

She blushed, but her expression remained hostile. "I'm angry," she said honestly. "My career is in ribbons because you wanted him to stay on. So when I saw..." She bit her lip again. Then she went on more calmly. "You have to be careful how you use expressions like, 'you cut her off at the knees' and 'you were cruel,' around me. It tends to set me off. Also, you could have taken me at my word instead of turning selfrighteous."

"Yeah... I'll remember that" He paused. "Ylknow, if you're really so hot to get out of here, I'll back your transfer request to the hilt. Since I didn't get what I asked for last time, I figure I'm still owed a few favors...."

"Ho no. The last time you backed someone to the hilt, the hilt ended up protruding from between my shoulder blades. Thank you so much. Now that I think about it, I intend to give Central Admin plenty of time to forget this mess and my starring role in it. You're stuck with me for a couple of years, at least, so you'd better get used to it. Oh, on the subject of overlooking things...*"

"Yeah?" What now? Is there dust on the tight fixtures? "I came face to face with a little boy in one of the aft engineering compartments."

Silence.

"What? No comment? Does this mean that you know about him? After all, you are able to view all areas of the station."

In the silence that followed, she walked over to the wall and leaned casually against it. "He was gone before I could react. But you know what's really strange? There is nothing on file about such a kid." The silence lengthened. "Simeon?" she asked with some asperity.

"A little boy?"

"Yes, Simeon, about twelve years old Standard give or take a couple of years. In the aft power compartment. A restricted area, I believe. A kid who looks and smells like a Sendee mud-puppy. Whose child is he? What can you tell me about him? Don't even try to tell me you know nothing. Kids don't acquire a patina of dirt like that overnight. He also looked like he'd been eating regularly, if not well. So someone's been looking out for him... minimally." / don't think saying "You're cute when you're angry" would be a very good idea right now, Simeon thought. He froze her image and scanned it for temperature variations and pupil dilation. She was angry on behalf of an abandoned child rather than at him. Which makes a nice change.

Besides, he could use an ally with this problem.

"He calls himself Joat," Simeon confessed with a sigh. "I don't know how long he's been here. I discovered him by accident myself. He's mechanically brilliant. The area he's staked out as his own just stopped needing repairs. That's probably the only reason I investigated. I mean, there are enough squeaky wheels around here. Why take notice of one that's quiet? Then I noticed that the last repair made in that section was two years ago. I got curious about nothing ever going wrong. So I went on a prowl, using mobile bugs, and kept, well, softpersons refer to it as seeing things out of the corner of their eyes. I always thought that had something to do with blinking, you know, eyelashes getting in your line of sight or something. But I kept seeing these flickers of movement and I don't blink. By turning up my sound reception I could sometimes hear little scrapes and movement, but there was a sort of 'white noise' masking it. It seemed unlikely that everything else in the area was running perfectly with the exception of my sensors, so I decided to do a stakeout. Eventually, he got careless and wandered into my line of sight. The first time I spoke to him, blip, he disappeared. It was a long time before I could get him to talk to me. You'll note I said talk, not trust. He's incredibly wary. I can't believe he was clumsy enough to let you see him."

"Two years?"

Leave it to you, you bitchoid, to pick out the pertinent information. "I said the last logged repair was two years ago. It's been known to happen. What can I say? Somewhere from two years to two months, who knows?"

"Who is he, Simeon?"

"His story is that he ran away from a tramp freighter. Joat told me that the captain won him from his uncle in a card game. I know, I know, that sort of thing's illegal, but it does happen out here in the boonies. The tramp left abruptly and went somewhere not listed. Joat has never had it soft, but apparently, the captain he ran from was of a different order of brutality altogether."

Channa wrinkled her nose. "Sounds like something out of Dickens."

"Yeah, well, the more things change..." and he left the sentence dangling. "What are you going to do?" he asked warily. After his first, disastrously wrong, impression, Channa hadn't struck him as a bleeding heart. Would she suggest flooding the compartment to flush the poor kid out?

"We've got to get him out of there. We can't leave a little boy in a dangerous and restricted area. It's illegal at best and irresponsible by any standard."

"He's been badly hurt and frightened, Channa. He doesn't want to be with people. The little guy can barely tolerate me. He likes machinery better than people, and I qualify as a borderline case. Besides, even / can't find him if he really doesn't want to be found. Maybe we should leave him alone for the time being. He's where he wants to be."

Channa looked up with her jaw set. "Simeon, no child wants to be alone in the dark and the cold of a power room, or wherever he's lodged himself. He needs and deserves to be taken care of. It's his right."

"I agree in principle, but I think he needs more time. I'll take the responsibility."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll take full and complete responsibility for what happens to him."

Channa brightened. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Okay," she said, "I'll call up some information on adoption procedures and we can get things underway."

"What?" I'm always screaming what? at this woman. Pm beginning to feel like a demented parrot.

"Well, what else did you mean when you said you would accept responsibility?"

"That, if anything goes wrong, I'll answer for it." / swear, if I had hair I'd tear it out. Softshells have some advantages after all. But, what is this... this... wench trying to do to me?

"Great! If he gets killed or maimed, you'll accept a discommodation? Well, how big of you!" Channa cut Simeon off when he began to splutter a protest "By now you should know that I listen to what you say, even when you don't. I promise you, Simeon. I will always call you on it when you try to shut me up or fob me off. You're not going to shuffle this one off, buddy. I won't let you."

"What are you talking about? I didn't put him in this situation. I want to help the kid. Hell, I am helping. I just don't see any need to rush him. The feet that you saw him may mean that he's almost ready to come

out on his own. I'm certainly opposed to coercing him. Geeze but you're hostile! You're so willing to believe the worst about me that every time I talk to you I feel like my circuits are being realigned. Am I really such an evil bastard? Or," and he changed his tone from plaintive to trenchant, "could it be that you really are the most bloody-minded, impossible woman I have ever met?"

"Oh, Simeon," she drawled, "you have no idea how difficult I can be. Just cross me if you want to find out"

A chill settled in Simeon's mind. Does that mean that so far she's been reasonable? Gahf "You're about to become a father, Simeon. That's what full and complete responsibility for a child means. Congratulations, it's a boy. If your word is good."

"They're not going to let me adopt a kid."

"Why not? You've been extensively tested for emotional stability, you have a responsible job. You even appear to care very much about his feelings. Do you think such a wounded child, of his age, is going to have prospective parents lining up to take care of him? I think you've got a very good chance."

She clapped her hands and rubbed them together gleefully. "So... let's get to work on it."

Mart'an presented the menu with a flourish and left them with a bow.

Channa looked around wide-eyed at the dimly lit, subdued elegance of the Perimeter Restaurant. There were even actual beeswax candles burning on the tables; a fortune for material and air-bills both.

No pleasure, she thought. The Perimeter was paying; something of a goodwill gesture. And it was logical for her to get acquainted with one of the station's premier tourist attractions.

SSS-900's finest restaurant was just down from the north-polar docking extension; the outer wall was a hundred-meter sheet of synthmet set on clear. Stars rolled huge and bright beyond fixed stars and the frosty arch of the Snakeshead Nebula, and the bright moving points of light that were shuttles and tugs. Within, the floor was of glossy black stone set with squares of gold. SSS-900 processed a lot of gold as a by-product and the tables were made of real and precious wood, glossy under the snowy linen tablecloths. Waiters moved amid a quiet chinking of silverware, savory smells wafting from the platters they carried. A live orchestra played something soft and ancient.

"Stars and comets a little rich for this outposter!" Channa said. "I'd heard of the Perimeter, but somehow I never expected to actually come here."

Patsy grinned. "C'mon now, Hawking Station wasn't an asteroid minin' center. Leastwise, not of the sort oui sainted Simeon cut his teeth on."

"Well, no... but I couldn't afford anything like this when I was at home. Didn't have the time, either. After I graduated and started pulling assignments, I've been mostly at outposts. Worse than Simeon's."

Waiters filled water glasses, laid their napkins in their laps, brought warm rolls and softened butter. Everything except brush our teeth and massage our feet, Channa thought. It was a little unnerving. Most places you asked for the selection, told the table what you wanted, and a float brought the meal to you. The sheer expense of having live human beings do all this!

"I'd never've et in here if it weren't on the station's ticket," Patsy confessed in a whisper during a lull in the

service. "Or unless a date was really tryin* to impress me. More relaxin* with another female you kin concentrate on the food without insultin' 'em.** "If this weren't complimentary, I wouldn't be here now, either."

They grinned at each other.

"Well, thank you fer invitin' me," Patsy said. "I woulda thought you might invite that med-tech you were talkin' to last night."

"Please, I'm looking forward to this meal. I won't be able to eat if I remember him. Have you heard some of his anecdotes?"

"All of 'em," Patsy said, nodding solemnly. "You've a point thar, ma'am. Chaundra's a nice enough feller, but his stomach's a mite too strong fer me."

"Besides, you and I have similar taste in music. You can always talk to someone who likes the same music."

Talk they did, touching on everything from Geranian folk ballads to eighteenth-century Earth composers, eventually matching the personnel of the station to various types of music.

"Simeon? Straight honky-tonk, no question," Channa said firmly.

Patsy laughed. "Oh, c'mon, Channa, there's unplumbed depths there. He's not that simple. It's just that the minin* center assignment came at an impressionable age fer him. Rough, tough rockjack, you know. His public image."

"Well." She looked down at the menu. It provided motion holos of the dishes as she ran her finger down the page. "I'll start with these grumawns, first, in the fiery sauce. Cleardrop soup. Grilled rack of jumbuk from Mother Hutton's World good grief, they do have everything here! baby carrots, salad. Spun pastry bluet confection for dessert, with Port Royal coffee. Castiliari brandy."

"Sounds good. I'll go with the jumbuk too, but... hmm. Fennel-leek soup first. Wine?"

"I don't usually " Channa began.

"If I might suggest?" Mart'an appeared at their table. Appeared, Channa thought, as if he'd blinked out of some hypothetical subspace. "The Mon'rach '97 to begin with, a half-bottle. Then, with the main course, a Hosborg estate-bottled '85. I'll open it now so it can breathe."

"Sure," Channa said, then sighed with pleasure. "You know, I was looking forward to the Perimeter, ever since they told me SSS-900 would be "

"SSS-900-C, now, Ms. Hap."

Channa blushed." would be my next assignment"

The first course arrived. The pink grumawns were coiled steaming on top of a bed of fragrant saffron rice, the sauce to one side. Channa took a sip of the wine, chilled and with a faint scent of violets, then lifted one grumawn on the end of a two-tined fork.

"I did do a lot of work today," she murmured to herself. She opened her mouth, and The Confederate armor was grinding through the woods and fields north of Indianapolis. The burning city cast a pall of smoke into the sky behind them. Diesel engines pig-grunted as the smooth low-slung shapes of the tanks and tank-destroyers crashed through brush and twelve-foot high cornstalks, past the flaming shards of a farmhouse and barns. The long 90mm barrels of the tank guns swung toward the thin strung-out lines of the Union convoys, caught in the flank as they attempted to switch front. The fighting vehicles surged back on their tracks at each monster crack of high-velocity cannon fire, and the air filled with the bitter scent of cordite. Chaos spread through the blue ranks as tracer and cannon fire sent trucks exploding into globes of magenta fire. A Northern tank dissolved, the turret flipping up like a frying-pan, a hundred meters into the air.

Behind the fighting vehicles, long lines of men in gray uniforms followed, advancing with their semiautomatic rifles carried at the port. Here and there an officer carried a sword, or the Stars and Bars fluttered from a staff.

"Now!" General Fitzroy Anson-Hugh Beauregard III said into the bulky mike hung from his vehicle helmet. His command tank was a little back from the edge of the combat, hull down; the general stood head and shoulders out of the commander's cupola. The turret pivoted under him, the massive casting moving smoothly on its bearing race. The long cannon fired in a flash that seared his vision, just as the opening salvos of artillery went by overhead. Down along the road, tall poplar-shapes of black dirt gouted skyward. Another explosion shook the earth and sent heavy vehicles pinwheeling like a child's models under a careless boot; the command-tank's round had hit the tracked carrier for a Unionist self-propelled gun.

The general nodded. "Nothing to stop us short of the Lakes," he said. Nothing to stop them linking up with the British Guards Armored Corps, driving southeast out of occupied Detroit, cutting the Union in two....

"Conceded," Florian Gusky said, and lifted the visor of the simulation helmet. He sighed heavily and took a pull of his beer, then looked around the room as though surprised to find himself alone with Simeon, blinking away the consciousness of a world and war that had never been. There was a slight sheen of sweat on his heavy-browed face and he worked the thick muscles of his shoulders to loosen the tension.

"You could play it out to the end," Simeon's image said from a screen above his desk.

"No dam' point. You've whipped my butt in that simulation fo, from both Union and Confederate sides."

"I could take a handicap," Simeon said with much less enthusiasm, Gus noted.

So he nodded. The last time he had beaten Simeon was in a Caesar vs. Rommel match on the site of Carthage, with the shellperson commanding Caesar's spear-armed host against Panzers and Stukas. Even then he had inflicted embarrassing casualties.

"Where is she?" Gus asked. There was no need to identify the female in question.

"She's dining at the Perimeter."

Gus raised his eyebrows in astonishment. "The Perimeter? That's some salary she gets." The Perimeter attracted two sets of guests: the rich, and spacers looking to blow six months' pay on one night.

Simeon laughed. "Nab, she's a guest of the management. Patsy's with her."

"Yeah, Patsy likes her," Gus said, his tone indicating that this revealed a serious and heretofore unsuspected flaw in Patsy's character. "Can you see them?"

"Yup."

"What're they doing?"

"Talking."

"About us?"

"I don't know. I'm not listening. Now they're laughing."

"They're talking about us, alright," Gus said gloomily.

"Geesh, Gus, let's get back to the game."

There was a plaintive edge to Simeon's voice. Gus reached for the helmet and then stopped, a slow grin creasing his heavy features. "Isn't it about time we had a drill?" he said, thoughtfully.

"We just had one. About four hours ago, remember?"

"When I was in the Navy we had 'em six times a day, sometimes," Gus replied.

He knew that Simeon badly wanted to pull Navy duty. Only a few staff-and-command vessels used shell controllers and Simeon didn't rate, yet. In the meantime, he put a lot of weight on Gus' experience as a fire-control officer on a patrol frigate. That had been some time ago Florian Gusky had spent a decade's hard work clawing his way up to regional security chief for Namakuri-Singh, the big drivesystems firm but Simeon had a bad case of military romanticism. And real talent, he told himself without envy of the brain's abilities.

"I know it's early," Gus went on persuasively, "but it's important not to have predictable intervals. So we don't get complacent."

"Well..."

"I'd love to see the look on their faces."

"Since you put it that way "

Channa started as the klaxons rang. They sounded like no other she had ever heard, a harsh repeated ouvuuga-ouuuuga sound. The elegant minuet of movement among the waiters turned to an inelegant but efficient scramble for the exits; some moved to assist guests. Thick slabs hissed up out of the floor along the outer wall and the lights flared bright "BREACH IN THE PRESSURE HULL!" a harsh male voice tone announced. "EMERGENCY PERSONNEL TO THEIR STATIONS. SECURE ALL SUBSECTION REFUGE AREAS."

Patsy stood and looked at her barely touched entree with dismay. "Damn! That's the second time this shift!" She threw her napkin down with disgust. "Simeon pulls these drills like a boy kickin* over an anthill to see the bugs scurry."

"Simeon!" Channa shouted.

"Yeah?" The klaxons dimmed in a globe around them.

"Is this a genuine emergency or just a test?"

"Excuse me, brawn-o'-mine, but you're not supposed to be privy to that information." There was the hint of a smug smile in the brain's voice.

"If you think I'm getting up from the best meal that's ever been put in front of me just because you're feeling your oats, you've got another thing coming. Cut it!"

As the klaxon abruptly ceased, people stopped, puzzled, and milled around uncertainly.

"Tell them it's over, Simeon. Don't just leave them standing there."

"This has been a test," Simeon informed them in the feminine tones he used for such announcements, "Return to your stations. This has been a test"

"We will discuss this later," Channa assured him icily. "Overdoing drills is dangerous, irresponsible and generally counterproductive."

Ah, hell, Simeon thought exhaustedly, why did I listen to you, Gust! I don't like the looks on their faces after all, buddy. I know I don't. He wondered what he could do to make it impossible for her to gain access to him for the next week.

Patsy sat down slowly, her wide eyes fixed on Channa's flushed countenance. "You really don't like him, do ya?" she said with some astonishment. Channa looked at her blandly. "Whatever makes you say that?"

Patsy shook her head. "Just a hunch."

Channa sighed and smiled ruefully. "Well, to be fair, there may be a touch of 'transference' there. You see, I've always wanted to work planet-side. I love the feel of wind in my hair and rain on my face. I enjoy splashing in an ocean, and the feel of earth under my feet. So, for the past two years I've been campaigning for a particular assignment." She looked up at Patsy inquiringly. "Have you ever been to Senagal?"

Patsy nodded and smiled warmly in reminiscence. "I should have. I had my first honeymoon there. What a gorgeous place! Beautiful beaches, warm ocean, flowers everywhere, and the food. I'd love to live there, at least for a while." She sighed. "So, go on."

"Well, as you can imagine, the competition was incredible. I'd been through twelve interviews, including one with Ita Secand, the city-manager of Kelta, whom I would have been working with. God! What I wouldn't give to work with her. She's witty, charming, sophisticated. I felt that I could learn so much from her. It had come down to two of us, myself and someone else."

She shook her head. "I never did know who the other candidate was, but my feeling was that it was going to be an extremely difficult choice. When suddenly, after holding on for twelve years, Tell Radon decides that he has to retire right now! And that sweet little plum, that was almost in my hand, was snatched away so fast it left scorch marks on my nail polish, "'Vbu're station born and bred,' they told

me, 'You're perfect for this assignment,' they said. 'It's an extremely important and prestigious post,' they assured me. Rurrrgh! Asthesayinggoes, Icouldjustspit"

Patsy looked at Channa's bitter face.

"It's a gyp, alright. Looks like yer skills ah goin' against you instead of helpin* you out. So, maybe you ah takin' it out on Simeon jest a teensy bit?" She grinned and held up a hand that measured out a micrometer between thumb and forefinger. "Hey, maybe that's good fer him. Now, I think," she placed a hand on her bosom, "that we need you mo'n Senalgal does. I mean, Senalgal's gonna be special whoever runs it, right? But a station, well, it can be just a big oT factory with the wrong people in charge. You don't need Ita Secand t' teach you to be witty and sophisticated you already ah. We need some a' that right here, Ms. Hap, an I'm not kiddin'."

Channa blushed and grinned, taking a sip of her wine to hide her embarrassment "Well, thank you. That's quite a challenge you've set me," she murmured, and changed the subject. "Who was that big, handsome, gray-haired fellow you were talking to last night? Somehow I never met him,"

"FlorianGusky?"

"We call him Gus."

"I can see why."

Patsy smiled warmly. "He's quite a guy a retired Navy man, a crack navigator. Tlie stories he's got... I mean to tell you, mmhm."

"I see he's spoken for," Channa said with a grin.

"Not so you'd notice," Pasty said primly. "I admit I lahk him, though. I jus* love to heah him talk. When I was a kid, I thought I'd do what he did. You know, join the Navy and scour the universe of evil doers, jus' like some ferocious holo-hero." She sighed. "But heah I am, nothin* but an algae-herder."

"An algae-herder?" Channa asked in amusement. "Algae travel in herds?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Instead of doin' somethin* adventurous, I'm just watchin* these bubblin' vats o* goop. The excitement is not goin* to give me ulcers." She sighed. "Sometimes I wish fer a real disaster. Something special."

Channa looked at her seriously. "Be careful what you wish for," she said. "You may get it"

Channa hummed tunelessly as she filled out the adoption forms, looking perfectly content and at peace with the world. The sound irritated Simeon excessively. True, he could in a sense "leave" the area and had done so. But he kept coming back, as though to a blown circuit; drawn to the irritant, checking again and again to see if anything had changed.

Finally he said, "You seem happy." Hap. Happy. Bet that would bug herbad.

"I love filling out forms," she said. "The more complex the better."

Somehow it figures, Simeon thought. When you became a broom, the universe lost a great tax auditor.

"Filling out your side of this is no problem," she said. "Your whole life is on file. But I'm going to have to talk to the child soon."

"I can do that," he said defensively. Icon oho fell out the damn forms, in half the time or less and without making obnoxious noises.

She turned to look at the column that held him. "Simeon... while I grant you that we should be as delicate as possible." She paused and gestured helplessly. "I've... we've, got to get him to Medical. We've got to prove, by retinal patterns and gene analysis, that he exists at all. You know how bureaus are: no tickee, no washee. We've got to do a recorded interview of him. So he's got to emerge, fully grown well, almost from the engineering compartments and into the real world," she concluded in a rush. "Okay.I'U talk to him."

"Simeon," she hesitated, "why don't you introduce us? I mean, you can discuss the adoption with him. I can stay out of sight nearby until he wants to meet me." She's being conciliatory, he realized. Why doesn't this reassure me? He forced down nonexistent hackles and replied in a neutral tone. "Sure, why not?"

Channa could hear them talking from where she sat against the cold bulkhead.

"You want to adopt me?" a young voice asked in disbelief. A yearning hope sounded through it "Yeah," Simeon said, surprised to find that he was getting to like the idea.

Joat's head popped into Simeon's line of sight, seemingly from out of nowhere.

"You can't do that," he said with complete certainty, voice flat again. "They won't let you adopt a kid. You're not real."

Simeon was taken aback. "What do you mean I'm not real?"

Joat's young face was lit with amused wonder. "I hate to be the one to break your bubble, but who's going to let a computer adopt a kid?"

"Where did you get the idea that Ymjst a computer?" Simeon demanded with a hard edge to his tone.

Channa bit down on the fleshy part of her hand. That kid doesn't pull his punches, she thought. Poor Simeon brain, though, dolftfa offended dignity bit well... She stifled the rising guffaw with a swallow. An audible reaction would be out of place. Definitely "You told me," Joat informed him, exasperation creeping into his voice. "You said 'I am, in effect, the station.' That means you're a machine. I've heard about AIs and voice-address systems."

To both his observers, his voice was conciliatory but his expression reflected an inner anxiety that maybe this computer was losing its tiny mind.

And he probably thinks that would be very interesting, the station computer losing function, Simeon thought in exasperation. Kids!

He had noted that, while Joat could keep his voice disciplined, his expression revealed his real feelings. Simeon wondered if he could maintain that duality in the presence of the visually-advantaged. Not that he, Simeon, was in any way visually-dtsadvantaged. Quite the opposite, as Joat would learn soon enough. 'Joat, I think it's time that notion got altered. There's someone nearby I'd like you to meet. She's known as a brawn, and she's my mobile partner.'" Which was true as far as it went, Simeon amended.

Joat's face went wary. "I don't want to meet anybody," he muttered sullenly, looking cautiously around him. "She, you said?" Another pause. "No, I don't want to meet anyone."

"But we've already met, sort of," Channa called out. Joat vanished instantly. "He's gone," Simeon said.

"No, he's not," Channa contradicted. "He's nearby. Joat? Simeon is a real person, as real as you or me. But he's connected to the station in such a way that the station is an extension of his body. I'd be happy to tell you about it."

No answer but a receptivity which she could almost feel beyond her in the narrow access aisle.

"Well," she began, "shellpeople were created as a means of enabling the disadvantaged to live as normal a life as possible. At first that was limited to the creation of miniaturized tongue or digital controls, or body braces. The extension of such devices was to encapsulate the entire body, though some people still think it's just the person's brain because they're called 'brains.' Despite popular fiction, such an inhumanity is not permitted. Simeon is there, body, mind and..." She paused and then realized that she couldn't permit personal opinion to corrupt the explanation. "... heart. Simeon is a real person complete with his natural body but he is also this station-city in the sense that instead of walking about it, he has sensors that gather information for him and he controls every function of the station from his central location."

"Where is M Joat paused, too, struggling to comprehend the concept" he? He is a he, isn't he?"

Tin as masculine as you," Simeon said, accustomed to such an explanation of shellpeople but wishing to underline his humanity. He did note that his voice had dropped further down the baritone level he used. Weft, why not?

"Oh!"

"Instead of having to give orders to subordinates," Channa went on, "to, say, check the life-support systems, or Airlock 40, or order an emergency drill, he can do it himself more quickly and more thoroughly than any independently mobile person could." "And I don't need to sleep, so I'm on call all the time." Simeon couldn't resist adding that.

"Never sleep?" Joat was either appalled or awed.

"I don't require rest, although I do like relaxation and I have a hobby...."

"Not now, Simeon, although " and there was a smile in Channa's voice "I admit that that makes you more human."

"Were you human... I mean, were you... did you live like one of us?" Joat asked.

"I am human, not a mutant, or a humanoid, Joat," Simeon said reassuringly. "But something happened when I was born, and I'd never have been able to walk, talk, or even live very long unless the process of encapsulating had been invented. Usually it's babies that become shellpeople. We are more psychologically adjusted to our situation than adults. Though sometimes pre-puberty accident victims work out well as shellpeople. I can look forward to a long and very useful life. But I'm human for all of that"

"Very human," Channa replied in a droll voice.

Simeon didn't quite like the implications, but at least she said the right things.

"And you run the city?"

"I do, having instantaneous access to every computerized aspect of such a large and multi-function space station as well as peripheral monitoring devices in a network to control traffic in and out."

"I thought brains only ran ships," Joat said after a long pause.

"Oh, some do, of course," Simeon said, slightly patronizing, "but I was specially chosen and trained for this demanding sort of work." He ignored the delicate snort from Channa that somehow reminded him he'd started out his management career in a less prestigious assignment. "Do you understand now that I am human?"

"I guess so," was Joat's unenthusiastic reply. "You've been in that shell since you were a ftofcy?"

"Wouldn't be anywhere else," Simeon said proudly, letting his voice ring with a sincerity no shellperson ever had to counterfeit.

There was a slightly longer pause. "Then it's not true, what I heard?" Joat began tentatively.

"Depends on what you heard," Channa said, having learned in academy the long list of atrocities supposedly enacted.

"That they put orphaned kids in boxes?"

"Absolutely not!" Channa and Simeon chorused in loud unison.

"That's totally inaccurate," Channa said firmly. "It's the sort of mean thing people say to scare kids, though. The program won't accept perfectly healthy bodies. To begin with, the medical costs and education are incredibly expensive. So is the maintenance for shellpersons. But it's better than depriving a sound mind of life because the body won't function normally. Don't you think so?"

Silence greeted that query.

"And if you've also heard the one about taking the brains from the homeless or displaced no, that is definitely not permitted, either."

"You're sure?"

"Sure!" Simeon and Channa replied firmly.

"And we should know," Channa went on. "I had to spend four years in academy to learn how to deal with shellpeople, of all types."

Which, Simeon knew, was another backhanded slam at him. Did she never let up? One thing was sure, Joat's misinformation made him more determined than ever to adopt the boy and give him such security that that sort of macabre stuff would be forgotten.

"And, no matter what sort of spaceflot you've been told, Central Worlds doesn't make slaves of people," Channa was saying at her most emphatic. "The very idea sends chills up my spine."

"Not even criminals?"

"Especially not criminals," Channa said with a little laugh. "With all the power available to a shellperson, you may be very sure Central Worlds makes certain that they are psychologically conditioned to a high ethical and moral standard."

"What's this e'tical?" Joat asked.

"Code of conduct," Simeon said, "probity, honesty, dedication to duty, personal integrity of the highest standard."

"And you own this station?" Joat asked, his voice tinged with awe.

Channa laughed in surprise at that assumption. "I wish," Simeon said fervently.

"Remember my mentioning that creating and training a shellperson is expensive? I wasn't kidding. By the time Simeon graduated from training, he had an enormous debt to pay off to Central Worlds."

"Hunh. Thought you said they weren't slaves,"

"They're not Every shellperson has the right to pay off their debt and become a free agent A good many shippersons do and then they own themselves. A management shellperson, like Simeon, will often get their debt picked up by a corporation, and when they've worked off the debt, they work under contract"

"Are you paid off, Simeon?"

"No, though my contract fee is generous enough. But, as I mentioned, I have hobbies...** "Like what?" Joat asked.

"I've got a great sword and dagger collection which includes a genuine Civil War flag, a regimental eagle."

"Hey, way cool! Got any guns?"

What is it with some males ? Channa thought.

"Yeah," Simeon said eagerly. "I've got a real Brown Bess flintlock, and an M22. And one of the first backpack lasers ever issued!"

"No shit!" Joat said, seeming to forget Channa's presence for a moment His voice sounded louder, as if he was drifting back from whatever refuge he had bolted towards. "All sorts of old weapons, eh?" "You name it A Roman gladius, even." "A what?"

"Good question," Channa said. "Shortsword. Over three thousand years old," Simeon broke in. A pause. "Of course, it could be a reproduction. If so, it'sstill in awfully good shape for an artifact of that age. I can trace it back at least five hundred years* provenance. The records say it was first owned by the legendary collector Pawgitti, then dug up out of the ruins of his villa."

My throat is getting hoarse, Channa realized an hour later. Amazing what he knows. Joat had probably

neatly escaped formal education, but had acquired a jackdaw's treasure chest of information about his keener interests. Anger awoke in her. It was criminal that a mind like Joat's had been ignored, like a weed in a corner lot. Or the barbaric way in which pre-shell handicapped were ignored as nonproductive persons. Joat wasn't just interested in showing that he knew things that she didn't, either. There was a naked hunger to learn in his voice. Closer and closer... She could see a little huddled shadow and an occasional glint of his eyes as he turned his head.

"And weapons are merely a pan of what I've been collecting over the years," Simeon was saying. "I've got great strategy games whole boards..."

Channa was shocked. Simeon would adopt the kid as a games partner? Then she realized he was only sweetening the pot "I don't know of a shellperson who has adopted, but I think it would be to your advantage, Joat. Certainly it would mean security and a place to call your own instead of ducking from one hidey-hole to the next when inspection teams go through. You'd have regular meals, and you could go to engineering school"

Channa heard a soft "yeah" from out of the cold darkness.

"Think it over tonight, why don't you?" Simeon said "Tomorrow you can come up and scan the room I can assign you. Maybe have dinner with Channa and talk about it some more."

"Yeah," came more dearly from out of the darkness.

"Okay," Simeon's voice was pleased. "If you have any questions tonight, just speak 'em out, and I'll answer."

It's an honor to win the trust of a child, Simeon thought, especially one who's been through what this kid has. I don't think I've ever been quite this happy. He intuited that the feeling approximated what the word "tickled" meant, and he also thought that this was what it felt like to smile. Since Joat had moved in, he'd been trying to empathize more with the softperson worldview.

Of course, there have been some surprises....

Seen for the first time by the full light of day-cycle flores, Joat was not prepossessing. Short for his age, scrawny to the point of emaciation, with huge blue eyes in a face that might have been any color short of black under the gray, ground-in coating of grime and machine oil. The mouse-brown hair had been hacked off and was standing up in tufts. The clothing was an adult-sized coverall with the arms and legs cut off to fit. An air of sullen suspicion accompanied a pungent odor.

"I've never run across the name, Joat' before," Channa began casually. "It doesn't give a clue about where you're from the way that some names do. I use 'Hap' as a surname because I was born on Hawking Alpha Proxima Station, for example."

'Joat'smy name." Joat answered, sticking his chin out aggressively. "I gave it to myself. It means 'jack of all trades,' 'cause that's what I do, some of everything."

"So it's a nickname," Channa said. "Shall we put you down on the form as Jack, then?"

Joat looked at her with cool contempt "Why? That's "You're a... girl?" Simeon asked, bringing the "g" sound up from the depths of his diaphragm and managing to split the word in several astonished syllables.

"What's wrong with that? She's a girl!" Joat declared defensively, pointing at Channa, as though ducking responsibility.

Channa burred with heavily suppressed laughter before she managed some reassurance. "Hey, it's all right that you're a girl. It's just that... All that dirt..." Channa couldn't risk continuing in that vein and switched abruptly "... is an effective disguise."

"Good disguise," Joat said proudly. "Bad idea to let people know when you're a girl. Can cause you trouble. But, since you say I gotta go to a medic," she paused to look questioningly at Channa who nodded, "best you don't look surprised then." She grinned slyly and then looked over at Simeon's column. "You really didn't know?"

"Not a clue," he said wonderingly, and Joat giggled with pleasure. "Hmm. According to the biological studies I had, it's not easy to tell with the pre-pubescent... dressed or in disguise."

"*7 can always tell," Joat said with some contempt for his ignorance.

"You're a softshell."

"You sure you're not a computer?"

"Yes, lam stop teasing!"

Joat grinned unrepentently. Simeon felt an unfamiliar sensation and tried to identify it. A flutter in the ribcage? he thought wonderingly.

"Why haven't they answered the tight-beam?" Simeon asked nervously a week later. "I sent everything. The forms were all correct"

"It's a bureaucracy," Channa said soothingly.

"Oh? That's supposed to reassure me?" Simeon said. A moment later: "Why is Joat's room always a mess?"

I send in the servos twice a day and it's still in a maximum-entropy state."

"It's called 'adolescence,' Simeon," Channa said. "At least she seems to be settling in at school"

Simeon's image winced. Joat had unexpectedly cleaned up as pretty, though she had wrinkled her nose when he'd mentioned that. She seemed to trust him Channa as well to a limited extent Any further social interfacing was... lacking.

"She gets in too many fights," he said. She also fought very, very dirty. He winced again when he thought of the places some blows, kicks and punches had landed.

"She's not used to interacting except as a potential victim," Channa replied. "I don't think she's ever been with anyone in her own age group. She certainly doesn't know the local rituals. She's an outsider practically a feral child. We're lucky she can respond to other human beings at all."

An awkward silence fell for a moment Unspoken: and she didn't think you were human when she met you.

"She's learned about daily showers," Simeon pointed out helpfully.

"Oh, there's good stuff in Joat," and Channa grimaced. "Even if her brand of ethics is unusual, at least she's consistent in applying it. All she needs is some security and a chance."

"Isn't that all anybody needs?"

Several hours later, Simeon still glowed with satisfaction in their accomplishments with Joat. This, being a father thing, is great, he thought, and warmed measurably towards Channa. I've got to thank her.

For the first time since she had arrived, Simeon looked into her quarters and was surprised at how, in that short time under two weeks, although it seemed like more it had changed from the Spartan chamber Tell Radon had occupied. She had tinted the walls a soft, off-pink and had put "paint-chips" into the permanently installed frame-projectors. The jewel-bright colors and romantic images of the pre-Raphaelites, Alma-Tadema and Maxfield Parish glowed from the walls, along with some modern Mintoro reproductions. The bedspread was an icy gray satin on which were scattered embroidered pillows of peach and gray and blue.

"Say, Channa," he said in tones of pleased approval, "I like what you've done with the room."

Channa emerged from the bathroom clad in a blue silk robe trimmed with lace, a brush in her hand and swept out of her quarters into the main lounge without saying a word. She stopped in front of Simeon's column and crossed her arms, her eyes blazing. All Simeon's warm feelings fell into cold ash as he looked out at her. Maybe if he didn't say anything, she'd go away and not say whatever it was that was burning inside her eyes. Nah, when have I ever been that lucky where she's concerned? Her body was rigid, though her shoulders twitched and her fists opened several times. He'd better say something to stem the acid eruption.

Using as casual and complimentary tone as he could manage, he said, "You have very romantic tastes, Channa," which seemed to reduce her blazing eyes a degree or two. He'd never know why he continued: perhaps sheer mischief to get a little of his own back. "Though your bed looks amazingly like an ice cube."

She blinked in astonishment and he thought, A hit! A very palpable hit! But then she took a deep breath.

"I did not think," she said, every word precise and polished, "that it would be necessary to actually say this, but since I must, I shall. Because we got off on the wrong foot and I did not trust you, I swept my quarters for active scanners." She crossed her arms. "You will please," she went on with careful emphasis, "not ever enter my quarters without knocking and requesting admittance, and waiting for my express permission to enter. Is that clear, Simeon?"

"I apologize, Channa. Of course you're right. I got careless, all those years with Tell."

"As to the quality of my taste..." she said in a voice even more brittle than before.

Oh please, he thought/or one just once, shut up and let it go. "... it's none of your business." She glared at him. "Given your own preference for interior decoration," she said indicating his sword and dagger collection, "I'd say you have titanium gall to make snarky remarks about mine."

"But I like it. I said I liked it!"

"And what," she continued unheeding, "would someone with such a morbid fascination with humanity's lapses into ritualized slaughter know about romance anyway?"

Simeon was dumbstruck. "I've never... thought of my interest in military history as a 'morbid fascination.' I am genuinely fascinated by strategy and military tactics. But to call it morbid, well, romance and morbidity have a long and interesting relationship."

She sighed with exasperation. "Let's just say that while both can be morbid, romance and militarism make uncomfortable..." and she winced "... bedfellows."

"Channa, some of the most romantic people in history have been military personnel. Doesn't the very word 'warrior' conjure up romantic images?"

She shook her head discouragingly. "Not to me!"

"Not even 'knights in shining armor'?"

She groaned. "Look, Simeon, it's late and I'm tired. Let's just say that I don't like my privacy invaded at any time, by anyone." Her lips curled in a slight rueful grin. "But I think I overreacted a tad. Especially when you made fun of my decor."

"Well, you might wait till you're actually being made fun of before you start clawing pieces out of people."

"Sorry."

"Romance has its place," he murmured.

She smiled sardonically and raised one eyebrow. "With all due respect, Simeon, I doubt that romance has crossed your mind. Real, genuine romance, with its aspects of tenderness and sentiment are, if you'll excuse me, beyond your ken."

Tiere was more challenge than honest regret in her voice, and he took offense. "Because I'm a shellperson?" he asked, fairly purring with suppressed anger.

Channa's jaw dropped. "N-no, of course not!" she said, stammering slightly. Then she caught herself and shook her hairbrush at him. "What a nasty, evil, slimy debater's trick! You know perfectly well that I never even thought of that! What I meant was that so far in our acquaintance, you have yet to demonstrate that you are sensitive, or idealistic or... well, tender, fission, now I think you've very effectively conceptualized raw, basic, animal passion. Which does not exist in the same universe as romance."

"Let me tell you something, Ms. Hap. I'm well aware that romance happens in the mind and the soul and the heart. I know that it isn't necessarily a physical thing. Remember Heloise and Abelard...* "Great warrior couple, were they?" she asked smiling.

He sighed to himself. What do they teach them in university these days? "Not they, milady. I see I must persuade you beyond any measure of doubt You've put me on my mettle." She cocked her head at him. "I shall court you, belle dame sans merri, and win your heart."

She laughed aloud in astonishment. "You've got your work cut out for you. I may like the romantical as

decor but I'm no dewy-eyed sentimentalist and not at all susceptible."

"Oh, so you're seduction-proof, are you?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that with an answer. Goodnight, Simeon."

"Goodnight, Channa," he said quietly as she left without another word.

Not susceptible, eh, Happy baby? Well, get ready for it, sweetheart you're in for the time of your life. You want romance? FU give you romance, little lady, in such subtle and clever portions, you won't realize that you're being wooed by a very personal phantom lover.

He settled down to consider his strategy. Softshells could rely on physical attraction for starters; that was impossible for him, of course.

How to begin, he wondered. Well, with Channa, I suppose I could start with deft cooperation and nineteenth-century manners. I'd better look into the mores of Hawking Alpha Proxima Station and see what their courting customs are. Nothing so blatant as gifts right off, hmmm. Ah-ha! Music! After all, it hath charms to soothe the savage beast, or breast. Both apply in this case. Now, fit just access her musical repertoire which doesn't invade her privacy, merely her overt records...

"Hey, Simeon, what's going on?" Joat said, turning from her breakfast to stare at his column.

"Going on, my dear?" Simeon said.

"Yeah, going on. All of a sudden you're so smooth you'd make a wombat puke, and Channa looks as if she'd just found a dead body, a long-time dead body."

Channa snorted suddenly. Since she was in the middle of a mouthful of coffee, the results were spectacular. Joat silently offered her a napkin as she coughed and sputtered.

"You're imagining things," Simeon replied, with a touch of asperity. He shifted into a mellow tone: "Are you all right, Channa?"

"What's wrong with Simeon?" Patsy asked, sotto voce. They were in the shadow of an impeller pump, and the vibration would make voice-pickup difficult "Wrong?" Channa said, frowning.

"Yeah, he's agreem' all the time.

"Now that you mention it..."

The woman from Larabie shrugged. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, Chan. But, if you do, check the teeth fer file-marks."

Chief Administrator Claren gave a final keystroke.

"That's the projections matched against the past five years," he said. "You'll note turnover is a little high, but on a transit station, it's difficult to keep people."

Channa frowned. "I'd think it would be easier here," she said. "More big-city facilities."

"Also easier to leave," Claren pointed out, nodding towards the large passenger terminal.

"We should do more in the way of social and cultural activities," Channa said. "The contingency fund would cover it, and in the long run, such amenities pay for themselves and then some. There are a lot of mining and exploration sectors around here " which was exactly why SSS-900-C had been established in the middle of the cluster of mineral-rich fifth-generation suns "and their people need leisure activities just as much as their equipment and ships need servicing. The Perimeter's a gold mine for its owners and for the station, to name your only real star attraction. If the outposters could get entertainment and commissary supplies in a range from cheap to expensive, they wouldn't need to travel further in towards Center. This whole area would take a big step further toward being part of the Central Worlds and not just a primitive frontier zone,"

"Exactly, Ms. Hap," Claren said. He was a mousy-looking little man, with thinning black hair combed back over his head. He dressed like a humorist's caricature of a bureaucrat, down to the keypad holder on his belt. "It's what I've been saying for years."

"What do you think, Simeon?" Channa asked.

"Sounds good to me," the affable city manager replied.

Claren coughed violently; one of his hovering assistants scurried forward with a glass of water.

Channa waited until he had recovered. "Surprise you, did he?"

"Surprise me? Me? No, no, something caught in my throat. Air's dry, I think." He hastily swallowed another sip of water to reinforce that interpretation. "Now, here," and his fingers flew over the key of his terminal, "are some plans we've had pending, with the projected "

"Answer the question, please, Administrator Claren," she said firmly but quietly. She might be new, but she could recognize "sign now, please," when she heard it "Well, ah, this isn't the first time these specific projects have been put forward," Claren said. "But, ah, there has never been a sufficiently positive reaction to implement the schemes. Until now, that is. It's a pleasure to work with someone who can appreciate planning ahead and is so naturally decisive. Ahhhhh, oh dear." His voice trailed off.

Channa's took on a steely note. "Changed our mind, have we, Simeon?"

"This station wasn't in a position to plunge into such an ambitious project. Much less have the incentive," Simeon replied smoothly. "Tell was a roughneck like me. Neither of us had the background for coordinating such enterprises. Here, anyway."

Channa turned, subliminally aware of something moving through the air behind her. It was a message tray, floating at elbow height. The domed top folded back, revealing chilled glasses and a frosted, uncorked bottle of a fine vintage. A single red rose lay on the white napery. Her lips grew thin but, as she saw Claren watching her closely and knew that she must be flushing, she controlled her impulse to sling the bottle at the sensor that linked Simeon to this office.

"Yes, by all means let us drink to the success of this undertaking, Claren," she said and began to pour.

Facetiously, she lifted her glass towards the sensor and sipped, mildly surprised at the dry crisp taste. "Hmm. Not a bad white! Didn't know you had it in you, Simeon."

"I'm not without a few talents of mine own," he replied, wishing there was an imager in Claren's office so he could project the suave smile he was feeling.

She downed the rest of the glass, replacing it on the float. "If you'd just transfer the plans to my terminal, Administrator Claren, I can peruse them at my leisure." Then she strode purposefully out of the office.

She was storming by the time she got to their lounge. "I bet you think you were being subtle like colliding with an asteroid, you " She swung around to the screen which he had prudently left blank, giving her anger no focus. Then she began to hear the sounds filling the room.

Simeon delightedly watched her expression gradually alter from livid to astonished and finally to enchanted as the lilting sounds of the Reticulatii mating croon filled the lounge. The sounds were long, low, dreamy. There was no formal melody, but somehow the theme suggested the stillness of deep forest and dew falling like liquid diamond in streaks of sunlight dazzling through the leaves.

Channa stood still for a moment. She winced slightly as the door closed with an audible swoosh, annoyed that any other sound marred the perfection of what she was hearing. Then, stepping carefully, as though fearful that doth brushing against doth or shoe against carpet might cause her to lose a precious second of the complex musk that surrounded her, she walked to a chair. She sat down so slowly she seemed to float down to it, scarcely seemed to breathe as she absorbed the music.

My first impression of her was correct, Simeon thought, watching Channa. She is a fox! Then, peering more closely, he wasn't so sure, for her eyes were half-closed, starred with tears, and his acute vision let him see the skin of her face relaxing, smoothing out. She doesn't look that foxy now! In fact, she looks kinda... sweet. When the croon had drifted off into a serene silence, she sat without moving. Then she closed her eyes and slowly leaned back, clasping her hands before her. When she opened her eyes, they shone and her voice was husky.

"Oh, Simeon... I can forgive you a lot of tricks for that! I might even kiss you. In appreciation, of course. That was so beautiful. Thank you," and she smiled.

Simeon modulated his voice so that there was a "smile" in his tones when he answered her. "You're welcome. Do you happen to know what that was?" He didn't think she was likely to, but he kept that out of his tone.

She wiped an eye and said, "I've never had the opportunity to hear one, but that has to be a Reticulan croon."

"You're right about that," Simeon said with satisfaction. "But I bet you'll never guess who performed it" He tried hard to keep any smugness out of his voice.

"Now, how would I know that? sang, much less who could, beside Reticulans, and they're on the other side of this galaxy. Oh! It couldn't be..." Her eyes went round in awed surprise. "Not Helva? She's supposed to be able to sing them. But... you... and Helva, the ship who sings?"

"None other." Simeon was gratified by her reaction.

"You know her?"

"Indeed I do," and Simeon allowed himself to speak with considerable pride. "She drops by every now and then to visit " he couldn't resist a little pause for effect " me. We discuss and exchange contemporary

music from all parts of the galaxy. Since there are so few recordings of Reticulan croons which we shellpeople enjoy so much she herself made me a gift of this one." The memory of his thrill at receiving such a prize colored his tone.

Channa smiled in response. "Finally read my personnel tape, did you?"

"Well, I'd love to say that I'm just terribly perceptive, but music's mentioned as a significant interest. I just thought this particular recording might please, too."

"Oooh," she said with a quaver in her laugh, "music hath charms department? As you said not long ago," and there was an edge of combined sarcasm and chagrin, "you have a few talents." Then she added brightly, "Do you sing, too? That's not mentioned in your personals."

Simeon made a throat-clearing, clearly selfdeprecating sound. "I am not like Helva and make no claims to musical discrimination. I listen to what I like, but I don't know if I'll like something until I hear it."

"So what else have you heard and liked?" she asked, relaxed in the afterglow of the beautiful croon. "Besides rockjack, that is?"

His tone was embarrassed. "I really don't tike Rant much. I just got used to it, you know. The guys on those early mining belt assignments I had didn't play anything else. Most ofwhat I like turns out to be classical or operatic."

"Me, too," she said, smiling towards his column with a kindness he had not seen in her before. "Well, if Helva liked you enough to give you that superb Reticulan recording, and you actually admit to a preference for classical and operatic, perhaps we should call a truce?"

"A truce? Do we need one?"

She narrowed her eyes. "In a manner of speaking, we do. We have struck a few sparks." She grinned. "A mutual appreciation of music is so far probably the firmest common ground between us. Halfway through secondary school, I realized that my best friends were also my choirmates." She leaned toward the column, with the first intimacy she had so far shown him. "We used to produce and cast ghost operas."

"You did what?"

"We'd choose a subject or theme, and a composer, then select a cast The rules said that composer and cast have to be dead,"

"Really? How bizarre!" Simeon paused to consider the notion. "Do go on."

"We'd start with... the name of this opera. Say, 'Rasputin.' Have you heard of him?" The merry tone of her voice was subtly teasing, challenging him.

"Of course, I have. He's often credited with being the indirect cause of a successful revolution."

She regarded his column with a wry expression. "You would know about him if he caused a war, wouldn't you?"

"Do we, or don't we have a truce?"

"We do," she said, holding up both hands in surrender.

"Who writes this 'Rasputin' opera?"

"Oh, Verdi," she said instantly. "Such a grand theme as well as that particular time would appeal to him. Don't you think? Now, you tell me who should play the lead."

Simeon accessed the necessary historical information from his files. "In the available likenesses of him, Rasputin has enormous eyes and a riveting gaze, so we want a singer who's physically powerful and dramatically able to do justice to such a role. How about flac Sue, the Sondee tenor?"

"Eh... he does have a compelling gaze, I grant you, and his eyes are large. But don't you think he has a few too many of them? Besides he's only retired, not dead,"

Simeon flipped back a massive leap in the research file. "Um, Placido Domingo?"

"I know of him! He lived in a time blessed with great tenors. He's perfect! Tall, lean, big brown eyes and what a voice. Nice choice, Simeon."

"And he's dead, too."

"I can see it now," she said, standing suddenly and clutching histrionically at her throat. "They poison him, you see," and then she flung her arms wide, "and he sings! They stab him," she mimed a thrust to the bosom, before flinging her arms wide again, "and he sings! They drown him," she flapped her arms as though splashing frantically, then placed both hands on her heart, "and he sings! They shoot him," she staggered to Simeon's column and leaned her back against it.

"Channa, he's got to stop singing sometime."

She raised a finger, "Sotto voce, he sings, 'it is over.' ** She slid down the column into a graceful art-deco position, "And he dies." Her head flopped forward and her hands dangled loosely from her wrists.

The com chimed and the screen cleared, allowing communications specialist Keri Holen an unobstructed view of Channa slumped at the base of Simeon's column. "Oh! What's hap... I mean, Ms. Hap! Simeon, is she all right?"

Channa was instantly on her feet, palm up in a calming gesture. "I'm fine," she said, serenely adjusting her tunic blouse. "What is it?"

"Uh... a message from Child Welfare on Central, from a Ms. Dorgan. If it's convenient, she's scheduled a conference call for 1600 today."

"Perfect," Simeon said, "tell her thank you," and he broke the connection.

"I thank the powers that be that wasn't Ms. Dorgan herself," Channa said nervously.

"I like that 'if it's convenient,'" Simeon said, musingly. "Channa, have you ever replied, 'No, it's damned inconvenient'?"

Channa regarded him with a singularly blank expression. "No, actually I haven't. But then, in my branch of the service, it shouldn't ever be!"

Simeon studied Joat nervously, wondering if they should have dressed her differently. All the other children her age wore the same shapeless clothes, disgusting and often raucous color combinations, but not necessarily what the prudent guardian would recommend for this kind of interview. The com chimed.

Too late, he thought. Channa seemed calm, but then Channa always seemed calm. Odd when she can exude such depths of hostility.... Still, she always did them with a controlled and icy demeanor. Yeah, Channa was fine. Joat's hands were clasped in her lap. Poor fad, her knuckles are white. But otherwise she seemed composed. Tm fine, too, he thought Tm not calm, but fin fine.

Ms. Dorgan studied them from die screen, like a teacher assessing a class of delinquents, then smiled, a tight superior little smile. Her hair was gray, cut short, combed in a simple disciplined style. She wore a severe dark blue suit with a prim white blouse and no jewelry. The view ofbackground behind her was official and equally unsoftened by anythingeven remotely unofficial I'll bet she starches her bras, Simeon thought. He remembered Patsy Sue using that expression: entirely appropriate right now.

Ms. Dorgan nodded to Channa, then fastened her cold litde eyes on Joat. "Hello, dear," she said in syrupy tones. "I'm Ms. Dorgan, your case-worker."

Joat's face had hardened to wariness, her whole body going rigid. Simeon wondered how his nutrient fluid had suddenly gone so cold, but he didn't dare divert an erg of his attention away from these proceedings. He didn't even dare reassure Joat. She mumbled a barely audible "hello" in response.

"Well, dear, you made some very impressive scores on the tests. Did you know that?"

A nearly inaudible "no" answered her.

Ms. Dorgan glanced down at something below the screen's range, and then her right hand became visible, probably pressing the button to scroll her file forward.

"You are, however, considerably behind your age group in a good many subjects, with the exception of mathematics and mechanicals, where you positively excel." That much was said with some genuine enthusiasm. "You've no idea the excitement you've generated in some quarters. I think you may now anticipate a much brighter future than your past may have led you to expect, dear."

Simeon spoke for the first time, keeping his promise to his prote"ge\ *Joat wants to study engineering. You obviously concur that she has a unique talent in that field."

Ms. Dorgan's studied smile wavered and the tendons on her neck stood out with the strain of not obviously peering around the room. "You are the... shellperson?" She seemed to hold her thin lips away from the word as though it might soil them. Her eyes roved between Channa and Joat as though hoping one of them might be ventriloquising the male voice.

"Yes. I am Simeon, the SSS-900-C. I'm applying to adopt Joat as a full daughter and full relation."

Ms. Dorgan's hand delicately brushed a strand of hair back into place.

"Yes, well, as to that," she raised her brows as though surprised that he had spoken at all, "you realize that other prospective parents have put in applications for children with Joat's potential. We usually give

preference to couples." There was a feint emphasis on the final word. She fingered her collar nervously. "In Joan's case..."

*Joat," said Joat, Simeon and Channa in unison.

'Joat's case, I've shown her file to a quantum-lattice engineer, who is a professor of my acquaintance, and he immediately expressed an interest in her. He's extremely enthusiastic about tutoring someone of such promise. He's married, too, on a life-contract with a poet. Such a situation would have many advantages for the child."

Simeon watched Joat's face go white. "As a station manager, I am intimately acquainted with a variety of sciences, including regular updates on state-of-the-art, so I am quite capable of tutoring her, on the practical level she prefers, in any specialty that interests her. Relax, Joat Ms.

Gorgon's merely mentioning options and possibilities."* The case-worker loudly cleared her throat "My name, Station Manager Simeon, is Dorgan, with a D. Which reminds me, Joat, somewhere on the application, ah, here it is, it says that your name is an acronym for 'jack-of-all-trades.' Where Jack* was a gender-inappropriate first name, Jill* was substituted. How would you feel about being called Jill?"

"About the same as I'd feel about being called shit," Joat replied, every inch the belligerent corridor-kid now, scornful and angry; no trace of her earlier diffidence remaining. "And I wouldn't answer to it 'cause it's not my name."

'Joat!" Channa gasped.

"Don't you see it, Simeon, Channa?" Joat said, her blue eyes sparkling with contempt "This is all a joke! This ol' Ms. Organ..."

"Dorgan, if you please." "... bitch has made up her mind. What are we wasting our time and credit talking to her for?"

"Calm down, Joat," Simeon said. "Let's not jump to conclusions yet. Ms. Dorgan, although I have unlimited communication links, my time is heavily scheduled, and I was assured by the authorities that this was merely a formality. Shall we move to settling the details now?"

Slightly pink in the cheeks, Ms. Dorgan took a deep breath and released it in a small huff.

"I can't believe that you would persist in this application, Anne McGuffey & S.M. Stining knowing that a human couple is interested in the child. It would be one thing if no one wanted her, but that is not the case. In the first place, since she's at a very sensitive stage of development, there is no way that someone like you could appreciate what she's going through."

"Because Simeon is male?" Channa asked quietly.

"Because he is a shell person. My dear Ms. Hap, as a professional brawn, you are surely well-acquainted with the peculiarities of these persons. Why deny that they are practically a different species? With no real understanding of what it's like to be independently mobile? How could he possibly raise an active, growing child?" The slight emphasis on the two adjectives made Channa clench her teeth in disgust. Dorgan's question was also rhetorical.

"Well, now, Joat," Simeon drawled, heavily borrowing from Patsy Sue again, "I guess you were right. Ms. Gorgon had made up her mind before she saw us."

"That's Dorgan," the case-worker said, leaning heavily on the "d."

"Toldja," Joat said, "ol* Ms. Organ's already decided."

"Dorgan. Dorgan. DORGANI"

"Stop it! All three of you." Channa cast her glare over Simeon's column, Joat's flushed face, and finally settled it on the Child Welfare representative. "You have some very strange ideas about shellpeople, Ms. Dorgan, with a D. My advice would be to consider carefully before you make any more bigoted remarks. I particularly resent your denying Simeon his intrinsic humanity. I've never met a shellperson who wasn't at hist as able and responsible as a softperson. And indisputably more ethical! In fact, your remarks indicate active prejudice on your part. Prejudice which is, I might remind you, legally actionable."

Ms. Dorgan raised her chin. "There's no need, no need at all, Ms. Hap, to make threats. No doubt it is due to your long association with such persons that you no longer consider them... abnormal." Before Channa could get over sputtering at that, the case-worker smiled smugly. "In the child's best interests, I'm afraid that I shall have to deny this petition. I shall make arrangements for her transport to Central, where, after a short stay at our orphan facility, she will no doubt be adopted by a proper family." Still smiling she broke the connection.

"Well?" Simeon almost shouted into the ensuing silence. "You're not going to let her have the last word on this, are you?"

"Don't she have it? Far's this orphan child's concerned?" Joat demanded bitterly. "I knew this'd happen. I told myself this'd happen. But you two trained brains were both so damned sure" She sneered as she counted off her points. "You knew just where to go and just who to talk to and just what to do. But you know what? You don't know ANYTHING! But after all, how could you?" she asked her eyes beginning to fill with tears. "Everything's always gone your way. Everything's always just been handed to you." She started to sob. "Shells, education, food, a living place. Well, they don't get handed out, lemme tell ya. And look what you've done to me\ Now they know I exist and where I am, and they're coming to get me! For all I know, that lattice engineer wants to play diddly on my lattice work. Only he's human and a professor and's got an 'in*' with her. You got me into this, but I'm sure not waiting for you to get me out. I'm not goin' anywhere with nobody \ don't want to!" Her voice had reached scream level before she pivoted and ran from the lounge.

*Joat!" Channa moved to follow her, but Simeon closed the door in her face. "Simeon!" she said in disbelief.

"Let her go, Channa. What could you do now? Lock her in her room until they come for her?" Channa looked as though he'd struck her. "She needs time and privacy. She needs to feel in control again. Let her alone."

"There are things we can do, Simeon. I'm not going to let that woman win. We can go over her head in Child Welfere. We can appeal to SPRIM and Double M for help. You taped that interview, didn't you?"

He laughed, for once pleased to see her so combative. "Yes, I did, and won't the Mutant Minorities and the Society for the Preservation of the Rights of Intelligent Minorities dump on La Gorgon for her attitudes! Good thinking, Channa. I'm this very moment apprising them of this incident Y'know, this could even be fun."

Late that night, Simeon noticed that a light came on in Channa's quarters. He had assiduously kept to his promise, but the faint glow under the door was plainly visible. Well, to anyone with photonscanners like mine, he amended. Still, he was observing the principle of the thing.

Channa heard a chiming sound and, after a surprised pause, called out "Hello?"

Simeon's voice, carefully adjusted to low audibility, answered from the lounge, "May I come in?"

She smiled and laid aside the reader she'd picked up. "Yes, you may."

She lay in bed, looking tousled and sleepy. Simeon thought that she looked little more than a kid herself, "Can't sleep?" he asked.

She shook her head, "I keep thinking of Joat, alone down there in the dark."

"Joat's been asleep for hours,"

"How do you know that? She might still be crying her heart out for all we know."

"I know because I can hear little, Joat-sized snores issuing from one of her favorite haunts."

"She didn't turn on her sound-scrubber?"

"Nope. She was upset!"

"No, she was thoughtful. She is becoming more civilized if she didn't want us to worry." And Channa laughed in relief, then sobered. "She's such a good kid. She really didn't deserve Gorgon on her case. Look, Simeon, B & B's are considered couples by Central Worlds. Our contracts tend to last a lot longer than mere marriages. If I stayed on for say, ten years and applied for joint custody with you, most of Gorgon's objections would be invalid."

"Joint custody, huh? Well, Gorgon can't say a female brawn isn't a good role model. I've got comlines hotting up, but what I don't know is how many others at Child Welfare suffer from Dorgan's prejudice. I'd hate to see you make such a 'supreme sacrifice' for nothing. Fighting Ms. Gorgon through the bureaucracy won't turn us to stone, but it could bore our brains into oatmeal."

Channa gave a little "tsh" of scorn. "It's not like I've got anywhere else to go."

"I know, I heard about Senalgal. Sorry, Channa. I know what it's like to lose an assignment you'd sell your soul to get"

She raised her eyebrows inquiringly. "What was it for you, if you don't mind my asking a planet-based city, a scout ship? Or maybe you looked as high as a whole planet?"

"I've got a city, more or less. Definitely not a scout ship. The brain/brawn scout ship is too claustrophobic and limited. I like dealing with a lot of people. I enjoy the give and take of various personalities and situations. More challenge on a station this size. Hope being challenged."

"Not a city, not a ship. You're after a planet?"

"No, I wouldn't want that much responsibility. And a planet's too sedentary. But a ship, definitely, so I could get around a lot."

"Ah,*" she said, making the connection between his leisure interests and the only ship assignment that applied, "a Space Navy command-ship." She cocked her head. "Are you in line for one?"

"Theoretically, yes. I've applied and what do I get? 'You're too important where you are,' " he began in a singsong monotone, " 'You're too perfect where you are, there's no one else as well-trained as you are for such a highly specialized situation.' I've always," he added wryly, "considered SSS-900-C to be a temporary assignment."

"Forty years is temporary?"

"With shellpersons, of course it is."

"Maybe we aren't so imperfectly matched after all." She paused a moment, then in a flippant tone added, "With Joat to sweeten the deal, I don't think I would regard staying here as a 'supreme sacrifice.' Ugh! Orphan facility, indeed! Pick her up? Like some sort of a package?" She peered out of her room towards his column. "Do you think we stand a chance of reversing Dorgan's decision?"

Simeon wouldn't have taken bets, but he had barely tackled the task. On the up side, he felt something deep inside him beginning to uncoil. "With a B & B partnership, we have a chance. I appreciate your willingness to consider one very much, Channa. Right now though, dear lady, why don't you sleep on it?"

She sighed. "Mm, but I'm restless, and," she played with an edge of the reader, "there's nothing I really want to read."

"Then," he said, gendy dimming the lights, "I shall recite a bedtime poem for you. Settle in." He waited until she had scooted down and adjusted covers and pillows, smiling as she did so. He began, "We who with songs beguile your pilgrimage..." Her eyes dosed, and gradually she drifted off to sleep as Simeon recited. "... softly through the silence beat the bells, Along the golden road to Samarkand."

Channa emerged into the lounge, heading for the table and her morning coffee. A wave of sound struck her very much a wave, like plunging into a curling jade-green wall that seized her and bore her back towards the beach.

She couldn't help but recognize the music as "The Triumphal March" from The Empress of Ganymede by User.

She paused with a slight frown when she realized that she had unconsciously altered her stride to suit the march tempo. She stopped, and her pause was the length of a measure. She laughed when she realized it. "Does this mean I get to be queen today?"

"Actually, after your restless night, I decided something upbeat would suit."

"Well, I sure got off on the right foot, then," she said with a sound approximating a giggle.

Simeon was pleased. Last night their relationship really had turned a corner. They were going to be all right.

"So, a good morning to you, Simeon," she said with an impish smile.

"And a good morning right back atcha, as Patsy Sue would say."

Channa's appreciative smile faded slowly into a frown. "I'd consider it a real good morning if I could see and speak to Joat as soon as possible. I'm very worried that she might jump ship on us, and that would ruin every step of progress we've made with her." fc? SM. Stirling "Wish I could oblige you on that, Charm a, but I don't know where she is now. She turned on her sound-scrubber early this morning and effectively vanished." He hurried on when Channa's face showed her disappointment clearly. "I don't think she'd leave on two counts. One, she knows her way intimately between the skins of this station, and it's certainly big enough for her to change hidey-holes on an hourly basis if necessary. And two, none of the ships undocking today are the type she could stow away on or hire out on. I've got every sensor tuned to her registered patterns, and I've discreetly alerted key personnel."

Channa nodded and went to her console, pulling the notescreen towards her. "Then we had better get to work. SPRIM ought to be moving on that dispatch you sent off last night." Her anxiety lifted at Simeon's knowing chuckle. She ran her fingers in a tattoo on the console. "And I suspect Child Welfare won't like being on their hit list."

"Hit list?" Simeon spoke with some alarm. "Are they that way inclined?" He didn't wish Ms. Dorgan any pkysicalharm.

"The way SPRIM execs rave about humanocentric chauvinism is enough to turn even a tolerant person into a xenophobe. They've got money and they're tireless in ensuring protection. That slur she made on shellpeople, well,. And the MM make SPRIM look like a quilting party."

"Quilting party?" Simeon searched his lexicon for the term.

"Old-fashioned way to spend a productive and socializing evening," she explained absently, "Oh. Not much we can do until they get back to us, I suppose."

Simeon sounded unhappy. Channa quirked a corner of her mouth.

"We can't go in with lasers blazing and slag Child Welfare Central, if that's what you mean. If the station had full self-government, they wouldn't be able to mess with us so let's concentrate on station business for now, shall we?" She cleared her throat. "I've been going over your accounts, Simeon, and I've got to say that you have some weird entries. For example, tucked away in the fourth quarter is the notation 'stuff.' You'll have to be more specific than 'stuff.'"

"Why? 'Stuff' is acceptable to the accountants," he said in a facetious tone.

"I'm not an accountant. I'm supposed to be your partner. Would you explain 'stuff?'"

"It's like this, Channa, I buy things that interest me. Me, Simeon, not the station master brain." Never mind that that also accounted for why he hadn't paid off his natal debt to Central Worlds. So Tm a packrat. Is that her business now?

Far out in space, Simeon's peripheral monitors, the ring of sensors that warned of incoming traffic, began to transmit information that suggested a very large object was headed their way. From the ripples it caused in subspace, it was very large or very fast or both. He split his attention between her and the alert, and sent a communicator pulse in the direction of the disturbance. There were strict rules on how to approach a station. Approaching unheralded broke half a dozen regs and invariably caused stiff credit

penalties.

Respond to hailing, he transmitted. Respond immediately.

"Well, we've got this inspection and audit coming up in two weeks," he heard Channa saying in a firm let's-not-beat-about-the-bush tone. "We have got to have everything shipshape and Bristol fashion, partner."

He did appreciate that she subtly reminded him of her promise to help with Joat, but this was no time for petty details.

"I don't have a ship shape, Channa," he muttered in his distraction, "but I do have something very unusual out there, approaching me without due protocol."

Visual information was now reaching him. Dropping out of interstellar transit and approaching at... Great Ghu.17 c! A large vessel whose profile did not fit any known human ship. The basic hull-form was spherical, but carried a web of crazy-quilt additions, constructions of girder and latticework. Some of them looked as if they had been slashed off short with energy beams, and the cutpoints were tattered. People were generally not sloppy with cutting tools. Enemies were. Simeon relayed a standard "please identify" message and put the tugbays on standby.

"Nor am I abristle," he continued to Channa. "The inspectors will be when they come, though."

Channa groaned. "Even for you that was lame. You're being unusually ridiculous, Simeon. You know the mentality that goes with these inspections sentence first, trial afterwards."

"In other words, off with our heads, if they could reach mine."

"And us running as fast as we can to stay in one place, too. Which capability you also don't have. Now, since this is my first time with you...** "Oh, Channa... pant, pant** "Simeon," she said warningly. "I know where the controls for your hormone balance are."

"Heh hen, sorry. What's the worst they can do to me? Send me back to asteroidic purgatory? Like I told you, I'm only on temporary duty here anyway."

Channa had been running a scan. "There are twelve entries for the word 'stuff!' You want this to be a temporary assignment? Well, you may get your wish."

"It's not a wish, my dear, I never said 'I wish they'd take me away from here and put me anywhere else.' I've a very definite destination in mind, as you so astutely concluded the other evening. If I had my druthers, I'd be running a command ship and waging star wars on the Axial Perimeter. But," and he gave a huge audible sigh, "who believes in wishes anymore?"

"You do, with all your war games and tactical daydreams."

The approaching ship still had not responded, nor was it dumping speed as fast as it should. In fact, whoever was in command had waited much too long to begin doing so. The flare of drive energies should be blanking out that whole quadrant, and the neutrino flux was barely enough for a pile just ticking over. Simeon came to a disagreeable conclusion.

"Whoa, there, Channa. We've got stuff, not mine, coming in to make mince of us if we're not careful."

Have a look?"

Simeon slapped up a main screen view of the intruder bearing down on them. Surprise and alarm held her motionless for only a split second before she reacted.

"I'm alerting the perimeter guard," she said, wiping her previous program and inputting the new.

"Right!" Although he already had, two sources of the same alert emphasized the emergency. "I'm busy calculating how to cushion the impact of that great hulking mass whistling towards us. I hope they know where the brakes are." Nice to have a brawn to share emergency work. The station personnel should get used to dealing with her.

Stabbing the alert button on the main console, Channa then called up a finer resolution of the object, which to her appeared to be a darker mass against the black of space.

"Unannounced arrival!" She transmitted the image to the personnel on perimeter traffic control, alerting them to the pertinent vector and ordering them to begin rerouting incoming traffic.

"How do you know it's whistling toward us?" she asked in as calm a voice as he was using while her fingers flew over the controls. "There's no sound in space."

Simeon could detect just a micro-tremor of fear in her noncommittal tone. "If I think it whistles," he answered, "it whistles."

"Perimeter says it's like nothing they've ever seen before either and " she paused and licked her lips " it's about to cut a broad swath through the proper traffic pattern."

Simeon took full control of the traffic control boards. He could see and respond to the necessary changes in traffic patterns faster than any unshelled human. He was simultaneously redirecting and responding to dozens of ships.

Suddenly Channa started cursing. "Damn their eyes and innards! These damned civilians are asking questions instead of doing what they're supposed to in emergency routines. Now you see why I didn't like you calling those false alarms. No one's paying a blind bit of attention to the genuine emergency! Wolf-cryer!"

"I've put it on every public screen. They'll know it's no drill," Simeon said, his voice velvet with malice, "and it's coming straight at us. I don't think it'll stop,"

I didn't realize you could banter when you're terrified, he thought with tight control, though it helped being able to set your analogue of adrenal glands.

Channa stared, stunned, as the screen filled with the alien ship. "You haven't activated the repel screen? Hit it for God's sake!" She pressed her rocker switch just a fraction of a second behind Simeon.

Joat gritted her teeth and wiped eyes and nose on the back of her sleeve. It was a good shirt, and dean. Dumb, she told herself fiercely. Dumb, dumb, dumb bitch, dumb gash, just like the captain told you you were. Especially when he was drunk. He'd always been worse then.

She turned her attention back to the little computer. It was the best she'd ever been able to steal, a real Spuglish; jacked into the station system right now, with the skipper-unit she'd cobbled up to keep the

station from knowing just where or why.

Ship schedules / departures / outsystem, she told it Machines didn't lie to you! You could trust machines and, if they didn't do what they were supposed to, it wasn't because they had lied. Maths and machinery could be believed.

A barking sob broke through her lips, spattering drops on the screen. She bit down on her hand until the pain and the taste of her own blood let her continue. Then she wiped the machine down with the tail of her shirt Machines didn't let you down, either.

Departures, the computer said. Look, Joat, you don't have to leave here. Trust me, we're "No!" she screamed.

Joat stuffed the scramblers into her pockets and went off down the duct at a scrambling crawl, ignoring projections and brackets that only slightly impeded her progress. The motions were reflexive, with a graceless efficiency.

Nobody's going to give me away again, she thought. Get me used to eating regular and school and everything, then give me away! The thought went round and round in her head, filling it, so that it was minutes before the klaxon penetrated her self-absorption.

"Oh, shit," she whispered in a still small voice, listening. Then she turned and went back the way she came, faster still. The computer was back there, and without it, she wouldn't be able to find out what was really going on.

Her spacesuit was there, too. This sounded serious.

"THIS IS NO DRILL! REPEAT, THIS IS NO DRILL!" The words rang down the corridors and haUspace, without the melodramatic klaxons Simeon had always used. "Nonessential personnel report to secure areas. Report to secure areas. Prepare for breach of hull integrity."

This time the citizens of the SSS-900-C listened, hastening into suits, gathering children and pets and heading for the central core or section shelters. Crews pelted onto their ships, even as moorings were detached and entry locks irised shut and each "all on board" signal was relayed to Simeon. Emergency crews flocked to their assigned stations. Infirmary patients who could not be moved were placed in individual, independently powered life-support units. All too soon, most of the citizens of SSS-900-C could only wait, imagining their station crushed like an egg as the invader plowed into them.

Simeon worked frantically, ordering ships of all sizes out of the projected path of the incoming ship, brutally suppressing the knowledge that ships with ordinary, unshelled pilots could barely handle the split second timing he was asking of them. So far, so good no one out there seemed destined to die today. For a heartstopping moment he thought the alien might be decelerating, but the blaze of energies sputtered and died. It's only shed 7% of relative velocity, he calculated dismally. Not nearly enough.

"Why didn't they program mobility?" "Who?" Channa asked distractedly. "Where?" "In me! In this station! I can't duck! I've no weaponry to blast it out of my way. I can't even fend off such mass. All I can do is watch. What lasers I've got can just about handle a decent-sized meteor. The best I can do is warm up his hull a little, and I have to wait till he's up my ass to do it! Damn! This station is like a paraplegic spaceship!"

"Whoa! Did you see that?" Channa shouted. The mass had seemed to deliberately veer aside from an

ordinary asteroid miner vessel, something the miner pilot himself probably couldn't have done. "Watch," she said, "there! Did you see? It jiggled just a bit to miss that incoming ferry traffic. It is being guided."

"But by what?" Simeon asked. He ran calculations on the ballistics of those maneuvers. The deviations were absolutely minimal for the effect. "It's traveling so fast now, no human pilot could stop it and stay conscious. They don't answer any radio messages. They're ignoring the damn warning flares. Shit, maybe they think we're welcoming them. Ah, good!" "But they are decelerating again, Simeon," Channa said, glancing up from her own screens to the main viewer before she went back to other chores which she had assumed.

"Yeah, marginally longer this time. No, cutting out no, decelerating again. Rate of energy-release... God, but they're still not dumping enough velocity! And still on a collision course!" His voice went slightly wild. "They must want to destroy me!"

"I don't see any weapons," Channa said, trying to finish her current task in time.

"Who can tell in that jumble of struts and boxes and crap! Besides, that thing itself is a weapon." Simeon had just one card to play and at exactly the right moment for maximum effect. "You're not even suited up, partner. At least take shelter in my shaft core, Channa."

She shook her head, "Not till I'm through evacuating the alien quadrant 'Sides, those Letheans scare easily enough as it is without me appearing in full gear."

She had managed at last to get through to the leader of the Lethe contingent. A people so formal that emergencies required a ceremony, mercifully brief, for deferring the usual endless courtesies in favor of survival. Had Channa not performed the ceremony and explained the situation to them, they would have died rather than commit such a breach of manners as assuming that something was actually wrong. She broke the connection at last and exclaimed, "Joat!" "She has a suit," Simeon said, "first thing I gave her. She's probably in it right now. Why aren't you?"

She dashed for the cabinet holding her space suit and began to struggle into it "Come to me, Channa," he said, in a wildly facetious tone, "come, touch the hard, male core of my innermost being."

"Ee-yuck, is that the sort of romance you've been studying? Try another mode."

"When I've world enough and time, lovely one, but have a look at what I've managed to arrange as stop signs."

Seemingly from out of nowhere, three communications satellites came diving towards the incoming ship, two striking it head on and one slightly astern. Whole sections of the scaffolding and outer skin of the derelict sublimed in white flashes that expanded into circles with zero-g perfection. The alien ship was not slowed there was too much kinetic energy in that mass but its vector altered slightly.

"Comsats aren't supposed to be able to move like that!" Channa exclaimed tightly. Simeon's sensors could hear the pounding of her heart, analyze the ketones her sweat-damp skin was emitting. Fear under hard control. The lady has guts, he thought.

"A little something I cooked up on my own," he said smugly.

"Cooked in the wrong sort of pot, you crazy loon. Without those satellites, we'll be out of communication with half the universe for weeks."

"Channa, if I hadn't done that we'd be out of communication with the all of the universe permanently. Besides, my satellite tactic worked!"

Channa looked up at the main monitor and saw that the projected vector had skewed slightly. "Not enough," she muttered. "Please don't use any more of our comm satellites like billiard balls, Simeon. If we do survive this, they'll be needed more than ever."

"Oh-oh," Simeon muttered.

"Oh-oh?" she repeatedly anxious.

It means, I screwed the pooch, Channa, Simeon thought Aloud he went on. "SS Conrad, dump your carrier modules and get out of that sector. You are now directly in the path of the incoming ship."

"No-can-do SSS-900-C. I've got a full load here. The company'll have my ass if I desert it"

"The company'll have to hold a seance to get it, then, 'cause if you stay put, you're about to become immortaL Jump it!"

"Now!" Channa shouted. "It's less than two k-thousand kilometers from you. Now, dammit!"

"No shit!" the pilot shouted and disconnected the "cab," the crew quarters and control section of the ship, from the much larger freight storage sections.

They watched the tiny cab move with agonizing slowness across the seemingly endless bow of the strange ship.

"Down on station horizon," Simeon instructed, "ninety-degrees, straight down."

"Down? You want me to stop? With that bastard coming right for me! Are you crazy?"

"It's your only chance, buddy. She's shallow on the bottom but, by Ghu, is she wide! Show me what kind of pilot you are! Not what kind of smear you'll make."

Obediently, the little ship flared energy, applying thrust at right-angles to its previous vector. Its path shifted, slowly at first and then with growing speed like a bell-curve graph across a computer screen. Slowly, slowly, descending, a bright spot against the ever larger mass approaching them.

"Oh shit, oh shit," the captain whispered desperately. "Help?"

The intruder was less than a kilometer away, now, from the cab which looked like a white pin-point against the black hull of the stranger. At half a kilometer it cleared the leading edge of the incoming ship and the pilot began to laugh wildly.

"Keep going," Simeon ordered sharply, to be heard through the hysteria. "It's about to hit your freighter. Keep moving till I tell you to stop."

"It's ore," the captain gasped though he sounded more as if he was weeping, "iron ore. Nickel iron carboniferous, in ten-kilo globules,7 Atu, crap! Simeon thought, as the intruder struck the freighter with majestic slowness. The forward third of its hull vanished in the fireball, and so did much of the freighter's

cargo. The energy-release and spectrographic analysis would tell him a good deal about the composition. Right now he had millions of special delivery meteors pouring down from the breached holds onto his station. Great example of Newtonian physics, action and reaction.

The collision had, serendipitously, damped much of the incoming ship's remaining velocity, but the fragments of ship and cargo had picked it up for themselves. He tracked the myriad trajectories of the space flotsam and relayed the information to the ships in the scatter area, directing them into still more impossible flight patterns. He assigned the computer responsibility for tracking and blasting the larger chunks of ore with the station's lasers. No problems with dispersion when the stuff was in your face. On the other hand, there was one hell of a lot of it Simeon set the computer to figuring out just how much would get through.

He realized that Channa was staring at the monitor in horrified fascination. "Hey Hap, Happy baby, get in the shaft core."

"Why?" she asked. "It's stopping."

"Slowing, yes, but if it so much as kisses me on the cheek, it'll breach the station and you're on a one-way trip to the nebula. We need you here, so shaft me baby."

"Shaft yourself," she said. "It has come to a complete cessation of forward movement"

A final flare of energy left the aft third of the intruder's hull slumping and melting, the drive cores and conduction vanes white-hot and misting titanium rutilite monofiber.

"So it has," Simeon said mildly.

Channa gave a giddy whoop and slumped against the central shaft, trying to wipe at the sweat that filmed her face. Her glove dinged against the faceplate of her helmet "Dead, stock still," he said, feeling intense relief. "Relative to the station, that is."

With a glance at his column, Channa hit the disconnect switch and the red warning lights stopped flashing. Simeon began to announce stand-down to Condition Yellow in dulcet, paternal tones. Channa took off her helmet and began to confer with the Lethe leader, reestablishing the usual formal relations.

When at last they disconnected from their various crucial chores, Channa looked at her incoming electronic messages and laughed. "By God, but we're a resilient species. Look at these."

Simeon scanned them and laughed, too. "I haven't even finished flushing the excess adrenalin from my system and they're already complaining about lost cargo and insurance. I love the human race. We're consistently more concerned with trivia than serious threats."

"And we're not even out of danger, are we?"

"Out of mortal danger. That thing could have totaled us. The ore will cause a lot of trouble and expense, so let's maintain Condition Yellow for a while."

That would keep nonessentials out of the exterior compartments, mostly industrial areas anyway, and everyone in suits with helmets in reach and within sprinting distance of the shelters. Megacredits of money were being lost, of course, most of which would be paid by Lloyds' Interstellar.

Channa was examining the strange ship on a dose screen.

"Next question is who, or what's, aboard.** "And if there's anything left of the pilot captain," Simeon added, "who's broken regulations I didn't know existed till now. I sent out a dozen probes to secure available information on what's left. Ah! Input!"

The main screen blanked, and then displayed a schematic of the strange craft, shifting to a threedimensional model as the computers extrapolated.

"So that's what it looked like before it started hitting things and melting down its drives," Simeon murmured as brain and brawn surveyed an elongated sphere amid its tangle of extensions. "And now I'D subtract what doesn't appear to be part of the original construction."

The resulting model didn't look much like the slagged ruin tumbling slowly through space in the real-time image that Simeon kept up in the lower righthand corner of the screen. Channa leaned forward and frowned at such an unfamiliar design. Huge it certainly was. At least eighty kilotons mass, with extravagant ship-bays and airlocks, old-fashioned cooling vanes around the equator...

"That looks like human construction," she said thoughtfully. "Just not any model I've ever seen or heard about" Human civilization had been unified at the beginning of starflight and their ships bore a family resemblance.

"It does look vaguely human-made," Simeon agreed, "but I can't even find a match in historical files of Janes'All the Galaxy's Spaceships for the last century. The composition is odd, too; metal-metal fiber matrix. Ferrous alloys. No comparable design for the last two centuries. Hmmm."

"Something?"

"This." He called up an image beside the reconstructed ship.

"Close but no cigar," Channa said.

"That's the last of a, line of heavy transports that one was a Central Worlds space-navy troop-transport Designers were Dauvigishipili and Sons. They used to make a lot of militaty craft, operated on stations out of the New Lieutas system. See, there is some use to being a military historian. Ah, tere."

The image changed and now there was a virtual one-to-one match.

"Colonial transport," Simeon said. "They stopped building them about three hundred years ago, so it could be up to four hundred years old. Original capacity was ten thousand colonists, in coldsleep of course, with a crew of thirty. There were a lot of odd litde colonies back then, people looking for places where they could practice as weird a religion as they wanted and not have the Central Worlds bugging them. The few that survived are still pretty flaky. Are you surprised to learn that the ship-class was called the Manifest Destiny vehicle? A few of the later models had brain controllers before Central Worlds put a stop to that practice on humane grounds. Some of those minor cults were " he made a brief pause to consult his lexicon " aberrant! Hmm, and I'd bet this one got transmogrified into an orbital station. Look at all that stuff"

"Your kind of 'stuff?'" asked Channa ingenuously.

"Gadgetry," he amended in a firm, this-is-serious voice, "plastered on the exterior: observation stuff,

transmission stuff, the usual. And intended to be used in orbit. I mean, who would try to fly any ship with all that crap sticking out? For starters, the thrust axis wouldn't be through the center of mass anymore, so for starters, it's unbalanced."

Channa scanned through more probe transmissions, including some views taken by the perimeter sensors as the hulk barreled in, so they could see the havoc caused by collision and too-rapid deceleration.

"They may have had cause for their precipitous intrusion," she said, and froze a view of the stubs of the radar and radio antennas. "Those look like battle damage to me."

"Hmmm." Simeon did a rapid close-scan and match with the naval records in his files. "You're right, Channa-mine. Transmission antennae sheared off so they couldn't have responded to our hails. Whoever shot those darts knew his stuff, and their most vulnerable points. See the long star-shaped ripple patterns in the hull? And those long sort of fuzzy distortions clustered in the rear third of the hull? Those are beamers at extreme range, I'd say. Hard to tell 'cause it's so messed up." He spoke more slowly, in an almost somber tone. "Hell, Channa, beamers like that are naval ordnance weapons. The real thing." Oh, boy, this is not like a simulation at all. "Somebody was trying to destroy that ship."

"While the victims were desperate enough to fly close to blind and totally deaf," Channa said. That was not a safe thing to do, even in the vastness of interstellar space. "My next intelligent question is, did they escape? Or are they still being pursued?"

"Ahead of you there, partner," Simeon replied, feeling slightly smug that he had anticipated her. "I can't detect anything coming in on the same vector." He heaved an audible sigh of relief that coincided with hers. "Or... no, they were blind. The pursuit could have dropped off long ago, and they wouldn't have had any way to tell. But we'd better establish who and why. If, and it's a big if, there's anyone alive in there now to tell us the facts. I'm not inclined to be charitable. For all we know, they could be pirates or hijackers, and they were running from Central Worlds* naval pursuit.

Either way, they came within centimeters of smashing us to a smithereen."

"Smithereens," Channa said thoughtfully, "because it's fragments they are and they have to be plural to be dangerous. I rather discount their being illegals. Something real deadly must have pushed them to run in a craft that unspaceworthy. Something that came to their planet suddenly. Why else wouldn't they take the time to cut away that mass dinging to the ship? Maybe their sun went nova. Anyway," she said briskly, "if there are people on board, they're in bad shape and what have you been doing to rescue and/or apprehend them?"

"Ahem, Channa-mine. You're the mobile half of this partnership. Remember? So go be brawn for me. And be careful!" Channa paused. "Ah, yes, so I am. Thank you for reminding me of that!" Her tone was brightly brittle. "Somehow this wasn't the sort of duty I thought came along with this assignment."

"Well, it has!" he said, making his voice lilt. "Hate to have caused you to get into that clumsy suit for no reason at all."

She lifted her helmet.

"Thatta girl!" Simeon said rather patronizingly. She ignored him. "Oh, and Channa?" "What?" "Before you lock your helmet, do switch on your implant"

"Ah!" She couched the switch grounded in bone just behind her ear, the contact responding only to her

individual bio-energy. "Are you receiving?"

"Check,"

"Can I go now?" she said rather patronizingly.

"Check."

"And mate, Simy baby."

"Got it," Joat muttered to herself as she rescued the computer from the shadowed ledge and turned it on, fingers clumsy in the space suit gloves. Joat had become well-acquainted with the station's drills but, with survival skills as finely honed as hers were, she had put the suit on when the klaxon sounded Red Alert. Besides, she'd had a chance to time just how fast she could get into the flippin' thing.

"Wow!" was her reaction to the activity the computer duly reported. "Fardling A wow!" The system was taking in some heavy data, converting it and feeding it to Simeon the way it transferred data from the pickups, though never in this density or complexity. "Heavy read!"

Joat did her best to follow, but the speed was too much. Then, "Got it." Now the main computer was also encoding it for her little friend. She fiddled to get a finer tuning, get rid of the drivel, giving her the visual and aural stuff. She reared back in surprise, hitting her head on the metal bulkhead but ignoring the pain as she realized what she now had.

Hey, this is from Channa. Strange, heavy strange. I'm getting what she's seeing. She must have an implant to input directly to Simeon like Mis. And what Channa was seeing made Joat feel a little more charitable towards her. Channa wasn't squishstuff, her private term for organic tissue.

"Beats hacking in to the holo system any day," Joat muttered, eyes glued to the miniature screen. She squirmed into a more comfortable position, plopped down a purloined pillow so she wouldn't slam her head again, braced her feet against the roof of the duct, plugged the earphone into the helmet outlet, and absorbed the action.

"Real-time adventure holo!" Perfect, apart from a wavering line down one side of the picture-cube that must represent breathing and life-signs and stuff "Go, Channa, go!"

At AFTERSIX Station-born and bred, Channa had gone spacewalking as soon as she was old enough to fit into a juvenile suit. But there the difference between her Hawking Alpha Proxima Station days and now ended.

Theoretically, she knew that SSS-900-C was at the edge of the Shiva Nebula. Trade routes crossed here, carrying processed ores essential for drive-core manufacture. As the ship which had brought her had approached the dumbbell-shaped station, she'd watched the process on her cabin's screen with great interest. But theory, and that shipboard view in complete safety, had not prepared her for the great arc of pearly mist that filled her vision plate; mist glowing with scores of proto-suns in a score of colors.

"Spectacular, ain't it?" Patsy asked.

Channa came to herself with a start "What are you doing out here?"

"This tug's my emergency station," she said, grinning broadly inside her bubble helmet "The algae you keep

right on breedin' for a while without me, randy little bastards. An' I'm a right good tug pilot, too."

"Believe you, ma'am," Channa said, throwing a salute from her bubbled temple. What's Simeon on about? He's got a fleet of sorts to command. "Let's go."

In turn, they slid down into the cramped cabin of the tug and plugged suit feeds into the ship system. The tugs were stripped-down little vessels, just a powerplant and drive with minimal controls; wedged-shaped, with grapnel fields and an inflatable habitat for taking survivors in their dual role as rescue vessels. The docking bay and the cabin itself were open to vacuum, but she felt a low whining as Patsy brought the drive up and lifted them out. There was the usual disorienting lurch as they passed out of station gravity. Now the only weight was acceleration, and the barbell shape of the station was a huge bulk below them instead of behind. Her senses tried to tell her she was climbing vertically in a gravity field, then yielded to training as she made herself ignore up and down for the omnidirectional outlook that was most useful in space.

"Vectoring in," Patsy said into her helmet mike.

Other tugs were drifting motes of light, fireflies against the blackness. The analogy remained in force as they circled the drifting hulk of the intruder; it was big. Forward was a frayed mass of tendrils, and the rear still glowed red-white, heat slow to radiate in vacuum.

"Readings?" Channa asked. Her nose itched; it always did when she had a helmet on.

Simeon's voice answered her. "Main power system went out when they burned their drive," he said. "Be careful about that, by the way it's radiating gamma, real museum piece. Main internal gravity field's down. There are localized auxiliary systems still operating amidships, and traces of water vapor and atmosphere. There might be a chamber in there still running lifesupport"

Channa scanned the bridge section of the ship again. The instruments available in the cockpit of the tug were basically little more than sophisticated motion detectors.

"I can't get a thing," she said in frustration. "Am I missing something?"

"Not much," Simeon told her. "There's too much dirt out there, which'll confuse readings. See if you can get aboard."

"Right," she said, and looked down the hull toward the equator where the shuttle bays should be located. "Bring us in there, Patsy."

Channa flicked an indicator light on the hull. They sank gradually, until the ancient ship filled half the sky.

"Don't build 'em like this anymore," Patsy said as they beheld shuttle bay doors which were easily two hundred meters long, big enough to accommodate a small liner.

"They don't have jets," Channa answered absently. Drive cores were a lot cheaper and safer nowadays, which made ships this size obsolete. "Somebody did make them."

This close in, the scars on the hull were enormous, metal heated to melting with a slagged look around the edges of the cuts, but miraculously there didn't seem to be much structural damage as they swung further into the bay.

"They have to be alive," Channa murmured. "Nothing could kill people this lucky."

"Except running out of luck," Simeon said grimly.

"There is that." She came at last to a smaller shuttle bay and attempted to open the portal with several standard call codes. "Simeon, what does the library suggest we use for a ship this old? I'm not getting any response with the usual ones."

"Three one seven, three one seven five?"

"Tried it, nothing."

Simeon relayed several more codes.

"Nothing's working," she said in disgust. "Could they have locked them?"

"Hard to say until we're sure they're crazy or not. Try another bay. That one might just be inoperative."

She had Patsy fly out and down the massive ship's side until they came to another shuttle bay. It, too, refused her admittance.

"This is ridiculous," she said in exasperation. "They got in, so there has to be an operable entrance!"

"Considering the visible damage, maybe you'd have more luck with a service hatch. There're close to a hundred of them and only six shuttle bays. Try something midship."

"That's a good idea," she said, feeling more optimistic with such odds. *Just in case, what do we use for a can opener? We don't want any survivors dead of old age before we reach them."

The very first hatch they tried opened, about half a meter. Channa looked at it, Simeon looked at it through her eyes via the implant which connected directly to her optic nerve.

"You're not that big, but you're also not that small," he said with a wistful note.

"I'm putting us down," Patsy said. "Contact" A faint dunk came through the metal of the tug as the fields gripped the big hull.

"And I'm going to try and effect entry. I think it's wide enough." Channa told Simeon.

"Just you be very careful, Channa-mine..."

"For Ghu's sake, Simeon, I've been space-walking since I was five. I'm a stickfoot"

"Yeah, but I don't think your station ever experienced a hostile attack. And there's all that flying junk! Could knock you right off the hull... or smear you across it"

"You do know how to give a girl confidence. I'm going, Simeon, and that's that." She muttered to herself about titanium twits and agoraphobic asses as she prepared to leave the tug. Patsy Sue at least gave her a cheerful grin and a thumbs-up. "We need to know what or who's in there."

"No problem," Patsy cut in, reaching into the toolbox under the pilot's seat. Her hand came out with the

ugly black shape of an arc pistol.

Channa looked around, her jaw dropped. "Aren't those illegal?"

Patsy wagged the pronged muzzle. "Not on Larabie, they ain't"

Channa shook her head, then picked up where she'd left off. "You know, Simeon, they do give us brawns training. I've done search-and-rescue before."

"How often?"

"Once. My inexperience will only make me more cautious. I can do this. Simeon. Once I'm inside maybe I can do something to widen the hatch opening. Direct some of the other tugs this way so I'll have reinforcements nearby, if I need them."

Patsy wagged the arc pistol, apparently accustomed to the weight of the weapon.

"Assuming it's needed," Channa added cheerfully. "Have you got any positive life readings, partner?" she asked as she eased herself with practised care out of the tug. With one hand on a hull bracket, she let herself drift to the hull where the stickfield of her boots held her safely.

"According to my sensors, nobody's conscious. But there might be "

"Stop being so reassuring," she said facetiously. "Have you got a medical team ready?"

"We were just getting to know each other," he said regretfully.

Channa paused, caught by the emotion in his voice. "You are the most manipulative creature it has ever been my misfortune to meet," she said coldly, dipping a reel of optical fiber to her suit. Simeon sighed. "Look, I'm not a total idiot. The tug will shield me on one side, and I'm only two strides away from the hatch."

"Me? Manipulative? I'm supposed to keep my brawn from risking its fluffy little tail."

Carefully breaking boot contact, she took the first step to the hatch, and the second. Then clipped both feet free and floated neady to the opening to examine it more closely. The magnetic grapple built into the left forearm of her suit twitched, with a feeling like a light push. The contact disk flicked out, trailing braided monofilament, and impacted on the door of the bay. She activated the switch that reeled her in. Patsy followed with an expert somersault leap that landed her less than an arm's length from her friend.

"Showoff," Channa said.

"You ain't the only one with walk experience," Patsy said. Her voice was light, but the arc pistol was ready as she peered within the half-open hatch. "Coburn to rescue squad. We're about to enter the Hulk. Stand by."

Channa licked dry lips. It's the suit air, she told herself firmly. Always too dry. She spoke aloud to Simeon. "You're just jealous of me, Bellona Rockjaw, heroine of the space frontier."

"I'm right there with you, Channa," Simeon said with a trace of wistfulness in his voice.

"Hmmp."

She struggled to get through the narrow opening, grunting with effort.

"Do not get stuck," he advised her.

Channa started to giggle. "Do not make me laugh," she admonished. "And stop reading my mind."

With the unpleasant sensation of metal and plastic scraping against each other, she pushed through at last. The chamber had held maintenance equipment of some sort long ago; there were feeds and racks for EVA suits, and empty toolholders. Only a single strip lit the dim interior. On the hullside wall was a massive, clumsy-looking airlock, and a blinking row of readouts beside it "Some systems still active," she said. "Patsy, prop yourself against the frame and see if you can't push the hatch door open."

"Nevah get through iffen I doan," the older woman muttered. "Makes me wish I were fiat-chested, too."

"She is not," Simeon replied vehemently.

Channa grinned, but Patsy Sue was busy getting herself into position in the hatchway, attaching her filament to the inside of the hatch before she grabbed the top of the frame with both hands and gave a mighty heave. The hatch did not so much as budge a millimeter.

"No, it's jammed tighter'n... nemmind. You got a polarizin' faceplate?" Patsy asked.

"Standard."

"Okay. I'll try sometnifa' subtle."

Coburn stepped t&ck, raised the arc pistol and fired four times. The bar_oT actinic blue-white light was soundless in vacuum, but a fog of metal particles exploded outward like glittering donuts centered on the aiming points. Patsy nodded in satisfaction and twisted herself around to brace her feet on the hatch and grip two handhold loops on the hull nearby. Channa could hear her give a grunt of effort, and the hatchway flipped out into space, tumbling end over end.

"Nice brand of subtle you wield," Channa said.

"Think nothin' of it," Patsy said, pretending to blow smoke off the arc pistol's barrel. "Any luck?"

Channa bent over the touchpad beside the airlock. "Not much. Ah, that's got it. Simeon, how's the transmission holding up?"

"Loud and dear, since Patsy got the door out of the way. I may lose Patsy's signal further inside. Maybe you should wait? There're four more tugs dosing in on your position."

Channa ignored the pleading note, not without a pang of guilt. But what the hell, the situation is irresistible, she admitted. She had been trained as an admiriistrator-paitner-troubleshooter, but most of the time, circumstances were fairly conventional. Not boring; she wouldn't have made it through brawn training if she were bored with it. On the other hand, she wouldn't have been picked if there weren't an element of the adventurer in her psychological profile.

"String this, would you, Patsy?" she said, passing over the reel. The optical fiber was encased in woven

tungsten-filament, with receptor-booster chips at intervals. Barely thicker than thread, it had a breaking strain of several tons. Tacked to the wall behind them, neither her implants nor Patsy's suit communitis could fade out Patsy welded the outer encj to the hull beside the hatch, using the spot heater in her construction suit's gauntlet, "Ready?" Channa said, taking a deep breath.

"Surely am." Patsy came up behind her, arc pistol ready.

"Standing by," Simeon said.

The keypad lights blinked green and amber. "I think it's saying there's some doubt about the atmosphere," Channa said. "It's definitely pressurized in there." She attached a sensor line to the surface.

"They're in trouble," Simeon said. "Hear that whining?" Channa shook her head, and felt him boost the audio pickups of her helmet. A feint tooth-grating sound came through.

"What is that?"

"That's the main internal drive cores," Simeon replied grimly. "The powerplant's down, but they're still superconducting. The alloys they used back then were tough. They built 'em more redundant then, too."

"Which means?"

"Which means... to stop this thing, the pilot put everything the powerplant had into the drive. The exterior coils blew before it could go all out. Now the internal coil's going to go."

"Bad news," Patsy said.

"It's going to blow?" Channa asked apprehensively. The energies needed to move megatons between stars were immense.

Simeon listened. "Not/urf yet, but soon. Building, but the noise will be considerably more audible before I'd panic. Get that inner hatch open, woman! I'll send the troops. You've got about thirty minutes before you have to be off."

The interior airlock slid open. The two women kept their helmets firmly ori as it slid down again and the air hissed in. Channa locjked down at the readouts on her sleeve and punched foranalysis.

"Oxygen's down, COg's way up," she said grimly. "Necrotic ketofaes, or so it says decay products. I'd hate to have to breathe this stuff. Could anyone breath it and live?"

"Depends oh natural tolerances," Patsy replied. "And it might not be bad further in." Being an environmental maintenance specialist, she knew the parameters. "From the volume of n.k.'s, their scrubbers must have been down for a while."

The inner hatch of the airlock slid open. Now that they were no longer in a soundless vacuum, the exterior pickups of their suits relayed the hiss. Unfortunately, a high-pitched whine was now equally audible: the kind that made the hair on your arms lift up. Channa looked down the long corridor, shabby with age and dim with the emergency glowstrips' ghostly blue light.

Flies buzzed around them. Patsy slapped one against the wall.

"Blowflies," she said after a good look. There was a faint quaver in her voice. "Had 'em on the ranch."

"Sound pickup says there are live ones down there," Channa said. "Let's go."

Doctor Chaundra's hands flew over his keypad as he made notes. He was a smallish brown-skinned man with delicate bones and a precise, scholarly manner.

"Fifty maximum, you say?"

Simeon switched back to the implant data filling another part of his consciousness. Channa's breathing sounded ragged; her heartbeat was elevated, and the stomach-acid level indicated suppressed nausea. Simeon wasn't surprised. The things she was seeing made Aim feel a little sick in an entirely nonphysical way that was still highly unpleasant.

"Short-term, improvised attempt at coldsleep," she said, voice struggling for the objectivity of a report. He looked at the tangle of cobbled-together equipment around living and dead. "Probably*to cut down on air consumption. Heavy equipment failures."

The latest chamber held mostly dead ones, eyes fallen in and dried lips shrunk back over grinning teeth. Maggots, too. Some of the corpses were children, dead children nestled against dead mothers. In a few, the maggots gave a ghastly semblance of life, moving the swollen, blackened limbs. About the only mercy was the elastic nets that held living and dead down to the pallets on the deck or to the bunks. Evidently someone had foreseen that the interior gravity fields might go. Simeon imagined walking into one of those chambers and finding die putrefying bodies floating loose....

"This one " Channa began, swallowing and bending over a body that was either still alive or only recendy dead. Drifting maggots brushed the surface of her faceplate and clung wedy, writhing. She retched, then forced herself to brush them away.

A chuwnngggg sound echoed through the still air. "What was that?"

Simeon split his viewpoint yet again. TTie rescue ship hovering off the side of the hulk had launched a missile carrying a large-diameter hose and attached to a pumping system: a force-deck system which punched through the hull and sealed itself. 4Airharpoon,"hesaid. "WeTlbepumpinginasecond."

"I kin hear it," Patsy said from the corridor. Her arc gun crashed, opening a sealed door. "More in heah. *Bout the same."

"With fifty living, we should have no trouble," the doctor was saying to Simeon in the safe, clean sickbay office. Chaundra tapped for a closeup on one of the recordings, looking at the life-signs readouts beside the wasted face of a refugee. "Coldsleep dosed, the old partial method; very unsafe dosage, and oxygen deprivation. Dehydration, starvation, but mostly inadequate air. Hmm."

He blinked. "Physical type? Sometimes there is genetic divergence on isolated colonies. I must check. These look to be of sudeuropean race archaic type, very pure.. We should evacuate them as soon as possible."

"I'm working on it," Simeon said with controlled passion, fm never going to look at battlefield reconstructions quite the same way again, he thought Through Channa's ears, he heard feet clacking in the corridor outside, stickfields in the suit shoes substituting for gravity. The volunteers came in briskly enough, inflatable rescue bubbles in their hands, then halted in disbelief One tried to control his retching

for a moment and then went into an excruciating and dangerous fit of vomiting inside a closed helmet. His squadmates removed it, only to have his paroxysm grow worse as the stink hit his nostrils. The luckless volunteer went into the first of the bubbles.

"Get moving!" Channa ordered. Only Simeon could hear the tremors in her voice beyond the range of normal ears. "The living ones are marked with a slash of yellow from a cargo checker. Use plasma feeds, the emergency antidotes, and get them out of here. These people belong in regeneration. Now."

Raggedly, then with gathering speed, the stationers moved to their work. Channa escaped back into the corridor, exhaling a breath she had not been conscious of holding. Simeon was profoundly thankful she had not tried cracking her suit seals when the air hose went in. It would take months of vacuum to get the stink out of this ship. Much more time than the vessel had. The final fire of the interior coils would at least cleanse it "How long?" she asked.

"Not less than an hour, not more than three," he replied. "I think the pirate hypothesis is out."

Channa nodded jerkily; too many families and children. Pirates were much more common in fiction than in fact, anyway. Bodies floated in the next chamber down, and medics working over the three living before transferring them to life bubbles.

"Ms. Hap, I'm !Tez Kle." The Sondee wore a medical assistant's arm-flash on his suit.

Channa glanced at him in surprise. Not many aliens chose to specialize in Terran medicine. Of course, Sondees were rather humanoid, if you managed to ignore the four eyes two large and golden about where eyes should be, and two more above the whorled ridges that served as ears; you could not sneak up on a Sondee and the lack of any facial features apart from a nostril slit and round suckerlike mouth. They had lovely voices, with far more vocal range and control than a human.

She came up beside the bubbles. "You're in charge?" He nodded. "Let me give you a hand," she said.

The first figure she turned to had reddish-black hair, a short muscular man with a square face. She released his restraints and lifted him, then gave him a gentle shove into the body-length sack, sealed it and activated it. His color seemed to improve immediately. She turned to his companion and froze.

"Channa, your vital signs just did the strangest little jig. What's the problem?" Simeon asked.

This young man was tall, close to two meters, broadshouldered and slim-hipped, shapely and muscular as an athlete. He had a clean, classically perfect profile, with firmly molded chin and sensitive mouth. His delicately curving cheekbones were brushed by long dark lashes, the corners of his eyes tilted upwards. His long hair was blue-black, curling back from his high intelligent forehead to fall almost to his shoulders.

Channa sighed in admiration, then caught herself. This stud is so handsome even being sick makes him look good.

"Oh ho," Simeon crowed. "Very nice, Channa, but if you don't put AHorys there in his sack, he's going to go a very unflattering shade of blue."

"Em... right" She unbuckled the man and sealed him in his sack, connecting the two bags together. Then she tugged them behind her to the lock where she turned them over to the waiting med-techs. The good transporter's hold was filled with floating, jostling sacks while Channa and the med-tech chief stood in the lock, checking their sensors for heart-beats.

"Guess we got them all," Tez Kle said. "But I don't think we can save them all. We left those we were certain we couldn't help," he said apologetically.

"Nothing else you could do," Channa told him. "We don't have time for anything else. Go," she said, and slapped his shoulder, "I've got a tug outside." She sealed the end of the caterpillar lock behind him and waited impatiently for the pilot to retract it "Damn, I wish we could have gotten to the bridge."

"You and Patsy give it a try," Simeon answered. "Every bit of data will help, but we're cutting it a little close. I'm positioning tugs to push that wreck away from the station and soon"

Channa looked up sharply. "It's still a danger to you?"

"Nothing this brain can't handle," Simeon said blithely. "You do what you can, brawn."

She looked down at the notescreeen tethered at her waist, studying the map of the ship's interior which she had managed to acquire from its own data banks, archaic as they were.

"I'll try through here," she said, struggling with the toggles of the hatch. "It'd be the more direct route, if it's open. If it isn't, I'll rendezvous with Patsy immediately."

"I need some people for tug and detonations work," Simeon announced. "It's going to be dicey."

The assembly room beneath the-south-polar docking bay was full of second-wave volunteers, those not needed or qualified for the emergency medical work. Every single one stepped forward. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Simeon found time for a grim internal smile. That old line's worked its challenge since GOGamesh, he thought, proving that even the oldest books on military psychology were right. People were very reluctant to appear frightened in front of others, especially their friends. He called the roll of those he needed. They were already suited up, helmets under their arms. Gus, of course, and six of the more experienced tug pilots, with six of the mining explosives experts who had been taking R & R on the SSS. "Thank you and I thank all the rest of you, too."

As soon as the room emptied of all but the participants, he began the briefing with the truth.

"That ship is going to blow. The engines, by the sound of them, are critically unbalanced, redlining far off scale. We've got the survivors off her. But we've got to get her far enough from the station so that when she goes, she won't take us with her. That's not the only problem. We've got to be sure she'll break into the smallest possible fragments and that they are thrown in a favorable dispersal pattern."

The explosives men grinned at each other. "Easiest thing in the world, Simeon," their spokesman said with a rakish smile. "If you know what you're doing."

"We do," one of the others said, thumping the spokesman jovially on the back. The man didn't so much as rock on his toes.

"That's good to know, guys! Can you tug pilots match their skill by redlining your engines a little to putt her as far away from us as you can?" "Hell, Simeon," Gus said, "you oughta know we'd have no trouble doing that little thing for you."

Til be monitqrng and should be able to give you fair warning to get yburselves clear." He paused a moment, anxious despite their obvious disregard for the inherent danger. "Have I made the situation clear?"

Gus grinned. "Couldn't be clearer, station man," he said, giving his broad shoulders a preparatory twitch in response to the challenge. "And we don't have much time for further chatter!"

Another voice broke in: Patsy's. Simeon keyed her visual transmission to one of the ready-room screens; she was back in the control seat of her tug.

"My, ain't the machismo level high around here? You got one tug already in place, Simeon mine. Count me in, too."

Gus winced. "Look, Patsy, we're in very deep, ah "

"Very deep shit," she finished, grinning at him. "Ah know the words, Gus."

Everybody laughed. Simeon looked them over and stifled a wave of bitter longing. A military commander of any stature led his troops from the front, not from an impervious titanium column. Don't worry, if they fail you'll be the only one left to say what happened, thanks to that sametitanium column. If you can buewithyowconseience, that is.

"I'll keep my eye on the coils and give you enough warning to peel oS," Simeon promised.

Almost simultaneously, helmets covered the faces of this small band of heroes.

"This is taking more time than it's worth," Channa said in disgust, giving the control panel a final thump with her fist. The door valved open, "Damn! And I thought that was a station legend," she said. "Does it work for you, Simeon?"

"Having a servo whack me with a wrench to make me work properly?" he asked. "No, not often. The bridge ought to be right down there. And hurry"

"How are we handling the demolition?" she asked him, stepping through the half-open door and trotting down the darkened way, her helmet light fanning ahead. Mercifully, no bodies floated about this section.

"I've got a team rigging explosives all around the ship to blow it to," he paused, his own nerves making him play the down, "smithereens. Real, genuine, nonstation piercing smithereens. It would be disgraceful, utterly disgraceful, to get holed by flying debris after surviving this morning, don't you think? Ah, the tug volunteers are in place, ready to grapple. Ah! They've broken her out of orbital inertia."

Movement was not obvious this far in the bowels of the dying ship. "Who's in charge of the team?" Channa asked.

"Gus."

"Patsy said he was a good pilot," Channa commented. "Soon as I finish here, I'll join her. Is she still standing by at the hatch?"

"She is, to pick you up and bring you straight back to the station with any information you discover."

"I can scan the info back to you, Sim-mate, but first I have to find it, you know.1* She stumbled over some jumble piled in the corridor and recovered herself.

"You and Patsy gets fraj Ai back here. I can't have my brawn risking her neck when..."

"Simeon," she said reasonably, "brawns are supposed to risk their necks for their brains. And if you, the station, are at risk, / am required to reduce that risk any way possible. This time I can do it by helping tug the risk away from here. Have I made myself clear on this point?"

"I don't like it," Simeon said in a disgruntled mumble. "Foolish risk."

"Thank you for your input, but Simeon..."

"Yeah?"

"Don't you ever try to forbid me to do the job I'm here to do. You got that?"

"Right in the forehead, sweetheart"

"Not quite where I was aiming, but it'll do," Channa said.

"If you get through the bridge of that ship, can I ask you for a download?" Simeon said plaintively.

"Why else am I penetrating this about-to-blow-up wreck?" Channa said. "Patsy, you read me?"

"Welcome to the party, Channa," came Patsy's cheerful wince.

"You don't mind my crashing?"

Patsy laughed. "Watch your choice of words, girl."

"I just noticed something," Channa said, slowing her pace.

"What?"

"Paper. What's all this paper doing around?" There were sheets of it drifting down the corridor and sticking with static attraction to the rubbery walls.

"This lumbering hulk must be filled with gear so ancient it's exotic," Simeon said.

"Paper storage?" she said dubiously.

"Maybe they regressed."

"Could it originally have been piloted by a shellperson?" Channa asked, suddenly jumping to some conclusions that ought to have been more obvious to both herself and Simeon.

If she got the edge on him on this one...

"Highly unlikely," Simeon said patronizingly. "B & B ships weren't that common then. All of these little back-of-beyond colonies were literally a shot in the dark, too risky to expend us on. C'mon, forward is to your right, one more passage to reach that control room."

"Aye, sir," she said. She worked her way forward, past leaking pipes and the occasionally sparking control boxes, ruptured by the overloads of the catastrophic deceleration.

"Paper," Channa said in wonder, wishing she could touch the valuable substance with her bare hands.

"And books! At least I think that's what I saw when you glanced into that corner. Nor further right. Yes! Books!"

"No time for browsing now," Channa said firmly.

"Right," he said. "Antiquarian reflex, sorry."

"Ah, I am now at the control room," she said.

It was large and circular; most of the consoles were under shrink-shrouds of plastic that looked rigid with age. Raw, hasty jury-rigs had restored a few panels to functionality. She had to duck under festoons of cable which were draped to and fro with no noticeable pattern. In the dimming light, she saw jury-rigged control boxes taped to consoles. The whole bridge seemed to have been reconstructed with mad abandon.

"Ghu! They flew this thing?" Simeon exclaimed. They must have been crazy, he thought and cocked a weather-ear to the sound from the engine. "The log," Simeon reminded her. "Though I'm inclined to doubt that this outfit has anything that fancy. Strip the data bank, too. We want any information we can get,"

"You tell me how to retrieve information from this archaic mess and you've got it," she answered, peering from workstation to workstation, trying to figure which one might access the main banks.

"I've got to go a long way back in my own files to find something comparable," he said. "There're only three centuries of bugging-up to decode but... ah, try the second console to your right. About the only one they hadn't been trying to use."

She drew the information feedline out of her glove and pressed it over the inductor surface. The screen beside it clicked to life and began flowing with a spaghetti-complex web of symbols.

"Oh, my oh my," Simeon muttered.

"Problems, Sim?"

"Nothing oT Simeon can't handle," he said. "But the code is old. I don't have anything that esoteric on file. Nothing I can't eventually decipher."

"Don't let your modesty run away with you," she muttered, looking down at her wrist chrono. Plenty of time, she thought ITwpe?

"I'm just cracking the interface and downloading it to decode at leisure," Simeon replied. "Don't get your tits in a tizzy."

"What did you say?", "Old slang," he replied blandly.

"Another antiquarian reflex, no doubt," she said archly.

"Touched Okay, got it," he said, "Get out of there."

"Gawd-dawm this thing!" Patsy said in frustration.

The tug was presenting its broad rear surface to the ancient colony ship. Channa scanned carefully on visual and deep-magnetic, looking for a place to engage their grapple.

"Time is a factor here, Ms. Hap." Gus's voice was a little testy. Aligning an extra tug in the pattern had taken more time than anticipated.

"I just got up here, Mr. Gusky. I'm looking for a flat spot among these struts. I can see why you gave it a pass. It's a mess. Wait, I think I see something now, it's..." She looked again and increased the magnification. "Bloody helir she cried.

"Crap!" Simeon's voice overrode hers. It took the others a few moments longer.

"I don't believe it," Channa whispered.

"What?" Patsy demanded. "What do you see?"

"It's a shell. There's a shellperson out there, strapped to the hull."

"Are you sure?" Gus* voice cut in. "Look, everyone else is in place, we have to get this thing away from the station "

Simeon ordered in a roar that nearly fractured eardrums. "BELAY THAT, GUSKY!" A moment of stunned silence followed. "Check it out, Channa. Now!"

"Aye, aye, sir," Channa said even as she strobed a landing spot where Patsy could set the tug down. "Yes, Mr. Gusky, it's a shellperson all.right. Granted, it doesn't look like anything you're likely to have seen, but brawns learn to recognize *em.a)L"

She hoped Simeon never had occasion to bellow like that again, with the decibels going off the gauge. Understandable, of course, or at least to her. If brains had a collective nightmare, it was being cut off from their equipment and left helpless. Attached to their leads and machinery, a shellperson was the next thing to immortal, a high-tech demigod in this world. Cut off from it, they were cripples. Spam-in-a-can, as the obscene joke had it. Neither Simeon nor she were capable of abandoning a shellperson, even if its occupant should prove dead.

"Gus, why don't you set the haul in motion," Channa said, knowing her priorities had just shifted. "Patsy and I will get this shellperson off."

She anchored the grapple just above the shell and as quickly as possible, reeled the tug to it. She studied the shell in the monitor as she drew closer. "It's inward feeing, they did that right at least."

"Fardlingrfo?" Simeon cursed. "Did it right? There is nothing right about this. What kind of shit-for-brains did this? That shellperson was lodged on the exterior of the huU\ Anything could have happened to him or her! Bastards, bastards, bastards. Get him out of there!"

Channa heard the cold passion in Simeon's voice and recognized another aspect of him, one his often

diffident manner and sometimes boyish enthusiasms had masked. Shellpeople were as individual as normals. Why had she thought him shallow, even trivial? Because of his fascination with ancient wars and weaponry?

"I'm on my way, Simeon," she said. "Gusky, step on it. We'll get out of your way. This won't take long."

"It had better not," the ex-Navy man said, his voice still carrying a trace of resentment. "Wilco. Out"

The surge of acceleration was feint but definite as the bulky vessel began-to idtve. Channa locked a safety line to her suit before s\$ie swung down to the pitted, corroded surface of the_hull and began to thread her way through the crazed jungle of beam-fused girders that covered it like fungus. The light had the absolute white-and-shadow of space, but the froth where vaporized metal had recondensed looked out of place.

Tm too used to things being new and functional, she told herself at a level below the machine-efficient movements of hands and feet. Fear coiled at a deeper level still, shouting that she was risking two living humans for a shellperson who could have died long ago. Brawn training overrode that trickle of fear almost before she noticed. A shellperson could not be left, not while a brawn could remove him.

"Is the brain alraht?" Patsy asked.

"Can't tell yet," Channa told her. Off to her left a white light flashed and the metal toned beneath her feet "What was that?" she half-squawked.

"Iron ore," Gus said. "She's moving into the dispersal cone of that load of balled ore. There's a lot of that crap out here. Hurry." fm hurrying, Tm hurrying, Channa thought. The shell was a shape like a metal egg split down the middle, with a tangle of feed lines and telemetry jacked into opened access panels. Three more winks of light as ore struck at hundreds of kps further down the derelict's hull, then a whole cluster. Debris flipped away into space with leisurely grace.

"Channa..." Simeon began. Tne rage was out of his voice, replaced by fear for her. Somehow that wanned Channa despite the cold clamp she'd put on her feelings.

"Can't be helped," she said and planted her own grapple at the top of the shell, just beside the lugs.

"It's a different design from mine," Simeon told her. "I'm doing a search now to see where you can put a heavy magnet without interrupting anything vital."

"Fine," she said distractedly. "Looks like they just took a dozen loops of wire cable and tack-welded it to hold the shell down. Talk about improvisation!"

Simeon watched her hands as she used a small laser to cut through one of the cables lashing the capsule to the hull. It broke free and the shell fell away from the hull slightly, fine wires floating like roots in a glass of water. God, it looks so naked, he thought helplessly.

Channa's gaze had passed over the code name incised on the shell so he could read it. PMG-266-S, a low number brain of very advanced years. Guiyon. The name floated up out of deep storage where all the names of his kind rested. A managerial sort. Working for the Colonial Department as it was, back then. Paid off his contract and dropped out of touch, presumed rogue. A hermit "He's a two-hundred series," he told her. "Now put the grapple dead center, upper side."

Channa used a remote control device to lower one of the smaller grapples from the tug, gingerly placing it as directed. Then she returned to cutting cables. She was working on the next to last one when a pebble-sized piece of ore struck the back of her helmet, hard enough to knock her sideways and to burn straight through her air regulator from left to right. Simeon saw specks of plastic spin off in the wake of the tiny meteor. The exterior view from the tug's pickups showed metal glowing white-hot.

"Channa!" Simeon called. The med-readouts flashed unconsciousness. He overrode the suit and ordered it to inject stimulants, a horse-dose, anything to buy her time.

"Oww." Channa jerked and then shook herself, hauling back on the safety line until her feet touched the surface of the ship. A red light flashed on the inside of her faceplate and the message:

"System failure atr-meulation. Ten minutes emergency supply (m//*appearefi Irwas replaced by 10:00. Then 09:59, and the seconds scrolled down inexorably.

"Channa, you okay? Should Ah git down there?"

"No!" Channa rasped. "Keep ready for lift."

Simeon called. "Channa, get inside."

"I'm almost finished," she said gruffly.

"Now," he said.

She ignored him. He watched the cable part, and her hands reached for the last one. From another view he watched the ancient colony ship being dragged away at an ever increasing acceleration.

"Channa! Get your ass in that tug now!"

"Shut upr she snapped.

The final cable parted and the shell swung free. For the first time, Simeon saw that the feeder line was damaged. No, he thought.

Channa began to disconnect the shell's input leads. It was difficult work in the unwieldy suit gloves, but her long-fingered hands moved with careful delicacy. She dosed the valve on the broken feeder line.

"Might not be too bad," she muttered. "There'll be an interior backup. Probably ruptured when they stopped."

Then she keyed the remote to reel them both back Co the tug at a careful pace, holding on to the exterior lugs and using her feet to fend them off random projections. The shell went ter-wmnggg against the light-load grapnels up near the apex of the stubby wedge; the mechanical daws dosed on the hard alloy with immovable pressure.

She turned and pivoted around a handhold and dove feetfirst into the control seat.

"Get yo' suit plugged in!" Patsy snapped, beating Simeon by nanoseconds.

"Can't This is a standard EVA sjiit, the input valve's upstream of the break. Get moving, we have to help

haul this thing!" ...

"Negative," Simeon said. "Make tracks back to the station, Patsy."

"Negative on that" Channa said. "If we don't get this hulk far enough away, there won't be a station to go back to."

Patsy bit her lip and touched the controls. The tug sprang straight up, the derelict shrinking from skyspanning vastness to child's model size in seconds as the great soft hand of acceleration shoved at them.

"Then you plant that grapnel field," she said urgently. "We can help the boost with our own rise. But when that's done, we're goin' home, girl."

Channa began the adjustments. The tug was designed for straightforward long slow pulls, not this redline-everything race against disaster. She must balance the uneven pull that might shred the tug's structure and compensate for the hulk's weakness by intuition as much as anything. Who knew what structural members had given way within? It would do very little good to rip a large segment of it loose.... The giant ship began to grow slightly smaller.

She glanced at the readout "I hate these clock things," she said fiercely. "They must have been created by a sadist I'm going to Anoa when I run out of air."

"Stop talking," Simeon ordered, "you're wasting oxygen. When that clock has flipped over another thirty seconds, you return to station!"

Gus' command rang through the conversation. "Synchronize release, slave controls to mine as Patsy cuts loose"

Channa keyed it in. "Five seconds. Mark."

Patsy cursed with scatological inventiveness as the little craft surged. Then it flipped end-for-end and the space behind them paled as the drive worked to shed velocity. They would have to kill their delta-V away from the station before they could return.

"Priority" she barked over the open circuit "Everyone get outta my way. 'cause I ain't stoppin'!"

Deceleration turned to acceleration again. Channa wheezed a protest as her ribs clamped down on her lungs..

Simeon's monologue took on a frantic note. He forced his mind not to calculate times, with an effort that almost banished fear.

Keep her informed, he thought: "... madness to have attempted that sort of linkage. The nutrients might have given out on the trip. It depends on when the feeder line was damaged. / might be responsible for that. It could have happened when I hit them with the satellites. What do you think? No, don't answer, save your air. I know we won't be able to tell anyway until we examine him.

"What kind of people are these?" he asked for perhaps the twentieth time. "Could they be pirates who stole the brain? Then why didn't they bring it inside? The access-way? Sure, that must be it, they couldn't get it through the hatch. Still, a shell person is a valuable resource. You'd think they try to protect him

more if they had to leave him outside. It could be some kind of punitive measure by an insane religious sect. Nah, Central would never assign a brain to a group like that, it wouldn't make sense." He began to curse again. "Hey, Channa, stop rolling your eyes like that You're making me dizzy." The circling increased in tempo. "Okay, okay, I'll change the subject. Sheesh, take away a woman's ability to talk..." Channa dosed her eyes. "I was jotting, Channa." Her eyes remained closed. "You're getting close to the station. You're going to need to see where you're going. Remember what it's like out there." No change. "Okay, I apologize. It was a stupid, ignorant remark and I regret it I didn't even mean it Bad joke, okay?"

She opened her eyes.

She was midway between the receding colony-ship and the station.

"I estimate that you'll run out of air three minutes before you reach the station," Simeon said. "But, if you take the most direct route, that unfortunately will take you right through the thickest concentration of spilled ore."

"Shit!" Patsy hissed. "Tellmesomethin' Ahdon'tknow!"

Channa fought down an oxygen wasting sigh. "Play safe?"

"Then you'll fall short by four minutes, eight seconds."

"Play safe. Don't want a shell full a holes."

Simeon was silent for a moment, feeding the pilot instructions for avoiding the worst of the ore-meteor cloud.

"You've got more guts than sense, Channa."

Patsy closed one eye and laughed, "Mind now, Ah didn't say Ah didn't like it, Ah was just remarkin* on it" She opened her eye. "Y'hold on now, we're goin' through like a scalded armadillo."

Channa's breathing began to rasp; psychological, but it wasted air.

Oh, God, don't let her die, he thought. That shelf's hanging out then. Is the mass of the tug enough to shield him from debris?

Even one pebble of ore at the right angle and all her sacrifice would be for nothing. Simeon knew Channa was about to undergo an experience that would feel like dying Humans could survive for several minutes without air hours, sometimes, in cold water. The length of time to brain death was utterly unpredictable but oxygen deprivation might cause brain damage.

Despite a very real and intense anxiety about Channa, his thoughts inexorably returned to the shell... to Guiyon. He's alone in the dark, Simeon said to himself, Channa's got Patsy, and me: Sensory deprivation would make every second feel like a subjective hour, and the backups would keep the shellperson -conscious until the last precious molecules of nutrient were gone. Simeon wished desperately that he could spare him the nightmare.

"Headache," Channa gasped. "Hurts." Her head lolled, would have fallen forward if the savage high-G acceleration had allowed it Her breathing was rasping louder now and not psychosomatic. It was instinct

the hindbrain telling the lungs that they were suffocating. The readouts showed an adrenaline surge, just the wrong thing. Reflexes older than her remote reptile ancestors were preparing the body to fight free of whatever barred it from air.

"Hang on, Channa, hang on," Simeon chanted. Then: "Can't you go any faster?"

"Not 'lessn you want this here tug smeared all over the loadin* bay," Patsy said grimly.

"Isn't inertia wonderful?" Gusky muttered to himself, looking down again at the readings, fourteen kps and building. Not very fast, but the battered remnant of the hulk still massed multiple kilotons.

"Bit of a paradox," one of the volunteer miners said. "I want this thing as far from the station as I can get it but I want to be as far away from it as possible myself."

"Ho. Ho. Ho," Gusky said. "Number three, you're a little off synch. Don't waste our delta-V."

"What's our safety margin, Gus?"

"That depends on when Simeon tells us to cut and run." fmivaUy, realty sorry Igotyou mad at me, Simeon! "I'd like to get twenty k&cks from the station before we drop the thing. But, what can I tell ya? If she blows without warning, if the explosives don't dojwhat they're supposed to, if we don't get far enough away before she goes... actually, I don't think we have a safety margin."

"Sorry I asked."

"Hmph."

Simeon's voice broke in. "Prepare to drop in one minute seven seconds from mark. Mark, Get it tight, Gus."

"Yeah," said one of the miners who had rigged the charges, "that thing has to stay in the same attitude. Charges won't be half as effective if it's tumbling."

"Roger that," Simeonsaid.No time for a linkup. They'd have to listen, reaSy carefully. "Everyone got that mark?"

A chorus of affirmatives. Gusky licked sweat from his upper lip. He'd never told Simeon, exacdy, but his fiveyear hitch in the Navy had been pretty uneventful: patrols, exercises, showing the flag, mapping expeditions. The most nerve-wracking moments had been the fleet handball competitions and surprise inspections.

"You pull the trigger, right?" he said.

"You got it, buddy," Simeon replied. His voice had less timbre, less humanity to it than usual.

"I hate being reassured in a voice that calm."

I've got other things on my mind. "Channa's suit got hit She's running out of air."

"Oh." I screwed the pooch again, goddamitt. "Sorry."

"Get ready."

The tugs were arrayed around the great tattered bulk of the intruder ship like the legs of a starfish, linked by the invisible bonds of the grapnel fields. Gusky kept the rear-field screen on at a steady x25 magnification. When the fields released, the image of the hulk seemed to disappear into a point-source of light in less than a heartbeat. Vision went gray at the edges, before the engines cycled down to something bearable. Tugs necessarily had high power-to-weight ratios. Then the shrinking dot of the derelict blinked with colorless fire.

Gusky cycled the screen to higher magnification. "Phew," he said gustily. The charges had cut the remaining forward section loose from the half-melted engine compartment and its core. Joined to the power module, whatever parts of the ship did not vaporize would be hyper-velocity shrapnel in all directions. With a Idick-or so distance and a vector away from the station, much less could go wrong. Blast is less dangerous without an atmosphere to propagate in. There is nothing to carry the shock wave except the actual gases of the explosion and they disperse rapidly. Given minimal luck, the explosion would just kick what was left of the hulk further away.

"When will it "

The screen blanked protectively. So did his faceplate and the forward ports of the tug's cabin. Beside him the copilot flung his hand up in useless reflex. Even from the rear, the intensity of light was overwhelming.

"Did it work?" Gusky called as visibility returned. That was not as reassuring as it could have been. Half the sensors and telltales on the board were blinking red.

"Sorry." This time Simeon did sound sorry. "That ship... the engines were so old, the parameters were different... There's a lot more secondary radiation and subflux than I thought there would be."

"Thanks," Gusky said facetiously. "All right, people, report."

"I've got a flux in my drive cores I can't damp," one of the volunteers said immediately. "Induction, I guess. Getting worse." "Let me see it," Gusky said, surprised at his own calm. This was much better than waiting; there wasn't time to be worried. "All right, you've got a feedback loop i20 there and it's past redline. Set your controls for maximum acceleration at ninety degrees to the ecliptic with a one-minute delay, then bail out"

"Hey, this is my tugf the volunteer wailed.

"It's going to be your ball of incandescent gas in about ten minutes," Gusky said grimly. "Or hot gas that includes you. Take your pick."

Simeon cut in. "Station will pick up full replacement costs."

"Lobachevsky and Wong, you're closest," Gusky said, "**pick 'em up!" Gusky's pickups showed the luckless volunteers jetting away on backpack and their craft streaking for deep space on autopilot. "The rest of you, dump me some data."

"Yessir, Admiral," one replied dryly.

The information dutifully came in. "Okay, Lobachevsky, Wong, you look functional, sort of. Take the

others with overstrained drives in tow, and well go back nice and slow and easy." With several mitticms'worth of tug that just became so much scrap. Suddenly boring routine becomes very attractive as a way of life. War games are excitement enough.

He touched the control surfaces to establish a tight fine circuit to the station. "Simeon, what about us?"

"Let's put it this way, Gus. None of you are going to die. But some of you aren't going to be very happy for a while, either. Sickbay will be crowded." A long pause. "Congratulations."

Gus grinned; half of that was relief from raw fear. Everyone who lives in space is afraid of decompression, which is why many become agoraphobic planetside. Those who do much EVA work or serve on warships develop a similar fear of radiation, which has the added terror of killing insidiously. On the other hand, most dangers in space either kill cleanly or let live.

"You're welcome," the big man continued. "What about Channa?"

Patsy's voice joined in. "She's gonna be fahn. Hey, Gus," she went on lazily, "you think people will respect us for this?"

Guskey keyed for the visuals. He got a double view, overhead from the docking chamber where the tug rested in its cradle and from the Chicle itself. Both showed Channa Hap being carried off in a floating stretcher.

"Phew. Glad she made it okay."

"Yayuh, mah sentiments exactly. Got a good one thar."

Guskey nodded. On station, Channa acted like a cryonic bitch, he thought, but she's there when it comes down to cases. This was the worst emergency SSS-900 had faced in the time he'd been here. SSS-900-C, he reminded himself.

"I dunno," he said, "7 never respected anyone who led from the rear."

She laughed. "Hey! This might get us a nice rest cure somewhar pretty. We could go togetha." She made the last a question.

"If any two parts of us are still stuck together when this is over, Patsy, you got a date."

"Unh-hunh!" she said enthusiastically.

Hey, first base! Guskey thought After thirty months of ritualized sparring so routine it had gotten to be as comfortably low-key as playing war games with Simeon. That is, if I'm not sick as a puke once sickbay gets through with me. Doctor Chaundra believed in repairing you rapidly. In some circles he was known as "Kill or Cure Chaundra."

"I need a drink," he said solemnly.

"Ah'U buy," Patsy said. a CHAPTER SEEN Channa woke to an excruciating, high pitched wailing.

The engines! she thought fin still on the derelict! Fve get to get out of here!

She lifted her head with a gasp and laid it back down again with a heartfelt groan. This has to be a fatal headache, she thought, nobody could feel like this and live.

The ceiling overhead was a soothing pale blue as were the privacy screens around her. There was a vase of flowers on the bedside table and a bank of portable equipment on the other side, quietly talking to itself and occasionally waving a sensor probe over her body. A suit of working clothes, overalls and jacket and belt, were draped on a clothes stand at the foot of the bed. The air had a slight, pleasant scent of cedar.

Sickbay, she thought. The ambience was unmistakable.

The wailing went on and on, sometimes breaking into sharp yelps. / hope I have long enough to kill whoever is making that racket.

"Who is that?" she finally demanded.

"Ah, Channa," said Simeon in a voice as soft as rain water.

Channa sighed and closed her eyes again. It was restful, and her body was beginning to accept that she was alive and in no danger. Which was a difficult thing, if you'd gone under deeply concerned about your chances of ever waking up again.

"Welcome back to the living," said a flatter voice with a tilting singsong accent. There was a sound of movement. She opened her eyes to see Doctor Chaundra leaning over her. He had his professional expression on; a sort of antiseptic smile, nothing like the genuine enthusiasm he showed in a social situation talking about his specialty. Channa managed the complex procedure of smiling and blinking simultaneously.

"My head," she said in a croaking voice, feebly raising a shaking hand to rub her brow.

"Got just the thing," he said. He touched the angle of her throat with an injector. It hissed and she felt a touch of cold.

Almost instantly, the pain boring its way into her brain began to fade. "Oh, Ghu! that's better." She licked dry lips.

"No, I have merely blocked the pain," the doctor said pedantically. "The organic damage is minimal but will take several days to heal."

"Thirsty?" She raised her brows in pathetic query.

Chaundra poured a glass of water from a bedside carafe, put in a straw and handed it to her.

She sucked greedily on the straw, mindful of her head position, and handed him the empty glass. "More," she demanded. He refilled it, and she drained it again almost as soon as he handed it to her. The wailer took off again. Channa frowned. "Who's that badly hurt?" He grimaced. "She's one of the people we evacuated from the ship; the first one awake. We don't know who she is. She's done nothing but shriek since she woke up. To answer your other question, no, she's not badly hurt. She's dehydrated, and probably has a headache like yours from that, and she had a bloody nose from the abrupt deceleration."

There was an especially violent shriek and the sound of something metal tipping over and of things

scattering. Voices murmured soothing words in edged tones.

"If she can scream like that with a headache like the one I woke up with, she's crazy," Channa said.

Chaundra nodded. "That, too, is a possibility, but I feel that she is presently venting hysteria as a by-product of coldsleep." He sighed. "The earliest methods sometimes had the effect of suppressing basic inhibition."

"Can't you give her something?" Simeon asked from a wall mike. "That sound has just gone from pathetic to seriously annoying."

"No," the medical chief replied. "Or rather, I'd prefer not to immediately. They drugged themselves rather heavily, indeed, presumably to keep their oxygen consumption down. I've no idea for how long a period of time, but from their physical condition, it must have been too long." He gave another of his sighs. "I'd really rather not put anything else into her system. Especially since many of the substances they used seem to have been past recommended shelf life, or discontinued types, or both."

"They say that if someone gets hysterical, a simple slap across " Simeon began.

Chaundra interrupted him. "I am thinking that has more to do with relieving the frustration of the listeners than the distress of the patient," he said with a resigned smile.

"You're a saint, Doctor," Channa told him. Actually she knew that he was a pacifist widower with a passion for surgery, but no matter. "But I'm not So, before I'm compelled to go over there and knock the little git through the wall, I'd like to get out of here."

He smiled and touched the machine. It waved more probes over her, prodding in two or three sensitive places. The readouts had him nodding almost at once. "Yes, you can be going now."

She stood with a satisfied sigh. "Um, is there anyone coherent awake yet?"

"Yes, a young man. He's still more than a bit groggy, so we haven't let him up yet He wants to help this girl."

"Can't you put him on a pallet or in a chair and push him over there?" Simeon asked. "It might help both of them."

"Depends," Chaundra said, "on how he's doing." " Just seeing him might help her," Channa suggested.

"Worth-a try* Chaufcdra shrugged and grabbed a float chair from a cluster of them by the door. "Over here," he said andjCfhanha followed, pulling on a dressing gown.

The man in question was the beautiful lad she herself had packed lip. Simeon watched Channa's pupils enlarge and decided that she was probably responding even more enthusiastically than she had on die ship. Pheromanes, he told himself wisely. And fewer distractions.

The young man had raised himself up on one elbow, a slight sweat glistening on his shapely brow. He looked at them with distress in his light blue eyes.

"Please, let me go to her," he pleaded. His accent was exquisite, his voice a light baritone. The language was recognizable Standard, although the vowels had an archaic tonality.

From the look on her face, Simeon decided that Channa would have taken him to hell if he wanted to go. Simeon wanted him off the station.

Guys like him cause more trouble than beautiful females, Simeon thought. On the other hand, if he can shut that screamer up, flllput him on the payroll.

Channa and Chaundra helped the Adonis into the chair and pushed him over to the pallet where the young woman lay. He reached out for her hand and began stroking it. She had waist-length dark hair and a pale, bony face with plain features and high cheekbones. Long, goldlashed eyes of a dark blue that was almost black stared at him, her screeches cut off for a blissful moment of silence. Then the whites showed all round the iris of her eyes, and before Channa or Chaundra could stop her, she had grabbed the carafe from the table beside her and was swinging it at him.

"You did this! You could have killed me! I almost died! The metal carafe connected with his temple in a sickening smack. The young man slid helplessly from the chair while, not content with the damage she'd just inflicted, the girl strove to climb over the safety railings on the side of her pallet, shrieking that it was his fault, all his fault. Then she began to sob with equal vigor. "My love, my love, what have they done to you?"

Chaundra's interns and head nurse leaped for the pallet in well-choreographed unison. This infirmary saw a lot of visiting miners, still high on various recreational chemicals, not to mention plain old-fashioned ethanol, so they knew what to do. One pinned her arms and another slapped an injector on the nearest portion of her flailing body. Instantly she slumped into unconsciousness.

"Doctor," Simeon said firmly, "put that girl in restraints until she returns to rationality. She can blame me for this one."

"You have it," Chaundra said. The nurses buckled the unconscious woman onto her pallet but were too professional to show the slightest trace of vindictiveness as they tightened the straps. Chaundra bent over the unconscious man.

"Glancing blow after all," he said, pulling up one eyelid. "Should regain consciousness soon."

"I'll be in my quarters, Doctor," Channa said, and gathering up her clothing, walked wearily to an elevator. She entered and leaned against a wall, dosing her eyes.

"You okay?" Simeon asked anxiously.

She smiled. "I'm very okay, thank you." She opened her eyes and straightened, rolling her shoulders to loosen the kinks. "I'm still thirsty," she said, "and hungry, and alive." Then she widened her eyes in dismay. "How could I forget? The brain, did he make it?"

Simeon paused. "No."

Channa slumped and covered her face with her hands. She looked up, her lips pressed tightly together for the rest of the ascent. Then she asked quietly, "Have you had a chance to find out anything about our survivors?" - ~ * "Not as much as I'd hoped to, but I did find out something about the shellperson. He was Planetary Manager Guiyon. Last assigned to a colony planet called Bethel, orbiting the sun GK.728, known locally as Saffron. Ignorant Central Worlds of his... death: beyond the call of duty, I'd say. They told me what they had on record. After his original contract ended, he just stayed on, apparently for no

other reason than he liked Saffron's pretty yellow color.

"Bethel's seemingly just an undistinguished colony of no great population, located a little off the beaten path, more than a bit xenophobic in their attitudes. They won't trade with nonhumans, for example. It was established about three hundred years ago by a 'tightly knit, religiously oriented group.' Hmmm." Simeon paused. "In three hundred years, a religion could develop any number of nasty kinks. The refugees may have been cast out. They may have left voluntarily to establish another base for their sect I don't have that information." He continued softly. "Guiyon must have been there a long, long time. A long time and a long way to die like that, alone in the dark."

His final words were said in the merest whisper and Channa felt tears pricking at her eyes. It was fitting for a brawn to mourn a brain. She let her tears fall. She could. Simeon couldn't.

She left the elevator and entered the lounge, dropping weakly into the nearest comfortable chair. She leaned her head back and dosed her eyes, letting the tears fall. For a long time she and Simeon observed silence.

"What about the data we got from the bridge?" she said at last, wiping her eyes again with the back of her hand. "Was it blank?"

"I, uh, can't read it," Simeon said. Under the grief, embarrassment tinged his voice. "The codes are ancient. In fact, it may not be a code, it may be a language. One I don't have on record, which means it must have been extinct before spaceflight and in limited use even then."

Channa began to laugh, suppressing it with effort before it took her over. She stifled it with a groan. "I'm almost afraid to ask this but...** and she found herself glancing at his column for reassurance. "What's the report on the people we rescued? Besides the screamer."

"Forty of the fifty we found survived to reach the station."

"Oh, Gnu!" she said and sat forward, her arms crossed on her knees, her forehead resting on them. "We didn't have time to count the dead, did we? Damn! We could at least have done that!" She sat back again and looked around the room bitterly, as though resenting its comfortable, unchanged appearance.

"I know," Simeon told her. "I feel that I've foiled."

"You aren't the only one," she said, and sobbed once. She placed her hand over her mouth, pressing hard, to stifle any others that might follow. After a moment she spoke again in a thick voice. "And the station?"

"That came out all right," he said, and gave her a report long enough for her to regain control: good news in the fortunate lack of injury to station personnel, lack of any real structural damage to the station or traffic, with the notable exception of the ore carrier. He reported that incoming ships were huddled on the far side of the station just in case and ended with an invitation to the party being thrown by the tug pilot volunteers for anyone who wanted to come. By the time he was finished, Channa was struggling to keep her eyes open.

"I never thought I'd see the day when I was too drained to debauch," she said in a hoarse voice. "I must be getting old."

"Cut yourself some slack, kid," Simeon said, reverting to his juvenile affectation. "You did actually die."

Subjectively, I mean. I think it's a bit much to expect to be in a partying 1 mtoa4wo hours after being brought back to life. Remember, the slogan is 'eat, drink and be merry for tontqrroui we may die.' So you're covered."

Channa managed a weak grin. /oofo exactly t%e she feels. "How would it be if I sent something down in your name, champagne or something?"

"Perfect," she said weakly, but with feeling.

"And you must eat something. Doc Chaundra said you'd feel better for it. It'll stave off a return of the headache."

"I'm for that" She rose, reeling slightly on her way to the small galley to find whatever was easiest to prepare. She was staring into a cupboard, not even registering what she was looking at, when the door to the lounge swooshed open. She stumbled out to see who it was and arrived in time to see Mart'an, himself, and a bevy of waiters sweep into the main lounge.

"Ah, my dear and valiant mademoiselle!" He snapped his heels together and bowed crisply from the waist. "I salute you. We of the Perimeter Restauran* would like to thank you for your extraordinary bravery which has saved the station." His arm swept out gracefully, indicating the serving trolley. "A mere token of our esteem, I know, but we put our hearts into everything that we prepare, and this evening, I think that we have even surpassed ourselves. As our gratitude is surpassing." He bowed again, a more modest version, with his right hand spread across his heart.

Channa smiled stupidly at him for a moment until she could gather enough of her wits together to tell him that he was very kind.

He offered her his arm and led her to a chair. Instantly his cohorts flowed into action. A table was brought, a cloth spread, service laid, wine poured, napkin spread and food appeared on her plate. The arrangement alone was a work, of art. Simeon recognized actual Terran truffles decorating the appetizer and the entree was no le\$s than carre d'agneau Mistral. A file said the recipe was by Escoffier, Mart'an's boyhood hero. / bet they'd chew it for her if she asked them to, Simeon thought, amused.

"Ah, Monsieur Simeon." Mart'an exhaled a tragic sigh, his face wearing the blank expression softshells adopted when addressing someone unseen. "How we wish we could offer a similar tribute to you."

Simeon put his likeness up on his column-screen, made it smile appreciatively and bow slighdy. "By coming to the aid of my brawn in this manner, monsieur, you are serving both myself and the station superbly. I cannot begin to express my appreciation."

Channa's eyes widened; her mouth, however, was fully occupied.

Ha! he thought, triumphandy. Didn't think I had it in me, didja, Happy? Diplomacy 'R Us.

"I wonder," he said confidentially to Mart'an, "if it would be possible for you to clear away at a later time? Ms. Hap is extremely weary and I need to bring her up to speed on station business before she retires...."

"Of, course," Mart'an said heartily. With a flutter of his hands, he gathered his magic minions together and the whole group departed as smoothly as they had arrived.

Channa sipped her wine with an appreciative glow on her face.

"Go easy on that," he cautioned her. "I know you're thirsty, but water would be a better choice."

"Yes, Dad." She picked up her fork and began eating again, chewing appreciatively. "Too bad you can't taste foods, but I assure you this lamb is deeeelicious." She rolled her eyes. "Sq, bring me up to speed. What else is there to crown today's glad tidings?"

"Nothing more really," he said, "except that the computer has finally regurgitated a translation program for me. The language was extinct Chuvash, whatever that is. The AI worked back from loanwords of known languages, but it's warning me that there are gaps in vocabulary and most certainly in shades of meaning..." "What does Central Worlds say about this disaster?" She yawned deeply. "Or don't we have enough comsat capability left?"

"I gave them an outline of events and the reappearance of... Guiyon. They were more concerned that I was still operational. Which I am. They expect a full report, of course, but I'm hoping to include more information about the ship. They can wait. They've the bones of the matter."

"Any news on Joat?"

"Nothing specific," he said with a sigh. "With everyone suited up, it was impossible to tell who was who. Not all suits have nametags and skill-codes. I haven't heard a sound from the engineering section."

"Well, I want to be sure she's all right," Channa said, exploding in angry anxiety. "You open up a channel down there and tell her that we need to know if she made it. One lousy 'yes, I did' will be sufficient." She picked up her fork again but was merely pushing food around the plate, her expression almost sulky.

Simeon regarded her with a mildly exasperated mental smile. When she was tired, Channa was amazingly like Joat. Sending the necessary discreet query, he was also relieved to have received a prompt reply, though he puzzled over Joat's odd undertone.

"She made it. I told her one word would do it, and she gave me two. Quote, I'm okay, end-quote. You should try to get some rest, Channa." A pause. "No wait a minute. She's adding something. Oh, really? Quote, Tell Channa she did a neat job. * Unutterably relieved, Channa pushed the table aside. Somehow, knowing that Joat was safe released the tension that had kept her going so long. Like a robot, she moved toward her quarters, made it to the door before she stopped, holding onto the frame.

"Simeon," she said, looking over her shoulder at his column, her head of its own accord resting against the cool metal panel, "I am your brawn, remember. You are required to inform me of any untoward incident. Yes?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly.

She nodded sharply: a "you'd better" gesture, and entered her quarters. The bed beckoned irresistibly; she had a dreamlike memory of fumbling with the sickbay wrapper and crawling onto the bed, of a servo pulling the covers up around her. Soft music hummed her to sleep.

"Good morning," Simeon greeted her the next day. "You look rested," he said. Fm learning, he congratulated himself, / didn't say, you looked like hett on a rampage last night, or even, you look a lot better. I'm acquiring sensitivity, he thought smugly, suppressing the thought that she had made him so. Hope it doesn't wreck my style.

"I feel rested, too," she said in some surprise. "After yesterday, I'm surprised I woke up today. You didn't," and her tone became suspicious, "let me oversleep?"

The essential Channa has not altered overnight! "Nothing new to report I'm still parsing through the language, but it's odds on we'll get more out of the passengers than the logs."

"How are they? Anybody else awake yet?"

"Doctor Chaundra says that poor bastard the screeching Valkyrie cold-cocked is their leader, name of j(\Jnos ben Sierra Nueva. The valkyrie is Rachel bint Damscus. I knew you'd like to put names to the face... es(" he added hurriedly, not wishing to single the man out for her attention in any way. "The doc says he'll be able to join us at the meeting."

"Whoelse?" "Leader Amos and his sidekick, a guy called Joseph ben Said."

Channa took a sip of the coffee she'd made. "When are they due here?"

"We've a station ofncers meeting in about an hour. Chaundra, too, if someone's not critical. Whenever we've finished that, I'll call down for Sierra Nueva and this Joseph fellow."

"Do me a favor," Channa said, "call him Amos, would you please? Sierra Nueva makes him sound like one of those dances that are supposed to make your blood boil and your libido unhinge."

"You got it. We don't want forbidden passions running riot all over the station, now do we?"

"Well," she said with a grin, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively, "that part's negotiable."

Well, well, Channa ma belle, nothing like dying to loosen a person up, eh? Let's hope the "mellow" lasts a while inyou.

He noticed a visitor in the corridor and opened the door before the boy outside could ring for admittance: a tall thin twelve-year-old, dark and slender of face but with green eyes and a reddish tint to his brown hair. The boy stood there a moment startled, his mouth a perfect O.

"Come on in," Simeon invited. Channa looked up from her notescreeen and reinforced the welcome.

"Uh, hi," the kid said nervously. Simeon noted that he walked with a cane. "I'm Seld Chaundra? I'm in Joat's class?"

"Oh, really?" Simeon said helpfully.

"Yeah." Seld's free hand bunched the material of his trouser leg. "Um, is she here?"

"Not at the moment," Channa told him, resting her chin on her fist "We'll give her a message," and Channa added a mental/tkmk. MIs there a problem?"

"Oh, no," he shook his head in wide-eyed denial. "It's just... Well, she wasn't in class today and I was worried that she might of got hurt or something yesterday.** "That's very kind of you," Channa said approvingly "But she came through..., okay!" "

"We'll tell her that you were asking about her, Seld," Simeon told him.

"Will she be in school tomorrow?"

"Quite possibly," Simeon said mendaciously. "I'll let her know you were asking for her and tell her to contact you. Does she have your call code?"

"Yes, sir, she does, sir." Like all station-born youngsters, Seld was not unaccustomed to Simeon speaking from the nearest sound cube, but he had the good manners to bow to the column. "Sorry to have bothered you." He waved at Channa and stepped back through the door.

"Welir Channa said, pleased. "She has a peer who cares enough about her well-being to beard you in your lair."

"You think that's enough to entice her back out?"

Channa deliberated. "I think it will certainly alter her thinking. When you're sure no one cares about you, it's easy to be depressed and feel hopeless. Go on," she said with an encouraging smile at his column, "tell her Seld was here, worried she might have been hurt, and looking for her in class."

"Yeah, he's okay Seld is, sort of," Joat said. "Bit of a kid,y'know?"

"Chronologically speaking," Simeon remarked blandly, "you're a kid yourself."

Joat laughed with more than a trace of bitterness; it was a sound like a yelping coyote. "Never had the time or chance to be one. So it's a little late, like, to expect me to act like one."

Silence fell in the improvised nest at the intersection of the ducts, but the girl heard just the softest sigh of regret issue from Simeon.

Softie, she thought, with a rueful affection. Even if he was... what was tike jingle? Spam-in-a-can? Nice guy, she decided. He need&someone to look after him. Besides Channa Hap, that was. Channa might be his brawn, but she seemed to have looked after everyone else yesterday instead of him.

"Yeah, Seld's not a bad osco. Sorta knows his way around a keyboard, in a kid sorta way. Can't fight worth shit, though."

"He says they miss you at school," Simeon replied noncommittally.

Joat gave a second bark of sour laughter. "Not that bitchite Louise Koprekni, she doesn't"

"Pushing her face in the toilet bowl was a bit extreme, wasn't it, Joat?"

"She said I smelled."

"You did smell. Then! That's about the time you considered regular washing wasn't such a bizarre notion."

Joat's lower lip stuck out, and she turned back to her keyboard and the collection of miscellaneous electronic junk which Simeon had been trying to identify.

"What's that you're contraptin'?" Simeon asked.

"Riffler."

"Dare I ask what a riffler is?" Do 7 want to know?

"Ultrasonic. Pops the caps." M Simeon's interrogative sound, she explained. "Bursts the capillaries, like, you know, instant really, really bad sunburn?"

"It what?" Then he modified his tone to a more conversational level. "We hadn't planned on dragging you out, you know."

"I didn't figure you would.*1 "You haven't... ah... tried it out, have you?"

"Not yet."

"How will you know it works?"

"It will!" His confidence in that reply was unnerving.

"Wouldn't kill anyone, but it'll sure make 'em think twice about following me." " * "Ah, I see."

His visual picked up just the hint of a grin as Joat bent her head to continue her handiwork.

"Some things," she said cryptically.

Silence fell again. Conversations with Joat reminded Simeon of documentaries he had seen of catching trout by hand. You had to be very patient to succeed.

"Looks like trouble coming," she said neutrally.

"Trouble's over," Simeon said. "Look, Joat, I do apologize for not checking on you during the alert, but..."

"No need. You gave me a suit, remember. That was all I needed," Joat pointed out reasonably.

"Something threatens you, the station, we're all in deep kimchee. Right? Much better you spent your time keeping us from getting in so deep we have to shovel our way out."

"You've an extremely realistic attitude, Joat," Simeon said, with a certain tone of admiration for the independence in her that also worried him.

"I'm no sap," Joat announced with satisfaction. "Troubles don't come by ones and twos, either you get 'em by kilobyte loads, I'll be ready. " She patted the riffler.

*I'm sure you will," Simeon replied soothingly.

"Yuh. See you at dinner."

"At dinner?" He sounded surprised but that pleased her. "Umm, yes, see you then," he added, doing a good job of sounding casual.

Joat whistled soundlessly to herself as she felt Simeon's attention withdraw most of it, at least She also switched on the white-noise maker and the scrambler she'd rigged up. She was no longer complete sure they worked, Simeon having had enough of a look at her contrivances to perhaps neutralize them. Not that he'd have had time to bother about her with so much else on his mind these days. Even a brain had some limitations.

She didn't want an ailience while she reran the stuff she'd recorded dfiring Channa's exploits on the intruder ship. First she screened something that had come in on the Central datablip just today. The watchman program Joat set up had cut it out and routed itto her system automatically.

Stretching luxuriously, she popped the tab on a can of near-beer. She stayed away from the real thing because it made her feel loggy and squiff. She bit a big hunk off a chocolate nut bar, grinning around the mouthful with vindictive delight as the scene played on.

A crowd surrounded the obviously official building and their chant ran shrill and menacing as they waved their placards which bore the same message they chanted.

"Dorgan the bigot! Dorgan out! Dorgan the bigot! Dorgan out!"

The ground-floor windows have been shattered and a line of riot-armed police were holding the SPRIM demonstrators at bay The visual shifted to an interior room where Ms. Dorgan of the Child Welfare department, looking rumpled and alarmed, was gesticulating wildly.

"And I categorically deny saying that shellpeople are unnatural abominations with no right to live!" she wailed. "Or that they make me want to puke!"

Joat grinned. She wanted to be a systems engineer when she grew up or maybe even a brawn but editing was a nice hobby. Editing transmissions of recorded conversations sent to SPRIM and MM, for example. Channa had the right idea, but adults had no enthusiasm for taking an idea and running with it "Like the teacher said," she muttered, taking another mouthful. "I gotta lot of buried hostility I got to learn to express."

"I felt a good deal like screaming myself" Joseph said.

Amos sighed and lowered himself fnto a chair. Once Joseph insisted, the doctor here a man, oddly enough had moved him into a small suite, with a private sitting room.

Apparently private, he reminded himself, though there might well be listening devices. Otherwise, it had the common strangeness of everything here, like soft synthetics for the walls which could alter shade or suddenly turn themselves into view screens. He had commanded that the space-scene transform itself into something more restful, and the holograph had turned to a neutral brown solidity. In its way, that made him uneasy too. What appeared to be plain bare plastic was obviously anything but.

"It is difficult to beUeve that we are safe," he said, rubbing a hand over his face, which had grown enough beard to rasp. He resolved to ask for a some, or the local equivalent "To be frank, my brother, I never expected to wake again."

"Neither did I," Joseph said, prowling with slow restlessness. The gravity was slightly higher than Bethel, just enough to be noticeable. "But we do not know that we are safe even from the Kolnari."

Amos looked up sharply. "We do not?"

"The shell Guiyon," Joseph amended, at Amos' frown " said that it "

"He." Amos compressed his lips firmly after that correction; the more so since he himself had never felt entirely easy with Guiyon.

Guiyon saved us, he remembered. More than that. Guiyon had been the first to listen to his youthful doubts without recoiling in horror and ordering him to do penance. Only families descended from the prophet were allowed speech with the Planetary Manager. Most Bethelites thought that entity was at best legend, at worst an abomination of the infidel. I am too old to believe in nursery tales, Amos thought. He was a nian now, with many depending on him.

"He," Joseph said, making a soothing gesture with both hands, "He intended to take us to Rigel base. This is not Rigel."

"No," Amos conceded. "SSS-900-C. Although they seem reluctant to tell us more."

"Understandable, sir. Would you immediately trust fugitives who came so close to destroying them, though we knew it not? However, there are things they cannot help but tell us."

"Yes," Amos said slowly. "For one, that this is no military base."

"Just so, my brother. These are a peaceful people." At Amos' dubious look, he went on. "I was raised dockside, you will remember. I know more of traders and trading than most. These are respectable merchants and spacefarers, by their own ethics, if not by Bethel customs. Dockside, we would have called them easy marks."

They looked at each other, haunted by what neither would mention first. Amos took hold of himself. A respectable, an ethical people deserved the truth.

"And we cannot know if the Kolnari still pursue," Amos whispered. Sickness tugged at the pit of his stomach. To achieve safety, even for so few, and jeopardize in turn their saviors. "We must talk to them!"

"All things considered, we didn't come out of the day too badly at all," Chief Administrator Ciaren said, once more running his stylus down his notepad to be sure he'd missed nothing.

Ducking her head, Channa managed to hide a yawn. Meetings were meat and drink to Ciaren. When he had the opportunity to trot out his careful graphs and statistics for an audience, he positively glowed and inflated. Like a plain girl who's just been asked to dance by a high-school hero, she thought mordantly.

"We're down about three million credits," she pointed out, reaching for the water carafe.

Two section chiefs sprang to fill the glass for her: fame was already a bit wearing. The meeting was supposed to have started as a working breakfast. Plates and crumbs were scattered around the table. Gusk was there too, looking a little pale either from the medications, or from the party. Not only was he prominent in his own business, he was a section representative and, with the recent favorable publicity, looked likely to be re-elected.

Patsy was filing a fingernail. "Somebody has to pony up the expenses," she pointed out. "For example, we commandeered equipment from Namakuri-Singh who is not known to be a charitable organization."

Gusky grunted, "commandeered the equipment which will have to be replaced, which you, Simeon, authorized me to use."

"Not me personally. The station!" Simeon said sharply. Brains tended to be sensitive about personal debt, having had to pay off such a whacking great amount for their early care and education. "No one could say that I didn't do everything possible to minimize damage."

Loss of the tngs-wa\$unavoidable and the station is morally obligated tfc compensate their owners for the loss. Which; Ciaren,' we will recoup from Lloyd's, invoking the force majeure clause."

"Yes, yes, of course, it will," Ciaren muttered, making a quick notation.

"The other unavoidable losses and damages which we've discussed today are going to wipe out the contingency fund."

"It will?" Gus asked unhappy.

"Yes, it will," Ciaren agreed in a lugubrious tone of voice.

"In a good cause," Simeon said briskly.

"On this Lloyd's claim," Gus went on, "well be dealing with bureaucrats, bureaucratic accountants at that Government bureaucratic accountants, with lawyers in tow."

"The withered hand on the controls," Simeon intoned.

"We could just rely on their decency, good nature and inherent generosity," Gus suggested. Even Ciaren laughed at that Channa shuddered. "So we should be prepared for accusations of mismanagement and hand-wringing over the cost of every rivet, bolt and coupling." She affected a nasal tone. "Didn't you realize that seventeen point three seconds boost would have done just as well as seventeen-point-seven?"

Chief Administrator Ciaren assured them that his entries would be meticulously checked, all forms would be properly made out, filed on time and to the proper bureaus.

"I won't go so far as to guarantee prompt or even early payment," he said, allowing himself a very small smile, "given that we'll be dealing with departments over which I have no control. But, I can promise you that I will do my best, and that is very good indeed."

There was a rumble of agreement "At least we," Channa said firmly, "can authorize immediate release of the contingency fund to private persons who suffered damage and loss, or have to make repairs germane to station functions. Claren, just get the claims into the insurance companies as soon as you can."

"Good luck," said the owner of a minerals company in a wry tone. "I've noticed they're always more enthusiastic about collecting premiums than paying claims."

That brought another chuckle. Channa turned to the pillar and Simeon's image. "As far as the station exterior damage is concerned, isn't there a relevant clause in the station's charter that guarantees immediate repairs?"

"Hmmm." The holo turned static for a moment before Simeon smiled, "Yes, as a matter of feet emergency expenses for maintaining station integrity and saving life and limb are covered under the

general station contract with Lloyd's. We ought to be able to cover everything."

"Excellent," Claren said, tapping at his keyboard. "'Nuther li'l thing. Fo' all them drills, Simeon, when we was supposed to know what to do iffen thar was a real one, thar was a mighty lot of folks ended up runnin* around like scalded roosters. Ought to be fined, to remind 'em to pay attention."

"Fined? Yes, fined! Fine. Good notion, Patsy," Simeon said, "And the longer they've been on station and should know better, the heavier the fine. Pinch a pocket, mark the memory. What bothers me is why didn't they know where they were supposed to be. I call these drills even if you're always complaining about them often enough for everyone to know exactly where to go and what to do. Their names are always checked off on the roster, so why the hell were they running around bumping into walls?"

"Aw, thar's allus some œlk who panic, Simeon," Patsy said. "Mos' of us was*whar we shoulda been. And Lord knows, we got-it all done, din we?" Patsy said.

"I'm inclined to think that perhaps we should give them the benefit of the doubt here," Channa put in. "But perhaps you should keep an eye on the group leaders, in the event that they just automatically check off every name on their list without verifying that everyone is in position and accounted for."

"Assign them a buddy," Gus said. "If they're too helpless to know where to go and how to get there, make it a joint responsibility."

"Should be the group leaders," Chaundra said in a disgusted tone.

"Joint responsibility! Excellent," Simeon said, "just like B & B teams."

The resolution was passed unanimously.

"Move that we break for lunch," somebody said. "It's

1300."

"Seconded," Channa said. "I think I need a full stomach to hear what our guests have to say. Spaceflot suggests they've got a fairly lurid set of adventures to tell us. Any objections? Adjourned."

A little different from last night, eh Happy? Simeon watched as Channa munched on her thin sandwich. He hoped she was comparing this fare with the feast Mart'an had spread for her. The deck commissary was not up to Perimeter standards, although Gus claimed that they did an acceptable late-night pizza.

"So, brief us with what you know, Simeon, about our latest arrivals," Gus said.

Simeon made a throat-clearing sound. "Data base describes 'em as a "tightly knit, religiously oriented group' in origin," he said. "Judaeo-Sufi Buddhist roots."

"Wow," Patsy said. "Thassa mouthful. But do they believe in God?" ** Wondering looks, sage nods and quizzical "ooh's" went around the table.

"Probably worshipping snails and marrying their siblings, or some such genetically stupid custom," Vickers said. The station security chief was a short, rather squat woman from New Newfoundland. "Buddhists, you said? No wonder they nearly crashed us. That kind don't know much about mechanical stuff."

"Wait, just a precise minute." Doctor Chaundra held up a protesting hand. "To begin with, I saw no medical indications of dangerous inbreeding. They may have looked as if they didn't comprehend directions or our comments, but they were all dazed from their experiences. They are needing rest and recuperation, but under that is health. Genetic diversity is low, but there are few recessives. I would hazard that they must have had a good screening program to begin with. The group is above the norm. One or two may have endocrine behavioral problems from the coldsleep drugs. They administered drugs well beyond their storage lives. The Bethelite leader is a very articulate man, educated and intelligent "Although," he went on, with a slight frown, "he has not been particularly communicative."

"Unfortunately, education and intelligence don't always go hand in hand," Simeon commented. "It's not that I've got my heart set on the 'religious fanatics drive the heretics away' scenario, but it does fit the little I've been able to decipher of Guiyon's log. Phrases like, 'Damn rockheaded elders who said immorality and doubt in the young had brought doom'; 'told them their children had a right to live'; 'feared some of them might betray us'; 'escaped as best we could'; and saddest of all, 'had to leave some behind to face death.'"

Patsy put down her sandwich. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Nor am I," Ghannajfaid grimly. "It's rime to get this from the mouths offie horses."

Stallion, you mean, Simeon remarked very privately.

Amos ben Sierra Nueva was accompanied by the smaller, thickset-man who had been found beside him on the colony ship. Two of Vickers* guards were discreetly in attendance, more to guide the floatchairs than guard.

They're weak as kittens, Simeon thought, not to mention unarmed and with no place else to go and nothing to go there in. Station personnel developed a special kind of paranoia as a survival trait: nothing, no one must harm their station. Any station, no matter how state-of-the-art and safety-conscious, was totally vulnerable. Had he, in innocence, welcomed aboard terrorists fleeing 'rockheaded' elders? Oddly enough, the presence of Guiyon argued against that possibility.

As their chairs thumped softly off their air cushions to the floor, the two strangers looked with impassive expressions at those seated around the table.

Simeon heard Patsy murmuring under her breath; very faintly, almost subvocalizing. He focused, upping the gain on his receptors:

"Oh, my oh my, that one is pretty" she was saying. "My oh myohmy"

Patsy's obvious interest in the man did not surprise Simeon but it did suggest he might have an entirely different problem on his hands. However, if Patsy's charms should win Amos, Simeon could relax. Then he caught Channa, glancing surreptitiously at Amos' classic profile, slightly clouded with a worry that only gave him a more Jovian solemnity. Then, seeing the look exchanged between Amos and Joseph, Simeon wondered hopefully if the short, muscular man was his boyfriend.

"Dr. Chaundra says that we mustn't tire you," Simeon said by way of calling the meeting to order, "but we'd appreciate your filling us in on a few details."

Amos gave a start, and his eyes widened as he suddenly looked up to the pillar at the head of the table

and saw Simeon's synthesized face. So, he knows about shettpeople, bid he's surprised to find one here.

"We are grateful for your succor," Amos began formally, bowed his head, touching forehead and heart with one hand.

"I am Amos ben Sierra Nueva, and my companion is Joseph ben Said." The short man repeated Amos's gesture.

Seeing it, Gusky frowned slightly and moved his fingers. Simeon read the message. I figure the short one for a hard case.

The brain accepted that verdict. There were some things that only personal experience could teach. Amos continued speaking, pausing as he sought the appropriate words but gradually becoming more fluent and his blue eyes began to warm with sincerity.

"We are of the colony on Bethel, I am loathe to tell you, in the face of your generosity, of a terrible scourge, a bright evil that flies upon us even now." "A... bright evil?" Channa asked uncertainly. Scourge* Evil? Sheesh! Simeon wondered. The archaic syntax made the man sound as stilted as a historical holoplay. What's he talking about? Devils* So he can blame the whole disaster on the supernatural? There was a rustle as the others around the table leaned forward. They had expected to hear about something safely in the past, not a new threat to the station. Yesterday's had been more than enough for a long while.

"Indeed, lady, you are in grave danger." He caught the blank or startled expressions around the table. "Has Guiyon told you nothing?" he asked desperately.

"Guiyon is dead," Simeon said, and saw both men go rigid with shock and grief. He thought better of them for it and paused to let them recover. "The ship's logs are all but unreadable. Why don't you fill us in?" Simeon suggested quietly.

"He is dead?" Amos's drawn face had gone pale under its smooth light-olive coloring. "But, how is that possible? He wa&a sljellperson, an immortal. Ah, perhaps that is why we are not at Rigel Base or some other Central Worlds facility where we thought to seek assistance."

"He brought you here, to SSS-900-C, a space station and many light years from Rigel Base."

"How can an immortal die?" Joseph asked softly, suppliant as he spread his hands wide in his lap.

"The feeder lines to his nutrient sources had sheared off and, as there was no backup..." Simeon trailed off and both Bethelites bowed their heads a moment, honoring the dead. "Considering the state of that truly ancient vessel of yours, he did well to get you this for."

Amos glanced at his companion. The other man's hard blocky face was drawn, and he nodded his head slowly twice, as if encouraging. Amos hesitated, cleared his throat and, throwing his chin up, spoke directly to Simeon.

"This is even worse than I had imagined. Guiyon must have been truly desperate. Can you defend yourselves?"

"Well, we fended off your out-of-control ship pretty successfully," Simeon replied. "What did you have in mind?"

Amos leaned forward, supporting himself on the armrests of the chair. His eyes took on a fierce glow.

"I will tell you," he said passionately, sweeping a look at those around the table. "We of Bethel are a peaceful Anne MtCaffrey & f 5M. Stating people." His fists met and clenched. "Virtually a defenseless people." His mouth twisted in pain. "We were attacked from the skies above our peaceful planet. I do not know how you count the hours in a day or the days of a week, a month or a year. I do not know how long we were unconscious in the Sleep. We fled our home world for four periods of twenty-five hours before I took the drug. Just before I did, Guiyon told me that he thought we would have a solid five days' lead. So nine days of twenty-five hours two hundred and twenty-five hours."

"Sixty minutes in yo* hoah, Mr. Sierra Nuevah?" Patsy asked.

Looking over at her expressionlessly, he nodded slowly.

Simeon called up a holo of Bethel, culled and realized from the Survey Service data base.

"That is our world as it appeared before this Exodus," Amos said bleakly, watching the slow rotation on the screen. "Our capital city was there," and pointed to where two large rivers flowed into a bay. "Keriss, we called it. The place where the Pilgrims landed and erected our Temple. The Kolnari..." He broke, squeezing his eyes closed, his face a mask of pain.

Reference, Simeon prompted silently, feeling the computer begin its work. Then he felt a mental lurch as he reviewed what Amos had said. The city of Keriss was there: past tense. Gus caught it as well, his pupils widening.

"They demanded unconditional surrender," Amos was saying, his face wiped clear of any emotion. "By sneak attack, they disabled our orbital habitats, our communications, everything we might have used to call help."

He folded his shaking hands, clasping them so tightly the knuckles showed white. "The Council of Elders convened," he said. His lips tightened. "They decided this tribulation was punishment for the increasing immorality of the younger generation. Mel"

He stabbed himself in the breast with his fingers, "And those like me, who only wanted a little more freedom, who only wanted to have answers to reasonable questions. They would not listen to me even though I am a male descendent, in the Prophet's own line." Locked in bitter memory, Amos did not notice the surprise his words generated.

Ah, patrUineal descent system, Simeon thought.

"I thank the All-Knowing for Guiyon, for when I left the council chamber that last time, he called to me. Escape, he said. 'To go where? How?' I asked. He told me then of the colony ship that had brought us to Bethel. For three hundred years we had used it as a weather and relaying station, nothing more. I left to gather those who might follow me."

His hands knotted together. "And the Kolnari... when the Elders refused surrender, they destroyed the dry with a fusion weapon!"

A shocked murmur ran around the table. No one had used fusion weapons in generations. Certainly not in any sector answerable to the Central Worlds.

"Murderers! Looters! Pirates!" he spat out the words and rubbed his face with his hands.

Another murmur. SSS-900-C was in a very peaceful sector; the only nonhumans were spesdes who did not practice institutionalized violence. The settlers were mostly well-integrated types, if a bit rambunctious, but no more than was expected on a frontier. Piracy was an historical phenomenon or a sporadic occurrence far out on the Arm.

In a steady voice, all the more effective because of its calm, Amos went on. "A tenth of our people died in that moment, and all our leaders. The Kolnari told us that we must capitulate or they would strike again. They broadcast their message from a dark screen. They would strike again and again until we were obliterated to the last man. Just this implacable voice. The cowards! They did not even show us the face of our enemy. They gave us two hours to make up our minds.

"And so we began. It was very hard, we had to determine who we could take." His cheeks grew red with shame as he continued. "First we took Guiyon from his column. We could not open the main bay doors. Ah, but we were so stupid, so innocent, so untrained! We'd managed to get supplies, disconnect Guiyon, gathered our people, flown to the ship without being detected and then," he gave a harsh bark of laughter, "the doors refused to open! Some murmured that the Elders had been right. We were being punished for our sins.

"Then, Joseph here," and Amos laid a light hand on the short man's shoulder, "opened one of the service airlocks. Only it was much too small for Guiyon's shell. He insisted that he didn't have to be inside, that we must strap him to the hull near the bridge, so that his brain synapses could be wired into the command panel. He had to tell us everything that had to be done. We knew so little of such matters." Another bitter snort. "And we were so afraid. None of us knew anything at all about spatial navigation. I had piloted a ship, but only a small one, and never beyond Bethel's moons. Beyond Bethel's moons," and he made a broad sweep of his arm, "was not fit for men of Bethel. Also, we know nothing of the worlds outside our little system. Guiyon handled what outsystem commerce was permitted to us on Bethel."

He paused, swallowing hard, and Chandra filled a glass with water for him. Amos nodded gratefully and drank before he resumed his story.

"Guiyon dared not risk bringing us to one of the nearer colonies for fear of leading those monsters to an equally defenseless planet. Instead," and he gave a mirthless laugh, "we may have led them to an even more defenseless space station. At least on a planet, one may know of safe hiding places. I do not know why we are here and not at Rigel Base. Guiyon must have changed course again. There were four fiends in our wake when I had to addept the drug. Well-armed warships, or so Guiyon thought. And we have led them here to you who have" saved the poor fragment of our people who fled from our once beautiful planet" He bowed his head, his shoulders slumping with his consummate despair.

An appalled silence had broken into a quickly rising babble of "they've brought trouble here," "they led fiends to its?," "But we're defenseless." Simeon let out a modulated howl and they all shut up.

"Thank you," Simeon said ironically when silence fell. When in danger, or in doubt, run in circles, scream and shout, he added to himself.

"Guiyon brought them here because first, the engines were about to blow, and second, they were dying fast anyway, and third, SSS-900-C is, after all, on the main route in this quadrant of Central Worlds sphere of influence. Now, if we could examine the problem more calmly?"

Claren turned to May Vickers. "As security chief, you're required to defend us!"

Vickers looked at the man. "With stundart pistols?" she asked incredulously. "I'm a police officer with fifty part-time assistants. I lock up drunken miners and see domestic disputes don't get out of hand," she said. "I've never had experience with fiends and I want no part of four warships." She crossed her arms across her solid chest and looked accusingly up at Simeon.

"Is it possible that you might have lost them?" Chaundra asked.

The two Bethelites shook their heads glumly.

"Unlikely," Simeon said, "not when Guiyon was overdriving the engines and leaving an ion trail a blind alien could follow."

Gus nodded. "Any warship could."

"Iffen they couldn't see the trail, thar's all them pieces of the ship rollin* about, saying 'theah heahh!'" Patsy waved her arms like a signalman. "We cain't hardly say they passed on through.", "My information banks give me no information at all about any group, or star system, known as Kolnari," said Simeon. "While J realize that your experience with these people is short-term, had you even heard of them on Bethel before they struck?"

Amos shook his head. "Guiyon had heard rumors of a band of marauders in the Arm from the few traders that came to Bethel. He was also forbidden by the Elders to tell any but themselves what news traders brought of the worlds beyond Bethel. On the ship, he did tell me," and Amos furrowed his brow, trying to remember the exact words the shellperson had used, "that they struck so swiftly that no alarm could go forth. That that was how they avoided detection by any force great enough to come against them."

"Central Worlds, for instance," Channa said with a rueful quirk of her lips.

Amos nodded. "The first wave of destruction was aimed at our air and space ports, at communication installations. The strike was as complete as it was unexpected. They chose not to show themselves to us until all our space capacity was destroyed... or so they thought. All we know of them was from a very brief time when we fought them. They follow us to destroy the evidence of the destruction of Bethel, the latest of their crimes. They will kill, and quickly. No doubt," he added with scorn, "they feel uneasy being only four instead of three hundred."

"Three hundred?" Simeon asked.

"Three hundred ships. So Guiyon told me. He had seen them coming in but was forbidden by the Elders to speak until they had decided what to do."

Gus whistled. "If that's three hundred warships, people, not only do we have a problem, this whole sector has a problem." The Navy was much larger, but it was scattered. "Have you had any recent word from Central, Simeon?" Channa asjced him.

"Basically no more than an acknowledgement of the... ah... incident in the vein of 'Gee, that's too bad, but you're equipped to handle it and when your reports are filed, we'll see what we can do.1 But of course that's based on what happened yesterday; this may get us action."

At least I hope it will, Simeon thought. Three hundred ships! Shit! Simeon opened a tight beam to Central with a mayday flag attached. Hopefully he'd have some hard news before too long.

"What sort of armament did they have?" Gus asked while the rest of the station's leaders sat, trying not to look at each other and especially not at Amos and Joseph. Amos had gone even paler and the blue of his eyes had faded. He just sat there. On the other hand, Joseph was watching each and every one of the station heads with a critical gaze and the slightest of knowing smiles on his full lips.

Simeon could see that the initial numbness his people had felt was giving way to fear. Gus was fighting it with trained reflex, but the others were edging slowly toward panic.

"You must have something to fight with," Joseph said, suddenly leaning his arms on the table and directing a piercing gaze from one face to another. "We fought, and we had much less than you did who turned the vessel from your station yesterday. With what did you blow it into pieces? Do you have more? That is something. It is more than we had who saw our ships. Stirling withered to slag. Our city..." He broke off and struck his fists impotently into the table. "We have brought you warning. We had none!"

Amos caught his friend by the wrists before he could damage his hands. "Peace, my brotifier," he said softly.

"Oh, youah brothas?" Patsy saicfin mild surprise, peering closely at both to find some familial resemblance. ;"

"Not of the blood," and Amos touched his temple with his index finger, "of the mind."

"Unh-hunh!" Patsy blushed and tightened her lips into a straight line.

"I've sent a message to Central Worlds," Simeon told them in a brisk voice that he hoped sounded as if he had matters well in hand. "They're consulting with the Space Navy brass to see what to do. I was hoping they'd tell me what they were doing, and or what we can do. I should've anticipated a full fledged diplomaticbureaucratic-governmental-bunfight, complete with quarrels over jurisdiction. Everyone with something to say about this has to be tracked down and given an opportunity to give his fardling opinion in triplicate. Amos, believe me, kid, I know just how you feel about elders. The good news is that Navy intends to act fast, only there aren't any Navy units dose. The nearest is eighteen days away. Tliis is assuming the brass cut movement orders today and not sometime after we've become the subject of mere academic debate, because we don't exist anymore.

"Which means that at best we can look forward to thirteen lucky days with our naked butts hanging out waiting for a kick from a booted foot That nearest Navy unit is a patrol corvette, a warship only by courtesy."

"Then you must flee!" Amos leaned forward urgently. "You cannot hope to defeat them. You must leave this place."

"Great idea," Simeon agreed, "in principle. Only the station can't move. That's why it's a station. It's stationary. Get it?"

"You mock me most unfairly," Amos replied with solemn and offended dignity. "I have no knowledge of space stations or of your capabilities. Further, I am not wrong. Iæthe stationltftelf cannot move, then its people _*" i ~ must * "As far as such advice goes," Gus cut in, "he has a point. We should evacuate as many as we can children, the sick, nonessential personnel. Whoever we can, or whoever's hot to go."

"By my calculations," Simeon said, finishing them in that instant, "given the number of ships currently in or near me at the moment, we should be able to evacuate over a thousand souls." He liked that touch. "Not counting crews."

There was silence for a moment. A thousand was a fraction of the average ever-shifting population of the station.

Amos broke the silence hesitantly. "How many people will that leave on the station?"

"Fifteen thousand, or so," Channa said grimly. "Our population varies. Simeon, does your estimate include emptying cargo bays and stuffing our people into them in suits?" A desperation procedure and liable to result in some fatalities.

"No, we could evacuate a few hundred more that way."

Although, given the average soft person's reaction to long-term confinement in tight spaces, we probably won't get many volunteers for traveling that way.

"And before you ask," Simeon continued, "no, I haven't even asked the captains their views on such an... exodus. That's a best case scenario. We can't prevent those who aren't docked in the station physically from leaving, so the scheme is still just inside this room. I think that before we start bringing anyone else into this, we should have at least one plan to present, preferably more than one."

"Evacuation plans?" Chandra asked, his brow furrowed.

"Those," Simeon said, "and plans to fight for the station."

There was a certain brightening around the table. Nothing visible, but the lift in attitude was almost palpable.

"That's right up your alley, Simeon," Channa said gaily, "even if this isn't a military installation."

"To fight," Joseph said, his dark eyes glinting with revived hope. Or was it vengeance? "Yes, this is what we would like to do, but how? Did you not say that you had no weapons? And surely they will not give you a chance to combat them. Why should they not simply rush in and destroy you? That would be but child's play for them."

"We will employ guile." Ceeze, their lingo is contagious, he thought. "Remember, you said these people were pirates?"

"Yes," Amos said. "When they made their initial demand for surrender they mentioned deliveries of materials, machines, labor. Pirates, but they speak as though they were a people, a nation. The High Clan, they sometimes named themselves. At others, the Divine " his mouth puckered in distaste " the Divine Seed of Kolnar."

"Right" Simeon spoke briskly. This is just (mother exotic scenario, he told himself firmly. Games theory, experience don't freeze up now. You've done things like this thousands of times. "So they're no more than criminals, not a true army, disciplined, strategically trained. More like guerillas. Jump in, grab what they can, jump out. Right now, they're pursuing you, and these four ships aim to destroy you to keep you from spreading any nasty rumors about them. So, what we better do first, is get their minds off killing by

distracting them with the material things they wanted from you in the first place. Right?"

Every station officer thought about this. Then Gus nodded slowly.

"If these people are space-based, and from the description I think they must be what a prize the SSS-900-C would be!" He turned to Amos and Joseph. "What sort of influstrfedoes... did Bethel have?"

"Very few," Amofe said, rubbing a thoughtful hand along his stubbled jajr' "We could maintain equipment and manufacture some components for in-system work. We traded rare foodstuffs and organic molecules for what little eke we needed. Traders came perhaps once in a generation. The latest only last "

Joseph swore antiphonally with Gus, Patsy, and Simeon. Channa snapped her fingers. "They must have been... what's the phrase?"

"Casin" the joint," Patsy said for she had a store of such archaic phrases.

"Spies!" Joseph said. Tears welled in his eyes, tears of pure rage.

"Always someone who can be bought," Simeon said, giving his holo image a wise appearance. Or so info tapes say, but I've never had to use that tactic.

Joseph nodded jerkily. "I knew several who would sell their mothers and fathers... maybe their fathers... for the price of two bottles of arrack."

"Back to the here and now, please," Gus said, boulder-solid.

Amos shook his head, sending the long black curls flying. "We have... had, very litde high technology, and of what there was... much was in Keriss."

"So they'll be hurting for equipment, possibly for skilled labor," Simeon said. "They've got to be. Whaddya bet that most of those three hundred ships are transports, factory vessels, that sort of thing. They wouldn't be self-sufficient even if they have a home base or star system."

"There've always been folk who'd rather steal than work," Gus said. He had no arguments on that score from anyone. "And they'll want to steal from us."

SSS-900-C was a maintenance and repair center. It was also heavy with rare materials intended for shipyard and general shipbuilding use. No one argued with that, either. Simeon addressed the two refugee leaders. "First, we have to get them thinking along those" lines. Otherwise they may simply sweep in and put a couple of highyield missiles into us. My plan calls for a sacrifice on your part that I'm reluctant to ask of you."

"Ask," Amos said quietly. "A drowning man will grab even the point of a sword. I should like to prove worthy of Guiyon's sacrifice. Ask!" "I want to tempt them with booty too rich to resist and get their acquisitive juices flowing. We'll commandeer one of the company yachts that salesmen travel in when they show their samples to rich customers, and we'll cram its holds full of things the bastards won't be able to resist. With the promise of much more easily available here!"

"Such as?*" Channa asked suspiciously.

"Technological stuff, upgrades in software, in computers, the latest improvements in fuel efficiency. We'll

include luxury fabrics, perfumes, jewelry, exotic delicacies..."

"Bribery will only make them hungrier to sack the station," Joseph all but shouted, half-rising from his chair.

"Peace, my brother," Amos soothed him, "remember that sicatooths do not eat grass. One must put out a goat to bait the trap for them."

"See, you don't shoot the cow you're milking," Gus contributed.

"Hell no, you don't eat a pig lahke that all at once," Patsy said.

Simeon almost laughed aloud to see the puzzled expressions on the faces of Amos and Joseph. Good one, Patsy, remember that "my brother" fake they pulled on ya and don't let 'em think they can be more obscure than we can.

Chaundra explained the humor and only raised his brows slightly when Joseph asked, "What's a pig?" Channa herself wasøpuAled. She would have expected the natives of an agricultural world to recognize the name of an important farm animal. Her own protein came out of vats, the way nature intended, as far as she was concerned. If not literally, then she didn't want to think about it.

"Won't they think it's kinda odd, though, one guy sellin* so many different things?" Patsy asked.

"Not if he's a middle-man type, importer-exporter, rather than a manufacturer's rep," Simeon said. "It's not that hard to deceive people once, Patsy."

"But we have none of these things you have mentioned," Amos said, puzzled. "We have no cloth or jewels or softwear. What is this sacrifice you would ask of us?"

"We need someone to put in the yacht we'll be sending out, and I'm not about to send a living person. I'd like to send one of your people who died in transit from ship to station. Preferably someone who died as a result of the environment failure, since that's why he's going to be out there in this luxury ship, broadcasting an offer for a huge reward to anyone who'll rescue him."

Amos and Joseph looked shocked. They sat unmoving for a minute, then slowly turned to meet each other's eyes.

"Impossible!" Joseph said, his lips tight with fury. "What you ask is base sacrilege!"

Channa glanced at Simeon's column as though appealing for help, then plunged in, knowing no diplomatic way of putting this. "Your funerary customs are... firmly set?"

"Yess!" Joseph hissed. "We honor our dead, we bury them and revere their resting place."

"Well," Simeon told him, "we have no place to bury our dead here on the station, and it's prohibitively expensive to ship them back to their home planets. You can't simply bury them in space because eventually they constitute a navigation hazard. Here we cremate our dead." =* "And the ashes?" Amos asked.

"Unless specifically requested, there are no ashes."

Amos bowed his head. "For bur dead, we request ashes, so that one day, hopefully, we might return our friends to Bethel. As to your... your appeal for the body of one of ours, I thirik, my brother," and he turned to Joseph, "that we should consider that an honor to serve is being offered one of our dead rather than sacrilege. Surely, whoever we choose, would have been pleased to be of help to those who survived."

"Itis wrong!" Joseph said. "And I object!"

"My brother," Amos said through gritted teeth, "if you angle with a straight hook, only those fish which are willing get on it. Be reasonable, or we may all be dead. It is only a hope, a possibility we are offered. If they destroy this decoy, they will then destroy the station and we will join our friends who are dead and we can all go unburied forever." He stared at his companion until, after a long moment, Joseph lowered his eyes and nodded. To Simeon, Amos said, "Choose the person most suitable for this ruse from among our dead brothers."

"Thank you," Simeon said simply, and the others around the table murmured their thanks as well.

"Okay," Channa said, bringing them back to more immediate concerns, "these pirates come upon this derelict space-yacht. They hear the message, 'Help, help, my environment system is down, augggh, I'm dying, save me and I'll reward you with umpity-zillion credits.'" "Right"

"They give him a buzz, no answer, so they bip on over to his craft and board it"

"Right"

"They find whomever several days dead due to environment failure/ "Right/* " ~ * "Why don't theyjust hold their noses and sail on?"

"Urn, wellfirst, itls the nature of pirates to be greedy. So we'll pile the ship high with cases of samples, clearly marked samples, dearly marked as coming from SSS 900-C. Second; no one likes to go back to their senior officer and say, 'It was a total waste of time, sir,' because it makes them look bad in their captain's eyes. So I think we can expect them to make at least a cursory search of the ship. Third, there'll be a curiosity factor, since I plan to choose the most opulent yacht in the area. These guys probably haven't seen anything like it hanging around the out-systems.

"So they'll probably be crawling all over it saying, 'I can't believe it! Look at this! Whatluxury!' One of these factors will attract their attention to the com screen, which will show a report our salesman was inputting when disaster struck. It will say something to the effect ofOJrabjwus day, fvejust made the biggest sale of my career to the SSS-900-C. Tve promised them delivery in fourteen days or less. The home office has confirmed the delivery date. Order manifestfoUows. Hooray, hooray, bounce bounce!"

"And there will be a listing that would make me drool and want to turn pirate."

Gus nodded. "It sounds do-able, though I hate to spare even one ship from the evacuation effort."

"I can understand that, Gus, but balance the dozen or so who could be evacuated on the yacht against the fifteen thousand plus people at risk on the station, and I think the sacrifice is justified," Simeon replied. Seeing that he had his audience listening very carefully, he went on. "Now, to prepare the rest of the station for pirate-fell, I want all irreplaceable equipment disconnected and hidden, or ifit can't be moved, I want it disguised or dismantled with no spare parts visible. All menus on all computer terminals will be changed. I intend to make them as confusing and difficult to understand as possible, in order to entourage

any outsider using our equipment to make as many horrible and damaging mistakes as possible. We'll need to have the emergency crews on alert at all times."

Twenty glum faces surrounded the table.

"Just a minute," Channa said slowly. "You're suggesting we let these... these/tends occupy the station?"

"We can't stop them," Simeon explained patiently. "We can't stop a single real warship from sinking a missile into the station's equator and blowing all fifteen thousand of us to MC-squared. I don't like it either, Channa. But we have to keep them from doing too much damage until the Navy gets here and we know the time frame on that. If we can confoozle them long enough so the Navy can catch 'em, that'll solve how to get rid of them.

"Once they make a few disastrous mistakes, they'll prefer to use our people. Why should they break their brains trying to learn how to run a station they'll only be occupying until they can loot it empty? I want our people, not theirs, in sensitive positions. No matter how it looks to them, I want real control of the station to remain in our hands. I'm willing to take a few risks to gain that advantage."

"Oh," Channa said carefully. "Sounds reasonable."

"Doctor Chaundra, you're really going to hate this one."

"You want me to make people sick."

"Got it in one. How'd you guess?"

"I assume that you know I didn't become a physician because I enjoy watching people suffer," he said calmly. "I will not kill. Otherwise, who do you want me to do it to and why do you want me to do it?"

"I want Co be able to declare a class-two quarantine, make them reluctant to enter the living quarters. We can't keep them out entirely unless we declare that a deadly disease is rampant on the station, in which case, we might as well blow the place ourselves and spare them the missile. I'd like to see the infirmary littered with volunteers groaning in misery, for authenticity's sake. But, most important want every one of the pirates who enters the living area to walk out with whatever bug you're using in his or her system doing what it does best. Fairly soon, they'll get the idea they should confine their communications with stationers to holocasts."

Chaundra wore a crooked smile. "Leper, unclean, unclean," he said in a singsong voice. Patsy was the only one at the table who understood his reference, but Simeon did, too. Then Chaundra shook his head. "Too little time to fake that particular disease. So! Agreed, I will search for a suitable virus. We can synthesize readily but we must hope the... Kolnari? have inadequate medics and no equivalent facilities."

"Patsy?" Simeon began.

"Yo, lover."

"As soon as we've got some data of a physical nature on these fiends, I would appreciate it if you could come up with some spore, or pollen or mixture of gases that would make our anticipated visitors real unhappy. If you can arrange to afflict their ships only, and not the station, I'll like it even better."

"Oh, Simeon, an opportunity! You do love me, doncha honey?"

"First and always, sweetpea."

*'Aw, blush." She consulted her keyboard. "Allergies'd be a good bet. They're pretty dam' specific in groups with low genetic divers'ty. Once we get some tissue samples,yeeehahl"

"Seriously, we can evacuate people or critical supplies like mining explosives, but not both," Channa said.

"I was just coming to that We'll have to leave some in the stores or it would look odd. After all, we are a supply center. But I want as much of that particular commodity relabeled, rerouted, or hidden wherever. We should leave, maybe, four percent below the lowest reserves we've ever recorded. Have the records show that we're between shipments, the additional four percent shortage of explodables is.because we used some of the stores to blow up the colony ship." Simeon saw no point in giving the Kolnari free weapons. Td like to do the same with food and medical supplies as well. Any questions?"

"Yeah," one of the supply officers spoke up, "where are we gonna pitt all this stuff, particularly the explosives?"

"You get it together," Simeon said, "I'll tell you where. Right now, let's work out what supplies the evacuation ships will need and I want you to start pulling together those tasty goods we're going to use to tempt the... sicutooth."

"You got it," the woman said.

"We, too, would like to serve," Amos said earnestly, "in any way that we can. Ask and we will aid you to the best of our ability. , Simeon thought Amos continued. "It is to our great shame that we have brought this terror down upon you. Better that we had all died..."

"Shut up!** Channa snapped, the verbal equivalent of a slap to a hysteric. "How dare you say that? All Hves are precious. Guiyon thought so. He recognized that he must save as many of you as he could and he did. Stop beating your chests. YouTI only get more bruises. For all we know, they might have come this way anyhow."

"You have been harbingers, and though such aren't much appreciated, I'd like to say now that I, Simeon, SSS-900-C, am grateful to you, and particularly to... Guiyon. If you'd all died at Bethel, no one in this sector would have known of the Kolnari and how they operate." Simeon paused. "I gather they operate on a scorched earth policy?" When the two Bethelites looked puzzled, he addedgenfly, "They dear away all traces that they've been there? That anyone's been on that planet? Hmm. Thought so.œ&n't leave dues behind if they want to keep on cutting their swath of destruction."

Simeon caught an,odd sound coming from Joseph and did a quick enlargement of the man's fece. Tlie Bethelite was actually grinding his teeth. Amos' blue eyes dulled with the pain of his own thoughts on the subject of total annihilation.

By now that concept was dawning on three or four stationers and their expressions reflected their shock. Piracy and looting were bad enough, but these Kolnari had gotten away with implied multiple acts of genocide.

"Central and the Navy are receiving hourly update blips," Simeon went on to provide what reassurance he could that SSS-900 was already ahead of the Kolnari on the dice roll. M Bethel will have retribution, if not blanket reparations when the accounting is rendered. You've saved not only yourselves, but us and

what's left of your world."

"He who fights and..." Diplomatically Channa edited the old adage slight "... escapes away! lives to fight another day." She even made it rhyme. She went on firmly. "Dying would just..." She waved her hands, racking her mind for the right words.

"Would be wasteful suicide," Simeon concluded for her. "And allow the Kolnari to sweep the board." He caught Channa's little grimace over his constant use of war-gaming terminology.

"Exactly, and you can't let those..." Again she fumbled for a dire enough epithet "Black-hearted sons of bitches?" Simeon offered. Nice combination of informality and traditional epithet, pleased with himself.

"Thank you... black-hearted sons of bitches go on killing and stealing. So, if you want to wish somebody dead, wish it on them" Channa finished, thumping the table with a fist for emphasis.

Amos smiled in chagrin. "You have burnt away my weakness with your fiery speech, beautiful lady. I shall direct my hatred towards our mutual enemy."

"Fine! Glad that's been settled. Now I'm going to adjourn this meeting," Simeon said, "Channa and I have to address the ships' captains in two hours and you all have plenty to do. I'd like progress reports every six hours from everyone, please. You may contact me at any time with any difficulties encountered. Amos, would you be good enough to accompany Doctor Chaundra to the morgue to choose our decoy. He'll also assist you with proper funeral arrangements for the other victims."

Amos nodded solemnly. Chaundra put his hand sympathetically on the younger man's shoulder, powered up the fioatchair, and they left the lounge together. Joseph's float, activated by one of the guards, started back to the infirmary. The station officers bustled off, no one of a mind to chat or rehash the meeting. Only Channa remained, staring off, her eyes unfocused.

"I take it back."

"What?"

"At the moment, I'm deeply and utterly grateful that you chose to study war instead of romance."

"There goes another one," Simeon said glumly.

A spot crawled through the plotting tank Simeon was screening on one wall of the lounge, trundling out of SSS-900-C's vicinity and heading for the low-mass zone and its interstellar transit.

"How did they find out?" Channa said.

"That's the Herod's Dream. She's an independent. One of those merchant-family ships that kick around the fringes, picking up stuff that's not worth the big outfits* while. They don't have to be told about trouble. They can smell it"

"I suppose it's understandable. They've sunk their savings in their ships which produce their livelihood." Channa sighed tolerantly. "What about the others?"

"They should be..." He broke off "By Ghu!"

Channa also heard the tramp of boots in the hall and swiveled in her chair as a half-dozen variously dressed figures swung into the meeting room.

They may well head out again faster than they came in, Simeon thought as he watched captains file into the room in pairs, or clumps, or singly. As motley a crew as ever docked here. Shipsuits were designed to be comfortable under a pressure outfit. From there on, individuality was often loudly or vulgarly expressed by adjustments to that basic attire. For instance, the woman with the shaved, tattooed skull wore a particularly vile shade of pinkish blue that wasn't the least bit becoming if highly visible. The two nonhumans didn't need to be anything but themselves to fit in with the other surly faces. They know something's up, but at least they came to listen, unlike those who scampered.

What the hell, he thought with a mental sigh, well use what we've got and be glad we've got it to use.

As the captains began to fill the room, few taking chairs at the table, Channa, looking too elegant in a light blue suit, had gone to the head of the conference table. When a minute had passed with no new arrivals, she opened her notescreen on the podium and looked out at the assembled captains, waiting for them to settle. Especially after a couple of Vicker's part-time police appeared just beyond the entrance, with breather masks and gas projectors as well as shock rods and dart guns. Channa made a note to remind Vicker that the enemy was not yet here and not to make enemies out of anyone else just now.

"Thank you all for coming," she said.

You're probably wondering why I've called you here today, Simeon thought, anticipating Channa's opening words.

"No doubt you're wondering why we've asked you here," Channa said.

Close, but no cigar "Station SSS-900-C is currently involved in an emergency. I am Channa Hap, brawn to Simeon and we are invoking section two, article two of the station's charter." Which she tried to read out so that everyone knew the station had the right to commandeer their vessels, A roar, surprisingly loud from so few throats though the non-humans helped a lot, swelled through the room, drowning her out. An occasional "whereas" or "said captain" were all that could be heard.

Let 'em get it out of their systems, Simeon thought It was understandable breaking schedule would be expensive, particularly for the small companies and the independents. Hopefully they'd be more cooperative afterwards. In any case, he had control of them all, either because their ships docked to the station or their skippers were attending this meeting. And nobody was going to leave without accepting an assignment Not a single captain here had an ounce of altruism, but station vouchers would! * valid anywhere on their routes. There'd be insurance when the dust settled but, psychologically, neither voucher or insurance-when it might-be-paid was as comforting as cash-in-hand.

At last they wound down. Simeon turned his volume up to an almost painful level "Sit down, please."

The mechanical roar filled the room. He added subsonics that ought to make the humans feel uncertain and cowed.

"Now that I have your complete attention," he said suavely, adjusting to a more bearable level, "I'd like to remind you that we have duly declared an emergency."

He paused and examined the defiant, angry faces. "The station is expecting to be under attack shortly."

Another roar, this time of fear.

"SHUT UP." A second's pause. "Thank you very much. We're all in this together. Except that you gentlebeings are going to get away safely, which is more than the rest of us can look forward to. Please keep that in mind.

"Now," he went on, "we're going to evacuate everyone we can; children under twelve and pregnant women first, of course. They number eight hundred, give or take a few." Not all that many, but passenger facilities on freighters were generally nonexistent or cramped cubicles. Adding any more bodies would make a voyage of weeks uncomfortable, but would at least keep life in those bodies. "I want to reduce all the edible supplies on the station, so commissary is advised to stock you up to your comtowers." There was a murmur of appreciation. "However, at this moment in time, I cannot guarantee full compensation for cargo or non-delivery fines. I'd like to and you'll probably get it, but I can't guarantee it."

*Just a damn minute!" a stocky captain with a bulldog face roared. "Who's attacking the station? We're three month's transit time fr&n any trouble, and that's minor."

"Pirates," Simeon said succinctly and that one word was sufficient to cause sturdy captains, and even one nonhuman, to pale. He waited as accusations and counter-accusations bounced about the hall, noticing hands going to belts that were, by station regulation, empty of accustomed defensive implements. This time it was Channa who brought them back to order.

Adjusting the volume on her microphone to the highest notch, she bellowed, "SIT DOWN!"

"As you were," Simeon said sweedy. "Could we consider any further riots as done and noted, and not waste valuable escape time? As I started to explain, a complement of four, heavily armed, pirate ships were in pursuit of the colony ship that... ah... docked here yesterday. Having ascertained details from the survivors of that vessel, we are reliably informed that these pirates were in hot pursuit We are given the distinct impression that these pirates will either destroy the station immediately, or strip it of everything valuable and then destroy it We have to evacuate as many as possible, which isn't that many, even if you are generous in your assistance. But you're all we have to save as many as we can. Sorry."

"You're sorry?" the bulldog was on his feet again. "You're sorry! I'm supposed to leave my cargo behind for pirates and you're sorry? Well, Fm sorry, too, cause 'sorry* don't pay no bills!"

"Captain... Bolist," Channa said smoothly, checking the list on her notescreen, "you're telling me that a cargo of,.. chemical salts is more important to you than saving the lives of forty children, which is the umber that can be accommodated on the size of vessel you command?"

The man lowered his head, like a bull considering a charge. "Ms. Hap, me and mine worked for forty years to get the Gunf/fo.T*(e're still paying off our loans. Losing a major cargo well pay forfeits if we don't get the load to Kobawasltfet Filles could break us. Then we'll be on the beach. Hell, I like kids s'much as the next guy, but a man's gotta live."

"Well, then, Captain, you'll be pleased to know that children are much lighter than chemical salts. Exchanging one for the other should get you well out of the danger zone in excellent time." Channa gave him a pleasant smile, and held his gaze until the man's eyes dropped. "Yes, you have a question?" And she pointed to the shaven, tattooed captain who had leaped to her feet, waving both hands to be heard.

When the question of how to deal with pregnant women giving birth on her ship was satisfactorily setded

by assuring her of a trained medic in her consignment, she subsided.

In the end, all capitulated, but nine begged a few hours' leeway to ditch and buoy-mark such cargoes that a period in space wouldn't damage beyond use.

"Phew," Simeon said as the captains walked out. "That was unpleasant."

"Not by comparison," Channa said grimly.

"Comparison to what?"

"Announcing it to the station," she said.

"Oh."

"You are shitting me, Joat," Seld Chaundra said scornfully. "Pirates! What do you think I am? A playschool kid?"

Ks, Joat thought. "I am not lying, shit-for-brains," she said.

They were in Seld's quarters, which were comprised of a bedroom and study, off his father's suite near the main sickbay in North Sphere. The study was crammed with ship models and holoposters, most of them from travel catalogues but a few from adventure serials. Joat particularly liked the ofee of the bug-eyed man screaming in the jaws of one fanged head of a three-headed monster which waved him above the rubble of a burning building. Curiously enough, the man resembled the captain who had won her from her uncle.

"Gimme another bar," she added. Seld flipped it over from the sofa where he sprawled. Joat caught it out of midair and discarded the wrapper on the floor. Seld winced but said nothing.

"How can you eat so many of those things?" he asked as she gobbled it "Gotta eat 'em while the getting's good," she replied, chewing with her mouth open. He winced again. He's a wuss, she thought. "Anyway, they're supposed to be here soon." "Suuuuure."

Suddenly Seld was tumbled backward against the back of the sofa. He gave a strangled squawk as Joat's thin strong hands, crossed at the wrist, gripped his jacket below the throat. Her bony knuckles dug painfully into his windpipe. He couldn't breathe at all, as she was also kneeling on his stomach. "Look, you wuss " "I am not a wuss!" he wheezed. " and I am not shitting you! Here." She let him up, marched over to his work table and slapped a chip on the receiver plate of his screen. It lit, showing the control lounge and Simeon's pillar, the shouting captains surging around it Seld listened open-mouthed. "Pirates," he concurred weakly. "Hey! That's private, you stole that chip!"

"Did not, just jacked the feed and copied it"

"Unauthorized copying is stealing, Joat. And eavesdropping on official meetings is..." Seld trailed off, unable to identify the offense though he knew it must be one. fordting wuss, shethbilght He sounds just like fas father " when he says things lifo 'that. Yet his father was a lot nicer than hers had been.,Her memories of paternal care were the kind you woke up at night sweating from. Hopefully he was dead from Jeleb nightmare-smoke by now. Her uncle had been worse, after he took her over, but at least she knew her uncle was dead. She pushed such thoughts aside as time wasters.

"Okay, I'm a Sondee mud-puppy eavesdropper and data-bandit so listen to what they're saying, will you?"

Seld blinked and did so. "Holy shit," he whispered. "We are going to be attacked by pirates." His eyes lit. "Hey, Joat, this is like a holo."

Joat kicked him.

"What did you do that for?" he demanded, outraged.

"Because I like you, fool," she said.

"You do?" he said, straightening up and then wincing. "Hell of a way to show it, ferdler."

"Fardler yourself. This ain't no holo, Seld. Those pirates, those Kolnari, are for real. Half the outies on that ship that nearly dipped the station were dead, osco. That's d-e-a-d, dead, finished, off to the big tax-haven in the afterglow, dead. This is major criminal we're talking, Seld. Like, we could get seriously fardled up you, me, Simeon, Channa, your dad."

"Yeah," Seld said, in a small voice, looking totally scared. "But what can we do?" That word came wobbling out as Seld tried not to show Joat how tightened he really was.

"Come close and listen to momma," she said. "Simeon has some ideas. I got more."

Rachel bint Damscus sat and shivered on the edge of the bed. There was nothing under it. Not even legs to hold it up, just some sort of field mechanism, yet it did not move. She shivered again, looking down at the pill in her hand. The strange dark man they called Doctor Chaundra had given it to her, saying that it would make her feel better. She didn't want to feel better. She wanted to feel pain, because pain told her she was still alive.

Her eyes flicked around the little cubicle. There was a sink in the corner. She darted to it and threw the pill down the drain, scrabbling at the unfamiliar controls until a gush of water followed it. Then she scrambled back to the bed, humiliatingly conscious of how the thin hospital gown revealed her body. Conscious also of the emotions roiling beneath the surface of her mind, like great boulders grinding and moving in the dark.... / wish I was home, she thought desolately. But home was gone, further than all the light-years between this accursed place and the sun Saffron. Home had been in Keriss... Keriss was poisoned dust floating in Bethel's skies. Mother, she thought, father. Little sister Delilah.

Most of the other Bethelites who escaped had been from the Sierra Nueva lands. Amos' family had been direct descendants of the Prophet, members of the Synod of Patriarchs for twenty generations. They had owned the city of Elkbre outright and tens of thousands of square kilometers around it. And they had always been an enlightened family, as much as any, more than most. Hence, the Second Revelation had spread widely there. Rachel had come to it late. After I heard Amos speak, she thought, burying her face in her hands. He was like the Prophet come again. A new voice, sweeping away the intolerable stuffy load of convention. And he is so beautiftd....

The partition door opened. Joseph came through first, one hand under the flap of his jacket as was his custom Amos followed, and Rachel flung herself forward into his arms, gripping him fiercely. It was a moment before she felt the awkwardness with which he patted her back. Site withdrew, clutching at the

gown. That only emphasized its skimpiness, and she flushed deeply, looking down at the floor.

"Pardon, excellent sir," she said.

He made a dismissive gesture. "No need to be formal, Rachel," he said. "You are well?"

"Relieved," she said. "They would only say that you would return, but not where you had been taken or why. Where have you been?" She raised her eyes anxiously to his face.

He hesitated for a moment. "Joseph and I have been meeting with the station managers. We have arranged a funeral service for those who died on our journey here." She turned aside to spare his embarrassment. "They are not to be trusted."

"What do you mean, Rachel?" His tone was apprehensive but also stern.

"Nothing, yet," she said sullenly, hanging her head. Then she grasped his wrist painfully tight, meeting his eyes earnestly. "But who knows? They are mezzamers." Strangers. In the ancient liturgical language, infidel.

"Rachel, do not start parroting the Elders at this late date," Joseph said in exasperation. More gently, he put a hand on her shoulder. "Did you take the medication?"

"Yes," she said brusquely, shrugging off his hand. Then she turned to Amos with a sigh. "I am sorry, Excell...Amos."

The memory swept over her again: the crowded chamber and the sickly-sweet taste at the back of her mouth as the coldsleep injection took effect. "I... thought I had died, when I woke here," she said. "My father... did I tell you?"

Amos said, taking her hand. His large dark blue eyes held a sudden compassion. "He cursed you?"

"Yes. When I left home to follow you, he put the Patriarch's curse upon me: hell, and miserable rebirth, and damnation again, forever."

Amos blanched slightly for, though his father had been disappointed in his son, even appalled by his son's apostasy, he had not uttered the curse. Perhaps that would have come about had his father not died during Amos' early teens. If he had been cursed? Perhaps that was why he, fatherless, could become the leader of the Second Revelation, he thought. What courage his followers had, to dare the curse for me!

"I thought I was damned indeed," she whispered. "Since I awoke... I... I really do not feel myself, Amos."

"It is to be expected," he said, patting her cheek. "You will feel better soon."

"And did you tell them of what follows us?" she asked, blurting out the words since his touch had given her the courage to speak them. "Have they defenses?"

Joseph had been brooding, facing slightly away. Now he laughed bitterly. "Defenses? These people are as open as a canal-side harlot"

Rachel drew a shocked breath.

"You forget yourself, Joseph," Amos said as Rachel drew closer to his side, an instinctive move toward his protection. "There is a lady present."

The shorter man bowed. "Apologies, Excellent Sir," he replied stiffly. A deeper bow. "My lady."

"I cast your own words back, my brother do not imitate the Elders," Amos said. Unnoticed, Rachel stiffened.

"Is it true?" she said. "They have no defenses?"

Amos nodded, his mouth drawn into a line. "Yes. These are peaceful people, as we were. Fortunately, they are in communication with the Navy of the Central Worlds. Unfortunately, the Kolnari will be here before that help arrives."

Rachel gasped. "How can we flee Scorn here?"

"We cannot," Amos replied, shrugging away the chance of flight. "There are ships, but they are small and have no facilities for passengers. Children, those with child, and the infirm are to be evacuated. The rest of us must remain here and seek to delay the enemy."

"They will know us!" she said in a trembling voice.

Joseph shook his head. "I think not, Lady bint Damscus," he said formally. "Not in this place, and among such as inhabit it. Already we have seen more races of men than I knew existed outside legend. Some very different customs," he pulled his mouth down in disapproval, "and non-men as well."

Rachel's eyes went wide. The most cogent incentive for the Exodus to Bethel had been the Prophet's determination not to pollute the pure blood by congress with non-humans. Nonhuman intelligence was the creation of Shaithen, whether flesh or machine.

Joseph made a soothing gesture. "They are not rulers here. Still, among so many and so various, our handful will disappear and not be remarked by the Kolnari for what we are. The fiends must believe that they strike without warning, that no help will be called to this station. So they will wait, thinking to feast at their ease. Then the warships will come, to rescue us and return us to our poor Bethel."

"Yes," she said, thoughtfully. "I had not thought of... returning."

"In a sense," Amos began, and her eyes snapped back to him with a fixed attention, "we have won the war. Now we must try to survive it. Please, Rachel my sister, would you go among the other women and children? They are awakening, and will be lost and frightened. Prepare those who are eligible to leave here."

"I obey, Amos." She looked around, realizing that she could not go even among women and children of her own people in what she wore.

Joseph opened one of the closets and handed her a large, shapeless robe. Rachel nodded a distant thanks before she donned it and left, the jull folds sweeping behind her.

"We have something we share—she and I," Joseph said bitterly, throwing himself down in his float chair. Even his solid bulk did not make it bob on its supporting field. Amos noted the feet and filed it must make

a quick review he thought. Find what technologies have arisen during our isolation on Bethel. Whatever supports the chair could be altered to support other heavyweights.

"What do you share?" he asked the other man.

"We both aspire above our stations, she and I," Joseph replied.

Amos blinked in surprise. "Oh," he said after a moment. "Sits the wind so? I had thought her merely devoted to the cause."

"So she is, but that is not the whole story."

"Even if we followed the old customs, I would not take her even as a second wife," he said with a dismissive shrug. "Since I have not even a first, speculation is useless." Then he raised one eyebrow. "You have not pressed your suit?"

"Was there time?" Joseph asked rhetorically. Then he sighed. "Amos, could you see me going to her father for permission? Bastard son of a whore and a dockside pimp he would have called me, whether he had disowned her or no and it would be no more than the truth."

Amos laughed grimly and thumped his follower on the shoulder. "Joseph, my brother, you are a bold man who has saved my life more than once. But there are times when you allow your birth to blind you as much as any hidebound Elder."

At Joseph's puzzled look, he continued. "Joseph, where did Rachel's father live?"

"Keriss ah! I see."

"Where did the Elders live, for the most part?"

"Keriss and those that did not, they were in the city for the council meeting," Joseph said. "You have had time to think, eh?"

"It is necessary for someone to do so," Amos said. "We of the Second Revelation were planning to leave, to escape the bonds-of customs gone sterile in their changelessness, Joseph. When if we return to Bethel with the Space Navy at our backs, very little will remain unchanged after what the Kolnari have done. God has given us a sharp lesson. If we ignore the universe, the universe will not necessarily ignore us. And on Bethel... the last shall be first, and the first, last; that at the very least.

"Furthermore," he went on, with a man-to-man grin, "I now stand in her father's place, in law. I hereby formally give you leave to press your suit, and for the marriage portion, I will dower her with the Gazelle Rancho at Twin Springs."

Joseph's laughter matched his leader's. "I may press, but I doubt she notices my existence," he said. "Consent may be as far away as the Rancho." A pause. "Although that is where I would take her to live, if we were wed and our cause victorious. She is stronger than she suspects, I think but her liking for the new ways you preach is of the head, not here." He touched his heart. "As lady of an estate, there would she be happy. She would not thrive among strangers."

TJN "Detection. Ship track."

Belazir t'Marid looked up from his crash couch where he had been rerunning a tactical manual on the screen.

"What signature?" he said.

"On track, very faint," Baila said. "Could have been weeks ago."

Belazir ran his hand through the long blond mane of his hair and cursed inwardly. The second in two days, he thought they were getting into well-traveled space, despite the fact that their data showed little or no settlement in this area. The centuries-old Grand Survey reports listed no inhabitable planets, although there was a nebula with potentially valuable minerals. There must be a regular traffic now, perhaps habitats or small space colonies. Dangerous, very dangerous.

A time would come when the Kolnari would not have to skulk around the fringes of known space, hiding like scavengers. But that time was not yet. "Reduce speed," he said. "Pulse message to the consort ships. Keep formation on new vector." The form of communication was so short-range that it was undetectable. "Anything more on the subspace monitors?"

"Plenty of nearby traffic, but mostly encrypted," the intelligence officer said. Belazir nodded. Perfect codes were an old phenomenon, available to anyone with decent computers.

"And the prey?" he asked.

Baila shrugged. As she was almost as well-born as Belazir, he decided to let the informality pass unrebuked. Also, she was daughter to a staff officer of Chalki's.

"The track is firm and hot," the woman said. "We gain, at an increasing rate. Signs of deterioration, as one would expect from old engines heavily stressed sublimated particles from exterior drive-coils and cooling vanes. She cannot survive much longer."

"Much longer, much longer! You've been saying that for days!" Belazir snarled, starting half-erect. The junior officer's eyes dropped before the captain's lion stare. Belazir sank back, satisfied that deference had been restored.

"Transmit to all vessels," he went on. "Maximum alertness. We strike hard and then we run. Plasma tells no tales."

"Dad, I'm not going," Seld Chandra flatly told his father.

The head of SSS-900-C's medical department looked up in surprise. For a moment, he tried to fit the words into a context that made sense as his hands continued automatically packing a carry-all for his son's trip. Then he shook his head. He was very tired. Since the announcement was made two days ago, there had been absolute chaos in the station. Literal chaos in some instances, and sickbay was full of injuries, everything from carelessness through flare-ups to attempted suicide.

"Do not make troubles now, son," he said. "There is too much to be doing."

"I'm not going, Dad," Seld said again.

Gods, but he looks like his mother, the doctor thought with despair. She had had exactly that set to her jaw when she decided to stand on an issue of principle. And I could never convince her of her error

when she looked like that, either. Fortunately, he did not need to convince his son, who was still a minor.

"Yes," Chaundra said, "you are going. I need SOT you to go." '

"Well, I need for me to stay!"

Chaundra grabbed his son by his upper arms and shook him gendy. "You're all I've got, Seld. You're the most important thing in my life ana I've got to keep you safe.** He pulled out his ace,, "It's what your mother would have wanted.** Seld's red-headed temper flared and, for the first time in his twelve years, he contradicted his father. "No, she wouldn't! She'd say what.I'm gonna say. You're all Fue got, and if you can't be safe dien I've got to be with you!"

He pulled his son to him in a fierce hug to hide the sudden glisten of tears in his eyes. Then he sank into his armchair, covering his eyes with his hand.

"Yes," he said thickly, "that's just what she'd say. But," he pointed a finger at Seld, "she'd be talking about herself, not about you."

"Dad..."

"I have packed one change of clothes, two changes of underwear and one," he held up one finger for emphasis, "thing you can't bear to part with. I'll be back in half an hour to walk you to the ship."

"Dad!** "Half an hour." He stood and left. There are times when a man must weep alone.

"Joatl" Simeon said in exasperation, "Answer me! I'd hate to have to send someone in there to flush you out"

He heard laughter echo softly then, from somewhere in the ductwork. Damned tunnel rat, he thought in exasperation. She had rigged the sensor in her room to show her present and he was still trying to figure out how it had been done.

"You know they wouldn't find me."

"C'mon Joat, you've got to go. Channa has packed some of your things. She'll meet you at the lock. You're one of the lucky ones. You don't have to wear a suit and travel in the hold for the whole trip."

"Hunh. Done it before.*1 "Well, you don't haife to do it now. Come on! They're leaving in fifteen Minutes."

"I'm not going." / * "Perhaps I left something out here? Pirates, heavily armed, almost certain death and destruction? Did I mention any of those?"

"You need me," she said simply.

"Yeah," he said slowly after a moment's pause, "but I think I should do without you for a while.** Joat came into view, grinning. "You are so soft," she said and shook her head. "You need me because no adult except you knows this station the way I do." She crossed her arms smugly. "This is my home, too, and I want a crack at defending it Besides, I'm not about to deliver myself to Dorgan the Gorgan." If she's still alive. Those demonstrators looked mean. "So here I stay!"

"Joat, is avoiding Ms. Dorgan and the orphanage worth risking your life for?"

"You better believe it!" That forced an unwilling chuckle out of Simeon.

"Look, Joat, no more kidding. Channa and I are fighting for our lives. If we have to worry about you, too, it might make that last little bit of difference and get us killed. We can't afford distractions from a kid."

Joat's lips went white. "You fight dirty," she whispered.

"I fight to win," Simeon replied.

"Well* so do I" Joat shouted. "And Vmotive, aren't I?" She paused for a moment, breathing hard. Then the urchin grin came back. "I've got an instinct for this kinda thing. Trust me." She took a step back and disappeared.

I wish I knew how she did that, Simeon thought. It would, come in handy when the Kolnanget here.

"Channa's expecting you on Boat Deck!" he called after her.

A voice filtered in from nowhere. "Tell her I'll be seeing her." "5; "Detection... ship detected! Ship detected! Captain to the bridge!"

Belazir t'Marid had been kneeling between his wife's thighs, with a heel in each hand.

"Demonshit!" he swore, diving off the pallet and toward his clothing. The woman she was his second wife, and a third cousin cursed antiphonally, rolling away in the other direction.

"The Divine Seed damn them," she said, hopping on one leg as she stuck the other into her skinsuit.

"Easy for you to say," he snarled and kicked at her, struggling with the humiliating and acutely uncomfortable process of getting into space armor in a state of arousal. Then he raised his voice. "Battle stations, full alert Brief me."

"One vessel. Approaching on path of our trajectory, in normal space."

"Normal space?" he said. The door hissed away as he trotted out of his quarters which were aft of the bridge and one deck down.

"Confirmed," Serig said as Belazir stalked into the bridge. While the captain slept in hostile space, the executive officer stood the watch. He now rose from the commander's couch; a squat man for a Kolnar, a hand below Belazir's height, and muscled like a troll. "You have the bridge, lord."

"Acknowledged." Belazir felt an obscure comfort as he slid into the crash couch and let his hands fall on the controls. And that cold plastic catheter has settled my other problem, he thought with an inward quirk of the lips. "Data."

"Vessel is in the one kiloton mass range." The battle team was on the bridge now, the circular room brightening as consoles came up to ready status. "Neutrino signature indicates merchant-class engines, presently running on ballistic. There may be energy or kinetic weapons, but I detect no triggers for fusion warheads."

"Interesting," Belazir said calmly. "Serig."

"Command me, lord."

"Indeed. We're going to take a closer look. Prepare for drop into normal space. Notify the flotilla.**
"Lord..."

"Yes, yes. The primary mission. We are gaining swiftly and have the time. Also, if we detect this ship, it may have detected us." The Kolnari fleet had the best instruments they could steal or copy, but there was no telling how much performance had improved in areas in close contact with regular shipyards. There had been one or two nasty surprises like that before in the Clan's history. "If they have, all the more reason to investigate and make sure they have no tale to tell anyone."

"Prepare for breakthrough." Alarm chimes tinkled and sang. "Thirty seconds, mark."

A twisting at the fabric of the universe; the view on the exterior screens did not change the computers compensated during FTL running but a subtle sense of reality returned, something at the corner of the mind.

Serig's voice spoke beside Belazir. "Lord, we have her on electromagnetic detectors. No answer to hailing. Shall we use the kinetics?"

Their relative velocities were in the thousands of kps; solid shot would strike with nuclear force.

"Not yet," Belazir said thoughtfully. "Give me a visual."

The image sprang out before him a few seconds later. There was a noticeable lag now that they were confined to Einstein's universe. A flattened spheroid, quite a small ship. Fairly fast, from the size of the exterior coils; neatly made, nearly new. And totally unarmed, as far as the detectors could determine. Certainly not meant for rapid transit in atmosphere as a Kolnari warship of that size would be.

"They have a small laser," Serig said. "Meteorite-clearing type. Apart from that, nothing."

"Is she dead?"

"The cabin is at sixteen-degrees," he replied, and touched a control. The screen's image split. A motd double of the ship appeared, infrared scanning to show temperatures.

"But no reply to our hail," Belazir mused, tugging at his lower lip. "This is too interesting to pass by. All ships, establish zero relative velocity and stand by."

"Great Lord." The communications officer. "The Age of Darkness is hailing, imperative code."

"Put her through." Belazir nodded to himself; exactly what he would expect. A face that might have been his brother's flashed into a screen on his couch-arm.

"Aragiz t'Varak," the man said. Equal-to-equal greeting, full personal and subdan-name. Socially correct as the t'Varak were one of the noble gens of the High Clan, but a military solecism. One of the problems of a family business. "t'Varak," Belazir said, reminding him of it. In a social situation, he would have replied with his own full name.

"Why are we halting?" Belazir waited. "Sir."

"Because there is a potential prize of great value here," Belazir said mildly. "In any case, we must deal with it"

"A missile is quick." And father Chalku is impatient: the unspoken thought was plain enough.

"A missile is wasteful," Belazir said. He grinned for an instant. Aragiz looked slightly alarmed. "But your objection is noted. You will not, therefore, insist on sharing in the prize credit you or your ship."

Now Aragiz's face was unreadable black iron. Fool, the captain of oehelMk thought Everyone on the4g⁻ would be monitoring mis, as the Bride was broadcasting in ship-to-ship dear. An intact merchantman could be a prize of great worth, particularly a new, fast ship, suitable for conversion to a family transport or an assault carrier. No matter how well-born or ruthless, a captain could not afford to alienate the common crew too badly; not to mention the relatives who would fill most of the command positions.

TVarak had just sharply reduced his chances of surviving to flag rank. Belazir's hand cut off his protests and the intership screen.

"Serig," he said, allowing himself a slight feral smile of satisfaction. "You will take the assault team. One boat, three fighters. Full monitor at all times."

Serig grinned, white against his ebony face. Being petit-noble, he could afford such open enjoyment at the t*Varak's discomfiture.

"Perhaps there will be a scumvermin woman aboard," he said.

The lock cycled open.

Serig na Marid signed behind himself on the count of three. He felt good, loose and easy and fast, the plasma gun in his hands an extension of his body. Nothing else felt quite as good as the tension just before combat: not sex or wealth or satisfied revenge. The knowledge that his lord would be observing through the helmet pickups was an added bonus. Whatever he accomplished would not be just another small byte in the chaotic melee of large-scale destruction: it would be uniquely his, with commanders and officers on all four ships watching.

Now!

Swiftly, smoothly, the three figures in dark combat armor swung into the lock. The deck rang under their boots as they landed in the interior field.

"Still no sign of reaction," Seric said. "Field is point six-three GK." Kolnari gravities, mat was. It was 1.0 G Terran, the old human standard. "Pressurizing."

Serig dropped to a three-point" stance on the floor, fingers of his left hand, toes of both feet, knees bent. The two ground-fighters were on either side of the airlock. The inner portal was of standard form, circular, with a seam down the middle where the leaves met. Air hissed into the lock, and the light went from vacuum-flat to a warmer, yellow tone. Much like that on some planets he had seen, although the Kolnari fleet still kept the harsh brightness of their vanished homework!.

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The leaves snapped back. In the same instant Serig vaulted forward, plasma rifle ready. A single octagonal corridor lay in front, ending five meters ahead in a T-junction. He went to ground just before the intersection and pressed a thumb to the stock of his weapon. A long stiff thread extended out, and Serig keyed the image it carried onto his faceplate. More empty corridor, this time running north-south through the main axis of the ship. Again octagonal, 2.0 meters in diameter, with a synthetic fabric covering on the "down" side and the ceiling; extruded synthetic sides, luminous at regular intervals, and recessed hatchways. Another door was at the north end of the corridor with a keypad, and a duplicate at the south.

A careful one second later the two backups leapt past him, facing either way. They waited in silence, eyes flickering in trained patterns.

"Nothing," Serig said, coming to his feet and walking into the axial corridor. He glanced down at the readouts on his gauntlet "Air is Terran-standard basis." Thinner than Kolnar, but with more oxygen and less sulfuric acid and ozone. Homeworld had much ozone at the surface, little in the stratosphere. "Slightly depleted oxygen levels, high level of necrotic decay products. Wouldn't like to have to breath it" * j.

"Proceed" Belazir's voice said.

"As you command, lord," Serig replied. In the language of Kolnar, that phrase was one word. "Proceeding up axialcorridor now."

Almost all human-made ships still had a notional "bow" at the north pole, and that was the most common location for a bridge. Serig directed his subordinates forward with hand signals. They moved from one compartment to another, opening each, checking inside with a vision thread and then going on to the next "Sensors detect no live presence," Serig reported. They moved forward again, two covering the one exposed, up to the small ship's control center. "These chambers appear to be staterooms, lord, presently disused."

"Better and better," Belazir's voice said. That implied extensive life-support facilities.

The north-end hatch yielded to the same simple random-number code as the exterior entranceway. The control chamber was a domed hemisphere with three couches, only one occupied. It had half-closed around the pilot's body in a coldsleep cocoon, not fully deployed.

Serig moved to look down at the body.

"You were right; a woman," Belazir said dryly.

"Not one that appeals to me," his second-in-command replied. "Tshakiz, get a tissue sample." He was glad for the filtered, neutral air that flowed through his helmet. The rotting flesh slid greasily away from the probe.

Serig looked elsewhere, touching the controls with slow caution. The shrill accented voice of the Medical Officer broke in. That was a low-status occupation, and the man was the gelded son of a slave mother.

"Subject has been dead approximately four days," he announced. "Scan, please, my great lords."

One of the ground fighters detached a sensor wand from her belt and ran it slowly from head to toe of the corpse. A minute's silence followed.

"Preliminary analysis: death from overdose of coldsleep drugs, combined with oxygen starvation and dehydration when cocoon failed to properly deploy."

Serig nodded. On single-crewed vessels the pilot would often use coldsleep, relying on die AI systems to handle the simple and tedious work of long interstellar transits. Slightly risky, but it saved lifespan.

"Ship systems are live," Serig said. "Cryptography, please." He punched a jack into the receptor and waited while the powerful machines on the Bride worked on the guardian programs of the enemy ship. "Worm is through. I have control of the computer." That was simple, he thought. Not much computer security at all, and...

"Ah! Lord? The coldsleep system was sabotaged."

"How wicked," Belazir said, and they shared a chuckle. "Why?"

"A moment, lord. Yes, by the dugs of the Dreadful Mother! This is a commercial courier. The female was an agent for some merchant house, traveling with samples. She boasts of making the 'sale of a lifetime' at her most recent stop, a nexus-station designated SSS 900-C. Some rival did it"

"It was the sale of her lifetime," Belazir said.

This time Serig could hear more laughter in the background. He turned sharply to his assistants. "Nobody told you to stop working" he barked. "Divine Seed of Kolnar! Lord, I have accessed the cargo manifest!"

He could hear Belazir grunt like a man bellypunched as the figures and data scrolled across to the Kolnari warships. Computers and computer parts; engineering software; fabrication systems; drugs; luxury consumer items, wines, silks...

"And lord! The cargo compartments have full climatic control!" * Rigged for the carrying of delicate cargo? That made the vessel beyond price to the Clan. With climate-controlled holds, she could be easily and cheaply rigged to hold families or troops in coldsleep.

Belazir's voice grew sardonic. "Captain t'Varak, I hope you are satisfied." Nothing came over the circuit but the sound of teeth grinding. One of the other captains did venture a comment "Does this not seem too much like the answer to a prayer?" he murmured. "I sacrifice much to my joss and the ancestors, vessels of the Divine Seed, but..." The joss help the strongest fist, the saying went "Under other circumstances, Zhengir t'Marid," Belazir answered him coolly, MI might agree. But cousin, who could know we forayed in this direction? Only those we pursue, and they press forward in a disintegrating hulk with no communications capability since we blew it away." Command snapped in his voice. "Serig. Secure the ship. Discard the corpse and flush the environmental systems. Are fungibles adequate?"

"More than adequate, Great Lord," Serig said, hammering the glee out of his voice. My gods! My greed! he thought A full percentage point would be his as noblein-command of the boarding party. My lord is well pleased with me, he decided. He must, to give his bastard half-brother such an opportunity. Petit-nobles had been translated to full status for less.

"There is plenty of air," he went on. "Surplus water. The pilot never awoke to renew."

"Good. Await the prize crew Alyze b'Marid will command it and then return. Expedite! We will resume

superluminal in less than an hour, or skin will be stripped."

Alyze was the commander's new third wife. Serig suspected she might be pregnant and Belazir anxious to have her out of harm's way before even the slight danger at the end of their chase. He nodded to himself. Such was good noble thinking, for a man's honor was in the diffusion of his portion of the Divine Seed.

"Harkening and obedience, lord," he said. And this SSS-900-C will also be in the path of our pursuit, Serig thought I will light ten sticks to my personal loss in apology.

He had kicked the little idol across his cabin in anger when he learned they were to be sent on a lootless, honorless pursuit mission while their comrades and clanfolk plundered Bethel. It seemed he had been premature. ~~qdip~~TERELEVEN "Told ya" Joat said.

"Yes," Seld Chandra said, turning his head aside.

The transit levels of SSS-900-C were still chaotic and barely-suppressed panic was rampant. Squads of weeping children pressed by, herded by an adult with a child in her arms. A caterpillar of toddlers held on to a cord which was tethered to a few protesting sub-adolescents.

Joat and Seld were off to one side in the shadows of an access bay. There were many at the upper globe's north pole, what with the pumping and docking facilities and the multiple feeds needed. The housekeeping programs were laboring overtime, pumping odors of pine, sea-salt and wildflowers into the air. It still smelled of vomit and unchanged diapers and fear, and the baffles only muted the roar of voices. The two teenagers stepped backward as a man wearing the arm-band of a part-time policeman went by.

"I hate running out on my dad like this," Seld said in a choked voice. "He'sgonnakillmejoat"

"No, the pirates may kill you, but all he can do is slap you around."

Shocked, the boy looked up. "Dad never hits me!"

"Well, then you've got a pretty good dad, and you're not running out on him you're staying with him. 'S what you wanna do, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He turned his face to the wall. "I can't go... my mom...." he said in a fierce tone. "I never saw her again... I woke up and she was just... gone."

Surprised at herself she generally hated to touch people Joat put an awkward arm around his shoulders. He clutched at her for a moment, sobbing.

"Sorry about blubbing," he said after a moment. Then he grew conscious of the bearhug grip he was exerting, and broke away. "Salright," Joat said. Somehow it is, she thought, then flogged her mind back to practical matters. "Need a snot-rag?"

"Thanks." He blew noisily on the one which she offered and then gave it back to her. "What do we do now?"

"We get out of sight. Channa's going to go ballistic, and she's nearly as hard to hide from as Simeon. Worse, 'cause I can't screw up her sensors."

"There she is," he said.

Joat's head whipped around. The noise was reaching tidal proportions around the tall lean figure of Channa Hap. Only the escort of Vicker's security personnel kept her from being bowled over in the crowd. She had a canvas carrier bag in one hand. Joat recognized the foot of the stuffed bear sticking out one side.

"That satisfies the letter of it," she said. "Let's go."

Channa stalked into the lounge, opened the door to Joat's room and flung the canvas bag she carried as hard as she could against the room's far wall. It made a solitary spot of disorder in the servo-neat room. Then she shut the door and walked stiffly to her desk, sat down and began keying through her messages, back hunched in rejection.

"It's not my fault," Simeon finally ventured to say.

She turned slowly to glare at his column.

Oooh, Vrnglad this is titanium crystal, Simeon thought. Now, if only there was something similar available for the psyche.

Just as slowly, just as silendy, Channa turned back to her console.

Simeon sent her a message that read. "I'm sorry you had to go through that scene at Disembarkation."

Channa let out an exasperated little hiss and slapped the screen. Simeon's image appeared on it, wincing realistically. * *i Unwillingly, a srrule quirked at her mouth. "Simeon, I would have been tljere anyway, to speak words of encouragement, to wish well, to shake hands, to show solidarity." She swung a fist in a go-get-'em gesture. "But I would have had a lot more credibility if I hadn't been standing there with an overnight bag in my hand. Did you see the suspicious looks I got? Half of the evacuees probably think I'm on one of the other ships. You could have said something, a quiet word of warning in my ear, as it were. Then I could have dumped that damned incriminating bag!" She turned to look at his column again. "Why wasn't she there?"

"She wouldn't go," Simeon said weakly. "Shesaid she'd see you. I thought she meant there at the Boat Dock."

"Yourf?"

"Well, I hoped," Simeon said. "I tried my best to get her there. Pushed every emotional button I could. Manipulated shamelessly, you know the way I can."

"Or silver-tongued Simeon slips up again, huh?"

"I can't exactly get out of my shell and chase her down and hog-tie her, Channa. She wouldn't go. She told me that we could never find her in fifteen minutes and she was right. Even you'd have to agree with that. Trying to manipulate Joat is like trying to suck liquid hydrogen through a straw."

Channa sighed. "Indeed! But standing there with that bag was hideously embarrassing for me. Besides, I really wanted to get her to safety."

"I know how you feel," he soothed her. "This surrogate parent stuff is pretty intense." And it was your idea, he reminded himself. Oddly, he felt no impulse to remind her. I guess / fi& &, he decided.

She ground the beds of her hands into red-rimmed eyes. "I apologize."

Well, that's a first. "I accept"

"Announce me," Amos ben Sierra Nueva said to the door.

It hinged softly, and he knew it would be turning to a screen on the interior, showing his image in real-time. Such things still made him a little nervous. Bethel had never used much in the way of sophisticated electronics. Doors there were usually plain honest wood. He smiled slightly in spite of himself. Here, wood was an unthinkable expensive luxury, and the most advanced technology, the stuff of common life. At least he had been able to dress properly, from the baggage somebody threw into the shutde at the last minute. It was demoralizing to look like some cottonchopper goatherd from the back lands. Loose black trousers tucked into his boots, silver-link belt emphasizing the narrow hips, open robe throwing his broad shoulders into relief. He bowed ceremoniously as he entered, sweeping off his beret to Channa.

"Come in." Channa's voice was flat and tired as the door opened, but her face lit in an inadvertent smile of welcome.

Good, he thought, smiling back. Even in this desperate hour, it was pleasant to have so exotic and attractive a woman smile at him. Then he bowed again, to the column. To Simeon, he forced himself to think. And tried not to think of the pale deformed thing in there, among the tubes and neural circuits. Whenever the image came to him, a slight tinge of nausea accompanied it. He was afraid that Simeon could detect his reaction. He could imagine several sensors that would make it difficult or impossible to lie to a shellperson. Guiyon he had never thought of so. Guiyon had always been there in the background, a sympathetic voice from his earliest days. Guiyon was my friend.

"I am sorry to disturb you," he began. "Now that the most urgent tasks are done, I wish to reiterate my desire to assist in the coming battle."

"When our J5ians art: more solid, I assure you there will be a place for you in them," Simeon said.

Amos's mouth quirked. You mean, when you've figured out something we can do, he thought "We are not trained as soldiers," he said with a selfdeprecating smile and a shrug. "And we are from a backward world. But," he raised a finger, "I have thought of something which you both, being so close to the matter, may have overlooked." He glanced from Simeon to Channa and back again. "It is something that Guiyon said that makes me think of this.

"He said to me, I am one of Central Worlds'most valuable resources. The Kolnari do not have any brainships in their fleet and I do not intend to be the first.

"Oh," Channa murmured.

"Hell," Simeon said. "I knew it but I didn't think of it Brains are so rare, out in the backlands."

"Yes." Amos nodded vigorously. "We must hide the fact that Simeon exists. Or the/hf thing that the Kolnari do will be to cut out Simeon's shell and send it back to their fleet This must not happen."

"Indeed it must not," Simeon said, his voice slow and flat AH three of them knew what followed from that If the Kolnari did get their hands on a brain one trained in strategy, at that it would immediately

change them from a wandering pack of scavengers to a first-rate menace.

"Simeon would never " Channa began hody, then trailed off.

"Yes." Simeon's voice was now as expressionless as a subroutine robotic. There were dozens of unpleasant ways of forcing a captive brain to capitulate. The most effective was also the worst simply cut off the exterior sensor feeds which would mean sensory deprivation fugue in days or less." I tend to forget how... helpless I am, most of the time," he went on. "Forget I'm a cripple, so to speak."

"You are not!" Channa blazed. * Amos blinked at the sight. She seemed to bristle, the widow's peak of her rusty-brown air rising. I wouldn't like to have this lady wrathful with me, the Bethelite thought respectfully.

She forced herself to be calm. "Compared to you, we are cripples, Simeon," she said. "You have a hundred abilities we lack."

"Thank you," he said in more normal tones. "Still, what Amos says is true. At all costs, we can't let the Kolnari get their hands on me."

The self-destruct sequence surfaced in the minds of both brawn and brain, like some monster rising from the depths of the ocean, with a wave of cold black water sweeping before it.

Amos coughed. "There is a way, I think. We may fool them. Convince them that there is no brain controller on this station. If indeed," and his lips peeled back over his teeth in a nasty grin, "barbarians such as the Kolnari even know of such persons." * Seeing Channa about to speak, he held up his hand to forestall her. "Do I assume that Simeon's name appears on far too many documents or news holos or whatever, for us to hide his very existence? Also, someone is sure to lapse and mention the name, thus giving rise to questions. So," and he gave his cloak a little flourish, "I have come to offer myself as a false Simeon. To deceive them." He looked from one to the other eagerly. "Is this not a good idea?"

"It's..." Channa began, and looked at him with shining eyes. "It's damn brilliant!" She sprang up and hugged him for a moment, then began to pace, ""we can get the substitution to work."

"Well, it sure beats suicide," Simeon said, for he had had to consider that as his only option. "One small point pops up, Amos. I've been here for forty years, and you're what, twenty-eight?"

"Ah, a valid point to consider," he said, "but as you have already pointed out, during their stay in this station, they are unlikely to spend time reviewing its history. They would have no reason not to accept me as Channa's assistant. If you feel it is an important concern, we could always tell them that Simeon is a title, I could then be the Simeon-Amos."

"Yes," Channa said enthusiastically, "we could pretend it's a traditional title. A position named after the first person who held it, an honorific! Why would they check if we say it is so and has always been? And that ploy would involve jimmying fewer personnel records that's a major plus. Especially with people who've been here a while. Faking that is like trying to pull one card out of a tower. Every change means more changes and pretty soon it cascades out of control"

"There are the transients," Simeon said meditatively. "Most of them don't bother about who manages what so long as they're not inconvenienced. We've pretty near dispatched so many who do know that the ruse might just work." Simon began to enlarge the concept of deception. "Mmm, you know, we could use that old secondary control center that was on-line when the station was being built Before I was

installed here. These quarters don't look much like an office. We could say this is a living accommodation."

"Ah! Then you accept my offer as impostor," cried Amos. "Excellent! I shall move here as soon as you require me. Until then, I'd like to remain with my people. If you do not mind a companion in your lovely rooms?" he asked, turning swiftly to Channa, concerned that he also might have offended her with his presumption. "We'll let you know when," she said, a little dazed. "Of course," he said. He took her hand and kissed it tenderly, smiled in Simeon's direction, and left.

Channa stared at the closed doors for a moment, then turned to Simeon's shaft "Excuse me, but did we just accept his offer?" ;

"Well, not exactly, but we didn't say no."

"I noticed that. Why not, I wonder?"

Simeon was a little amused at the idea of Channa being bowled over by another personality. "Hmm. Maybe because we agree with him?" Slyly: "Or it could be the pheromones, in your case, Happy baby."

Channa bridled and threw a cushion at the column, "Get serious. It is a good idea, even if I didn't think of it first You have to be protected from the Kolnari." "Yes," he said, enduring excruciating embarrassment at that truth. "Nor can I see any reason not to take him up on his offer. Maybe having an outsider dose to our counsels will keep us on our toes, so to speak."

Channa gave a little grunt "As I said, it's a good idea, but on second thoughts, why Amos? He'd have to learn a lot in very little time to sound as if he knew what he'd been doing all this time. I still have trouble finding my way around, and I not only grew up on a station, I had time to study the layout of the SSS-900 before I came here. Why not someone from the station? Someone we know and have confidence in?"

"I think we can have confidence in him, Channa," Simeon said thoughtfully.

"Hunh! Based on what?" she asked challengingly, hands on her hips.

"Authority usually stems from character, Channa. I've been watching him with his people, and there's no doubt that he's the man in charge. They look at him the way that people look at someone they can depend on. Consider the shocks they've all been through, especially him.

Don't forget he went with Chandra down to the jnorgue. Then he came to us with this... viable, I think plan. We could do worse than accepting his offer. Besides, who else is there?" "Since you ask, I was considering Gus." "And who's going to be Gus, while Gus is being me?" He watched her cross her arms over her bosom and frankly pout "We could end up changing every name in the station if we go that route. What with this and that, we could get so snarled up, we wouldn't know our arse ends from bur ears."

She laughed, suddenly visualizing the corridors full of people checking their noteboards to see who they were that day.

"Besides," Simeon said, "I like Gus." "What's that got to do with it?" she replied. "Oh." Whoever fronted as the station's manager was the most likely to receive the brunt of occupational hazards. She liked Gus, and even on such short acquaintance, she liked Amos. He was undeniably nicer to look at and had

already been through several layers of hell. On the other hand, somebody had to do it. If she was right there beside him to give judicious guidance and being beside Amos was not a chore, maybe they'd get through without any really bad gaffes.

"All right," she said, raising her hands in capitulation. "Shuffling people around really could become more difficult than teaching one stranger the ins and outs of station management. At least enough to fool these thugs. But, on your enhanced head be it, my brave brain, if he turns out to be a disaster."

"I accept your challenge, my beautiful brawn. Shall I have him move in tonight?"

For a moment, Channa looked as though she'd inadvertently swallowed something too large and lumpy. "Ah, of course. We'll have to get his training started right away, won't we?"

Amos frowned. As attractively as he smiled, Simeon noted.

Sheesh. When this is over, he could earn megacredits as a wd-star with Smgari Entertainments, yoking historical.

"But I had wanted to stay with my people," he said.

"I know," Simeon told him, "it we're placing the least injured in their own quarters, effective immediately, and scattering the rest. We can't risk having them identified as a group, you know."

The young man clasped his hands behind his back. "Yes, I see. All will be strange to the Kolnari, in many different ways. Our strangeness will be one more anomaly." "You're not that strange," Simeon felt compelled to say. "Too bloody handsome for my peace of mind. Or maybe being that handsome and a stranger I realize."

The elevator opened onto the corridor outside Simeon and Channa's quarters. Channa stood in the open door of the lounge to greet Amos. She held out her hand to him, wearing a formal, welcoming smile. He took her hand tenderly in both of his, bowed over it gracefully and kissed it gently, his eyes never leaving hers. Channa raised one brow and smiled crookedly, taking back her hand and gesturing him into the lounge.

"I know you wanted to stay with the others," she said, "but there's a lot you'll have to be briefed on, and we should get started. Also, Simeon may have told you, they'll be moving to their own quarters this evening."

"Yes, so he has told me," Amos said softly.

He looked at her with a warm attention that she found unnervingly intimate. "This will be yours," she said, opening the door farthest from her own.

He entered, looked around, his hands clasped behind his back once more. He nodded judiciously, "It is very nice," he said. He opened a closet, empty but for a few hangers.

"One of the things we'll have to do is fit you out according to your new position," Channa said from the doorway.

He smiled at her. "Yes, I need everything. And Bethel clothing would not be appropriate."

He walked over and stood right beside her. She had noticed that the Bemejites did that; their social distance was close and they were a very tactile people.

"I shall enjoy that," he said, "if you will help me choose?"

She lowered her eyes. "Perhaps, if time allows. Though you'll be guided by experts in men's fashions, which I am not." Down, girl! she told herself.

The door chimed and Simeon opened it. "I've sent down to the commissary for dinner. I doubt you've found the time to eat, Amos, so I've taken the liberty of ordering for two," he said.

"You do not like to cook?" Amos asked, turning to Channa in surprise.

"Not when I have more important things to do," she answered. "It isn't among my hobbies."

"Ah, well, doubtless your servants are skilled." His voice implied that a chatelaine should still oversee them personally.

Ah, good one, Amos. Simeon thought, feeling more cheerful. He had been reviewing what Kettle was known of Bethelite culture. He did not think Channa would find it agreeable. Why don't you ask her to sit on the floor and rub your tired feet while you're at it, then retire to the rear of the house while the men talk business?

It was worrying, though. Much as I hate to admit it, maybe Channa was right. This plan has inherent elements of disaster. I forgot to take into consideration that he's from an insular and probably the kind, old-fashioned. Nan! Why be kind backward culture. All their preparations were a mishmash of improvisations. Would this be one too many?

Amos looked quickly from Simeon's column to Channa and said in mild dismay.

"I have caused offense. Please, forgive me. This was not my intention." He smiled ruefully down at Channa and sighed. "I clearly have more to learn than I had imagined. Even my speech the more we talk, the more I am conscious of how old-fashioned I must sound to you. And, forgive me/we of Bethel are not used to dealing with people of strange of different customs. That was one thing I disliked about my home, the insularity."

Hell, Simeon thought. He's not stupid. Adaptable, in fact.

With a smooth professional smile, Channa gestured for him to take one of the seats at the table.

"Then let us begin," she said.

To his back she made a small moue of distaste, which quickly turned into a smile as he held out her chair and looked at her expectantly. She grinned and waved him to his seat "First," she said, "you must learn that we're much less formal here. We reserve our 'company manners' strictly for company."

"But," he said, smiling as he took his seat, "a beautiful woman should always be treated like a treasured guest."

Channa served herself from a platter and passed it to him, letting go of it almost before he'd gotten a grip on it "Flatterer. I'm not ugly, but I'm no great beauty, either."

He almost dropped the hot platter in surprise, its contents tilting alarmingly close to the edge and burning his thumb. He put it down hastily and sucked the injury for a moment "No, truly," he said, flapping his hand to cool it "I think you are most attractive." There was no doubting the sincerity in his wide, gentian-blue eyes. The lashes, she noticed, were long and curled. His gaze grew playful. "In a strange, foreign, exotic fashion, of course." "Well, you're very attractive, too, Amos," she said seriously. "I like attractive-wo&en," he said, and his gaze was subtly challenging. * "Mmh, I don't like*attractive men," she said positively. Actually, I don't approve of them, which is not exactly the same thing, she amended to herself. "They tend to be spoiled and self-centered and in general much more trouble than they're worth. Now, let us eat before the food cools. We have a great deal of work to do and not much time and energy to spare." She gave him a direct stare. "I'm sure we're going to have an excellent business relationship, manager to manager."

"Of course," Amos said with a neutral, social smile.

"Shouldn't you start calling Amos Simeon-Amos, Channa?" Simeon broke in, before the atmosphere got any cooler.

"Good idea," Channa said.

Amos, as far as Simeon could tell, was sulking slightly.

Aha, Simeon thought With those looks, plus brains and charisma and high position, he's probably used to women succumbing to his every ploy. And, he noted charitably, the Bethelite was only in his early twenties. All the textbooks said softshells were highly subject to hormonal influences at that stage in their pitifully short development spans.

Nine gets you ten, he told himself, that there's a worndown track in the carpet between their doors within a week. The notion was oddly unpalatable. He put it aside and launched into some of the nineteen million things Amos would have to become familiar with about station management H CHAPTER TvfeLVE " is Ahhha, gotcha! Simeon crooned to himself "Channa? You awake?"

"You can always tell when I'm awake. Why ask?"

"Because it's polite" he replied.

"What is it?" Her tone noted that the sleep period was three hours gone and, in barely five more, she would have to be awake for more of the interminable meetings and briefings.

"I've found out something about our expected and uninvited guests," he went on.

That brought her alert, sitting up in bed and reaching to key up the lights and switch off the soft fugue she had been playing to court sleep.

"Couldn't sleep anyway," she said. "Let me have it,"

"Got a download from Central. Had to burn some butts to get it released. It's not much. Planet named Koinar, settled way, way, way back. Quite a ways from here, too, as such things go. About forty times as far as the sun Saffron, further in on the spiral arm."

Channa frowned. "That's really out in the boonies, settled in the second or third waves."

"Uh-uh. It was first wave."

She pursed her lips in a silent whistle. "Right at the beginning of interstellar colonization He went on. "Involuntary colonization. Translation program running... Okay, a whole bunch of bad-hat groups; the Kh&nir Reddish Rice Cosmetic, the Temil Large Striped Felines, the New Council Men, the Resurrected Aryan-Germanic Statewide Associationist Employees Party, faeSonsofChaka, the Luminescent Footway, the Darwin Wilson Society, the "

"What's so amusing?" she said as she caught the laughter ripple in his voice.

"You'd have to be a historian to understand, my voluptuous popsfe," &e said cheerfully. "Anyway, according to the records, they sent out about ten thousand of these oscos, and about three thousand reached their destination."

"Bad voyages?"

"Internal fighting in the holds," Simeon said. "With fists and teeth and soft plastic cups, since they didn't have anything else. Then when they got there, they realized they'd have to interbreed, like it or not."

"What son of planet is Kolnar?"

"Nickname was 'Hell's Orifice.' They picked it because it was easier on tender consciences. Society could pretend the planet killed the convicts, who deserved it, from the records. One-point-six gees, hot sun, enormous heavy-metal concentrations, thick but low-oxygen air, superactive and largely poisonous biosphere. No ozone layer. Vulcanism, unpredictable climatic shifts... the whole nine yards! Not much visited since. When the Grand Survey went through a few centuries later, they were fired on. Evidently the locals have a nuclear war about once every forty years or so, and the ship got in the way of one. Their descriptions of the physical type match what Amos and the others say. There's been some contact with them since. That incident with the survey seemed to remind them that the rest of the universe was still there, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately?"

"Well, I've got cross-references under pimcy, brigandage, police actions, war crimes and aggression. Also entries in the anthro files under genocide, slavery, cultural pathology, xenophobia and societal devolution. There are apparently pockets of the descendants of the original social aberrants scattered through a number of systems in the area nowadays. Little asteroid colonies, freebooter dens, unsurveyed worlds."

"Urk. Characteristics?"

"Apart from not being very nice? Dark skin is a climatic adaptation all that UV and the hair and eye color genetic drift you'd expect in a small initial population. They breed like, limm, rabbits, though. Puberty at eight, all children twins or triplets. Overall, the Kolnari subrace seems to have very efficient immune systems. They're extremely strong and fast. You'd expect good reflexes on a planet like that those with bad ones didn't survive. They can see in the dark like cats, and they've got an amazing tolerance for ionizing radiation. There's so much fallout and natural background radiation on Kolnar that they've genetically adapted to it. The scientists seem to disagree whether their paranoia is inbred or just cultural"

"Hard to get rid of, I'd expect,"

"Like cockroaches," Simeon said, deliberately misunderstanding. "One Space Navy type a few generations back said the only way to solve the Kolnari problem would be to drop antimatter bombs from orbit. Even then, you wouldn't be really sure of destroying them all."

"Very depressing, thank you, and now can I get some rest?"

Later that night, still unable to sleep, Channa called out his name softly.

"You should be sleeping, Channa."

"I know, but I've got to clear my mind first. Will you talk with me?"

A pause hung in the air. She took a breath and went on. "I know I haven't been as good a brawn as "

"Ancient history," Simeon said. "You've been handling a hellacious emergency better than most anyone could. I can certainly listen. What's on your mind she said, as if the two words covered the problem adequately."

"Ah. Not what you expected, huh?"

She sighed, "No, the opposite. Too much what I expected. He's... I'm afraid I won't be able to work with him."

Why am I not surprised? Simeon thought. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Aside from his being a smug, pushy, egotist, you mean? Well, he doesn't have any faith in my competence and I expect to have to fight to keep him from trying to usurp my position. He's very much a take-charge kind of person, you were right about that. And he has no respect for women."

"What makes you think that?" Let's hear how you came to that difficult conclusion. Simeon enjoyed the challenge of following the workings of her mind.

"For crying out loud, Simeon, he expected me to cook for him! Oh, yes, he got over that. He's always ready with an apology for 'different customs.' But, deep down, he doesn't really believe it. He thinks 'customs' is whether you sit on the floor or on a chair, stuff like that. He doesn't grasp the difference in fundamental cultural views."

"Channa-my-sweet, back on Bethel, there aren't any fundamental differences. This quarrel he had with the Elders, it's hard to grasp exactly what it was about... but it seems overwhelmingly important to them. "

"Oh, I understand why he's that way," Channa said, striking the pillow with a frustrated fist. "And it's not as if he's stupid. He's intelligent and he notices things, but that makes it more irritating, not less. You could ignore what a stupid person does. What's more, suddenly he's living in my pocket I'm just a little surprised he didn't ask to see the other rooms in order to choose the one he preferred." Her face suddenly flushed a becoming rose.

Simeon noted that. After all, he could see in the dark, too. "And he came on to you like the colony ship he flew in on, didn't he?"

"Damn right he did," she muttered, half under her breath. "I like attractive women," she said in exaggerated imitation of his manner and accent. "What do you suppose he does when he has to deal with an un-attractive woman? Carry a bag to put over her head? I hate men like that!" She thumped the bed with both fists for emphasis.

"I thought you were attracted to him," Simeon said in a calm and mildly curious tone.

"I am," she said with exasperation. "I hate that part of it the most."

"I'm a little confused here. How can you be attracted to someone you can't stand?"

"I don't know," she said grimly.

"Pheromones?" Simeon asked slyly.

"Maybe. It happens." She sighed.

The mysterious pheromones strike again, he thought. There are times I'm extremely glad I'm a shettperson. At least I can adjust my own hormone feeds. The thought of having his biochemistry unpredictably mucked about by emotional factors was nerve-wracking.

"You mean," he said carefully, "this has happened to you before?"

A look of annoyance crossed her face. "Notjusttoiw. It's happened to a great many people."

He waited expectantly and patiently.

With a resigned sigh, she went on. "He was a professor of economics, of all people! I fell for him like a stone. And the weird thing was, I never liked him. Quite the opposite. He was attractive enough, but he was sarcastic and lazy and snide ugh! Never to me, but it bothered me to see him doing it to other students.

One day I was sitting there and I looked up at him and I said to myself, I'm in love with him." She widened her eyes and held out her hands in a "go figure" gesture and let them flop back onto the bed. "Hmmp."

"So... you're in love... with Simeon-Amos?"

"No! Of coufsetiod I said I was in love with my professor, not Simeon-Amos. They're two different cases." She started to laugh. "I'm older and wiser now, Simeon-Simple."

"As long as you're npt sadder, love."

She chuckJed/"No, not sadder."

"Naturally you and Simeon-Amos will have to undergo a bit of a period of adjustment," he said seriously, "but he really wants to help. And he's going to be very busy helping. That'll go a long way in curbing any ardent tendencies he may have. Try to cut him a little slack, Channa; he's the victim of an inbred culture. Besides which, we're all under threat of death."

"Mmm. Tell that to the subconscious it interprets threats of death as a reason to get more interested. I do wish this crisis wasn't so immediate." She sighed again, wearily. "Maybe they're not out there. Maybe they gave up and went back to Saffron, to Bethel. All we'd have to do is file a report, while the fleet floats by us."

"I wouldn't bet on it, babe."

"I must be mellowing," she observed, "I've allowed you to call me love* and "babe* and... I actually let you get away with 'luscious popsie,' didn't I?"

"Yeah. I'm counting coup. Maybe you like me?"

"I wouldn't count on it," she said grinning. "Goodnight, Simeon." "Night, Channa."

"Oh, God, not another meeting," Channa mumbled to herself around the light-pencil clenched in her teeth. In one hand, she held the notescreeen she was studying and, in the other, a cup of coffee. Hot as hell, black as death, sweet as love: not the way she generally drank her caffeine, but the proper dose to jolt a body into action after inadequate sleep. For something stronger, she would have to go taDoctor Chaundra.

"Why meetings?" she continued to herself as she stumbled into the lift at the end of the corridor. "Why can't I just send memos?" i;

"Mornin', honeybunch," Patsy's voice said. Channa started so violently at the presence of two other people on the lift that she almost slopped the hot coflee over her hand. Gu put a steadying grip under her elbow.

"Why meetings?" Gus repeated, "because they're civilians. They're not used to facing a military emergency. They need to be told the information again and again before it'll seem real to them."

The lift hissed to a stop. "Fortunately, I don't need to be told so often, so I can get right on with my work," he said. "See you later, ladies."

Channa looked across at Patsy. The older woman was leaning into the padded corner of the lift, eyes dosed and a dreamy smile on her lips. "Patsy?"

One eye opened reluctantly and a sweet smile lightened herexpression as she stretched languorously. "Yeah?*" "You look almost as exhausted as I am. Aren't getting enough sleep?"

Patsy's eyes widened, and she worked her eyebrows melodramatically. "Not much," she said with some enthusiasm. "Unless you use 'sleep*' in the euphemistic sense."

"Anhhanh-Gus?"

"Con mucho Gusto!" Patsy giggled. "Ah've read about this. People in crisis, they jest get together, y'know? You ask Simeon about it He'll tell ya."

"I wouldn't presume to ask Simeon about private matters. I suspect he's morbidly fascinated by the subject Besides, I know what you mean."

Aren't you "Ohho! Ah heard about yoah pretty li'l roommate," patsy said with a wink. "Hubba hubba."

She nudged Channa with her elbow.

Channa cleared her throat, stuck the light-pencil over one ear and took sip of her coffee. Ghastly, she thought. "Simeon tolcrme that 'hubba hubba' meant i j * " * 'sexy lady "Did he? Well, when he says it, it probably does. No, really, it jest means somethin1 sexy, anythin' sexy What, is up to the beholder." Patsy rose onto her toes and clicked her heels together a couple of times. "Ah think Simeon-Amos is sexy," she said teasingly.

"Right now you'd think taffy was sexy," Channa said repressively.

"Oooh, yeah, ya can puulll it..."

"Patsy!"

"Loosen up, girl! If ya get too tense, all yore hair fells out. Doncha know that?" She grinned and waved as she got off on her floor.

"Damn," Channa said, leaning against the wall. The padding held a faint trace of Patsy's body heat. "It's been entirely too long since I went to work with a smile like that"

"Great Lord, we cannot determine whether the craft we pursue left the area of the station or not," Baila said, tugging at the cupid's bow of her lower lip.

Belazir tapped a meditative thumb against his lower lip. "Why not?" he said mildly.

The technical officer swallowed. "There is too much traffic here, lord. Individual trails fade in the background clutter."

Belazir raised his brows, the only outward sign of an icy stab of concern. According to their best calculations, the way the fugitive ship had been pushing its engines, it should have blown itself to a ball of plasma and fragments long before now. Granted that, in the old days, ships had been built to last, still... If, by unforeseeable fortune, they reached a well-traveled zone first, the unthinkable could happen. The Clan would be in danger. He would be in even mote danger from the rest of the Clan. , "Computer," he said, the command-voice that slaved its attention to him. "Extrapolation: the vector of the prey, matched against last definite location and possible destinations, as updated from the chardogs of that captured merchantman."

A spray of possibilities flicked out in the 3-D tank. "Now, eliminate all those that would require more than four days' transit from last known location."

All faded but one. "Ah, that station," he said. It was the most probable search vector in any case. "We must continue the pursuit. Comments?" he asked the other captains' faces. They were present by holo, a ghostly ring effaces on the shadowed command-couches of their respective bridges, similar to the Bride's.

Aragiz t'Varak, of the Age of Darkness; Zhengir t'Marid, of the Rumal Strangler, in the old tongue Pol t'Veng, of the Shark, old and scarred and the only woman among them, the only one with an independent command in the Clan fleet. Enemies and rivals; his ability to make them move in concert was another test the Clanfathers imposed. That which does not fall us, makes us stronger, he reminded himself "Captains and kin," Belazir said. "You have the data. We must decide whether to continue the pursuit, or break off. My recommendation is that we continue."

Aragiz's face pushed forward, tensing like an eagle held by jesses to a hostile wrist "If you had not stopped to loot, we would be closer on the prey's trail," he said sharply.

Pol cut through his words with a snort "Irrelevant We must continue the mission,"

Belazir nodded at her.

"I do not like it," Pol said in her guttural rumble. She was known to be a canny and prudent commanders. "Something is just slightly out of kilter." She made a rocking gesture with the claw-scarred hand.

Belazir considered her remark. What had that contractor one of the 4nes the Clan fenced loot to occasionally said? "There are bold pirates, and old pirates, but there are no old, bold pirates."

"Still," she went on, "the balance of risk is clear. We must know if the prey reached this station. To do that, we must take it in our fist"

"And if it did?" Aragiz said.

"We kill, send a message torpedo to the fleet, and we run," Pol said. "With as little as one week's lead, we can lose the Navy among the stars and dust Nothing is lost save time."

"And the effort we put into subduing Bethel!" Aragiz snapped. "Stopping for that merchantman "

"Was irrelevant and consumed no significant expense of time!" Belazir said. "In any case, there is a substantial chance nothing was left alive on the preyship by the time it reached this station. If it did reach them. In which case, there is the station itself."

"Ah," Zhengir said. He was a close relative, and a man of few words. "A target of great opportunity."

"Risky," Pol said, rubbing her chin.

"We come in fast at the limits of their sensor capacity and launch hyper-velocity anti-rad missiles to knock out their communications," Belazir said. "We pulse our engines to jam subspace for the time required. It will look natural to those who come to investigate later. A black hole evaporating, or some such."

"Hmmm."

Pol rasped a hand over the horrible keloid scars that narrowed one half of her face. Since cosmetic repair would be easy enough, Belazir suspected she kept them as an affectation. But with those scars, even the most arrogant seldom remembered that Pol was a woman. Those grooves had been made by the daws of an animal which Pol had subsequently strangled with her bare hands. She wore its tanned hide around her shoulders. "Hmmm," she said again. "That would be minimum risk strategy. However, we cannot find out if the prey reached the station if we obliterate the station. We must be sure that no warning of us has gone out On the other hand, a swift raid, catching them unawares, would discover the truth and we can act accordingly."

"Taking with us whatever the station holds," Belazir said, grinning avariciously. Greed was quickly kindled, since everyone knew what the merchant ship had yielded: the merest trifle in comparison to what a full station would render up. "Depending on what we find, we might even have time to call for the Clan's

transports to come and haul the loot. Even what we could load on our frigates makes a raid more than worth our while."

Agreement rolled around the circle with the exception of Aragiz. Belazir quirked a brow at him. After criticizing his commander for sloth, he could not be behindhand now.

"Attack, then," Belazir concluded. The others nodded. "Tactical instructions follow. Confirm on receipt"

Several of Simeon-Amos's instructors were female.

Wfco/, Simeon thought. Thin, plain and severely ascetic in middle-age, Flimma Torkin blossomed visibly as Simeon-Amos bowed over her hand.

Her smile died a few minutes later. He appeared to be hovering attentively, but...

"Mr. Sierra Nueva "

"Simeon-Amos," he said.

"Will you please listen to what I'm saying? As station head, you should have some knowledge of how our communications system functions."

"I am sorry," he said meekly.

This should be interesting, Simeon mused. The rest of the session went n\uch more smoothly, although several times Amos*absently called the communications chief nama.

Nonstandard. Simeon thought the computer into action; a few nanos later it came up with a probable derivation, from the languages other than Standard spoken among the first settlers of Bethel, plus observation of the refugees. nama: aunt, auntie. Probable meanings: female authority figure from childhood, nurse, teacher [primary].

"That didn't go too badly," Amos commented as Flimma left.

"You learn quickly," Simeon said: sufficiently true as well as polite encouragement. Meanwhile, Simeon had been busily switching assignments. The assistant power chief was really the logical person to brief Amos. The fact that Holene Jagarth was stacked and less than thirty was irrelevant; at least to Simeon and anyone else dealing with her as an expert on plasma containment. Twenty minutes later she stood, ominously silent for a moment, then turned to the pillar.

"Talk to him, Simeon. Or send him around to my place for recreational duty, but in the meantime I have work to do!" Holene said in a terse voice, turned on her heel and stalked for the corridor.

Amos blinked in astonishment "What was the matter with her?" he asked plaintively.

"Ahem," Simeon said, and watched Amos turn back toward the training display they'd been using. "I wonder if you could tell me, what role do women play in Bethel society?"

"Role?" The question seemed almost meaningless to him. "They are mothers, of course; daughters, sisters, wives. They keep the home, raise die children, follow gentle skills such as medicine and painting, the writing of novels and poetry." He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I was wondering if, perhaps women played a more subservient role on Bethel."

"Subservient? No, of course not! Bethel has, as yet, a very small population. Therefore, to us, the bearing and raising of children is the highest calling a woman may attain. We revere our mothers, and we feel that women and children are to be protected and nurtured."

He frowned, mildly indignant. "There are exceptional cases, such as Channa. And I have never been one of those who think that women should keep to the inner rooms and stay silent in the presence of men. That is old-fashioned and ridiculous. Why, some of my primary associates in the New Revelation were women! I feel as though you are telling me that respect is disrespectful."

"Not at all," Simeon said soothingly, "but I think you may be confusing respect with condescension." Amos' face took on the set look it had worn through the last half of his dinner with Channa. "A little less patting on the hand, Simeon-Amos. You give them the impression that you claim authority because of your gender."

"No, no," Amos exclaimed, throwing up his hands in reversion. "If I have an aura of authority, it is because of my position on Bethel. Birth aside, I am a junior member of the ruling council. I rule the family estates, of course. I have been an administrator for several years now." He smiled in a confident manner. "Although, I have found that women react differently to my orders. I do not deny that I find it simpler to work with men." He gave a negligent shrug. "There is no problem of seduction between men." he's consistent, at least, Simeon thought. Maybe he needs to cling to whatever ego-confirmation he's got, since he's so displaced.

"Do you realize," the brain said coldly, "that you've just patronized me? Based on your belief that you're such a treat for ariyprJfe to deal with? I'm a part of this culture. You're not I know these people, you don't. I run this station and have been running it since before you existed, and will be running it centuries after you're dead. And I'll be running this station throughout this emergency while you're only pretending to. So listen up! You're treating your women instructors as if they're only adequate until someone real, meaning male, arrives to take over. Well, the experts here just happen to be female! We're short of time, so I'm going to pay you the compliment of expecting you to be able to adjust to that alien concept We need you to be one of us. We need you to forget about Bethel for the time being.

"I know how much we're asking of you, Simeon-Amos," he concluded, his voice less stern and more understanding, "but you're asking us to trust you without lives."

Amos gasped, his eyes wide with a mixture of embarrassment, puzzlement and astonishment. Oh, fudge, Simeon thought Channa was right. I do have the sensitivity of a demolition charge. Seventy-seven of Amos' followers had died fleeing Bethel. And, being the conscientious sort of leader Simeon had seen him be, he probably had them marching through his dreams at night, asking, "Why?"

"Sorry," Simeon said, "that was badly phrased. Look, I need to know if you can do this. I need to know now. You'll be dealing with Channa, under her authority, daily. I'm not going to waste time. If we have to replace you with someone who doesn't have the same hangups you have, then six hours is all we can afford to waste on a false start. Now, can you or can't you?"

Amos put a hand to his brow. They depended on me, and they died, ran through his mind like a prayer response. Followed by: No. I saved some, who would otherwise have died. And Bethel may yet live, what & left of it.

"I have never yet failed to accomplish a thing that I have set out to do," he said grimly. He touched head and heart with two fingers as We bowed to Simeon's column. "Would you be so good as to convey my apologies to the lady who has just left?"

"No, but I'll be happy to show you how to call her so that you can tell her yourself." Simeon watched Amos' Adam's apple bob as he swallowed hard.

"Of course," Amos said with a strained smile. "That would probably be best." ® CHAFER THIRTEEN This is worse than the captains' meeting, Simeon thought. It was absolutely amazing that so little rumor had leaked out. In that alone was an indication that they might be able to bring the whole thing off. SSS-900-C personnel had an uncanny instinct for keeping their mouths shut when silence was more than golden. Not so at this meeting, where everyone was sounding off barring Channa and Amos and no one was listening to a word being said.

The meeting was being held in the largest auditorium on the station. Which, thank Ghu, Simeon thought with relief, is not nearly large enough to hold all of the station's population. The sensible had stayed in their quarters watching the whole spectacle on holo. The skeleton crew now running the station would have their own briefing later. Just as well I didn't bother to activate sound from the private quarters' screens, he thought wearily. He was getting a good enough cross section of opinion right here, for the thing. Icon always turn the audio off... No, that's useless.

He contacted Channa on the implants in her mastoid. "This was a mistake. We should have briefed their counsel-reps, who would have briefed their aides, and so on. This could build panic to critical mass." For some reason the shouting in the auditorium rose to a higher pitch. "Or simply get so loud the noise shakes the station to pieces and saves the damn pirates the trouble."

"Hindsight," she said softly, "is always so dear. Actually, they look more angry than frightened to me. I've gotten more used to the smell of fear than I like, but the ambience here has a different reek. Of course, I can't hear what they're saying, they're all yelling so loud."

Simeon picked out phrases from the uproar with directional sensors: "... those goddamned assholes in that colony ship..." "... yeah, how many ways are they going to try to get us killed..." "... where's the damned Navy? That's what I want to know. They cripple us with taxes and..." "... this is crazy. They don't even know this is what's gonna happen? Meanwhile, I'm sittin* here losin' money... what do they expect us to do?"

"WHAT DO WE EXPECT YOU TO DO?" Simeon asked in a tone that overrode the babble. He added in a stew of subsonics intended to stun and intimidate. The noise dropped off abruptly, pleasing him.

"For starters, shut up and listen!" he suggested in a reasonable tone. "We expect you to take the emergency seriously, to listen to instructions and to carry them out" He paused for a moment to let that sink in. "This meeting will give you what you need to know on how to handle yourselves during the anticipated emergency. Remember, what you don't know, you can't reveal. From this point on, I remind you that rumor helps the enemy, not you or me, and not this station.

"If you hear something you think is a rumor, report it to your section leader, who's the same person who leads your ordinary emergency evacuation team. If it's true and it concerns your safety, he'll know about it. If he hasn't heard it, he can check with me and I'll confirm or deny it. I will tell you the truth. Do not spread rumors. Remember that We fully expect shortly to be occupied by an enemy force which has a very bad reputation for space piracy."

Echel Mckie, station newscaster, waved both arms for attention. Simeon acknowledged him.

"Pirates?" he asked. "Look, is this another one of your damned games, Simeon?"

"Absolutely not. This is as real as death. They'll be here in less than three-days. We've notified Central and the Navy, who assure us that a rescue mission is already under way. But it woiA be here before the pirates are likely to arrive. Therefore this station and its personnel must initiate such delaying tactics as possible. To stay aliver That silenced the last bit of muttering.

"Why weren't we told this earlier? Every ship has left we're stuck here!" Mckie's face was a study in outrage.

Channa moved forward to the front of the dais. "You weren't told because we used the available space to evacuate children and the sick," she said crisply. "Any objections to that, Mr. Mdde?"

"As I said," Simeon went on, "we are not only expecting to be occupied, we are hoping we will be." He paused again to see that they had absorbed that distinction. He was proud of his people! They got it in one! Shocked pale faces now accepted what he did not, after all, have to spell out.

"Listen up now. These are your station manager's orders. Don't offer direct resistance. Cooperate whenever necessary but don't volunteer anything. We expect that most of the enemy won't speak Standard, so misunderstand when you can. Make your answers as brief as possible, when you can't be silent. If you don't know, say so, but do not tell them who does know. Stay in your quarters as much as possible. Keep your emergency suits ready to use. Listen to information passed to you by your group leaders rather than anything you may hear over the vid. Remember, we're on your side. They won't be.

"Finally," he said, "this is Simeon-Amos." Amos stood up and bowed politely. "This is the only Simeon on the station. He is co-manager with Channa Hap, the term Simeon means co-manager. We have a longstanding tradition of having the male station managers carrying that name. It's in honor of one of the first station managers. There is no brain or brawn on this station, there never has been. Shellpersoas are only used on ships."

He paused to gauge their reaction, studying their grim faces. "If they don't know about me, I'll be able to continue running the station unimpaired literally behind the scenes. If they disconnect me from the station and they will, if they find out about me we're all in trouble. So, as of now and for the duration, I don't exist. This is Simeon-Amos, your station co-manager."

Amos smiled and nodded. The audience had that stillness of about-to-boil-over. Faces began to reflect expressions now; mild alarm, disbelief, skepticism.

"This... this backworldmttdfoot is supposed to manage us in an emergency?" somebody said, with all the hauteur of the space-born. Amos' head went back, and he stared down his classical Grecian nose with ten generations of aristocrats behind his eyes.

"To pretend to run things," Simeon said. "Furthermore, he volunteered to front for me! Not a role you'd get many to take under the circumstances," he added, and got a few snorts of agreement "So, before anyone frets over Simeon-Amos' leadership qualifications, I'd like to replay the man in action. The tape's authentic. I've checked it." Nobody could do that better than a brain.

What Simeon screened for them then were shots that he had accessed from Guiyon's files. It began when

a wall flashed with intolerable brightness, then diminished to show troops in black combat armor trotting down a burning street of brick-and-timber buildings. The sensor was pitched low, looking up from a half-basement window or a hole in the ground. Across the way, a human figure hung out of a window, long black braids trailing in a pool of blood on the sidewalk. A child's body lay there too: its crushed skull suggesting it had been thrown against the wall. The screen was abruptly blank. Then lit up again with a dimmer scene.

Amos' recorded *olq* cut through the blurr-roar of flames. "Now" he said.

The picture shook "as the ground heaved, and the burning walls cascaded across the street, drowning the black figures in a tide of brick and flaming timbers and glass. Other figures darted forward, Bethelites to judge by their rough, improvised uniforms. When the first powersuits began to claw their way out of the rubble, the defenders were ready. Amos was unmistakably leading them, an industrial jetcutter in his hands. He plunged it down on the massive sloped helmet that jerked itself free of the ruins, and helm and head exploded in steam.

The screen jerked, a different scene coming into abrupt focus: a manor-house among formal gardens, only a few scorch-marks on its walls. Invader infantry stood at their ease; the picture had the slightly glassy look of a flatpic extrapolated by a long-distance camera. Armored fighting vehicles rested in leagues on the lawns, their cannon pointing outward in a herringbone pattern, lighter weapons on their upper decks tracking restlessly across the sky. An aircraft slowed overhead. Bulky armored shapes disembarked, one in a suit marked with complex blazons in a script of angles and sharp curves.

The viewpoint zoomed in, as a group of young women in long robes were pushed out of the front door of the manor, many carrying bundles. They knelt under the alien guns; one opened the chest she carried, filled with miniature crystal vials. She smiled, gesturing to the bottles, opening one and smelling, extending it to the warrior in the decorated suit. From her looks she was about sixteen Standard years and very beautiful, with the classic features similar to Amos'. The pirate raised both gauntlets to his helmet, lifted it free and tucked it under one arm, bending to sniff. The exposed face was scored with age, roughened skin pockmarked by radiation damage, blossoming growths, thinning blond hair startling against dark complexion. It smiled..."

Leered, Simeon thought, reviewing the scene, I've heard the word, but never really seen the corresponding expression till now.

The view of the pirate's face"was brief. Even as he bent, a red dot appeared between his brows. Less than a second later, his head exploded into mist.

The body stayed erect in the armored suit, blood pumping in a high arc from the stump of the neck. The girl with the perfume box stood, smiling truly this time as the blood bathed her. Until one of the other warriors stepped forward and, gripping her head in a powered gauntlet, squeezed. Her head burst in a spray of pink bone and gray matter. The other girls joined hands and were singing when the plasma gun scythed them into ash and steam.

Someone in the hall was retching; several sobbed.

"For the death of that Kolnar, I claim only the marksmanship," Amos said, his archaic accent adding gravity to his clear tone. "The bravery was my sister's. Sahrah led the maiden volunteers. I did not know what she had planned. I was trying to reach the manor before the enemy could. We think... we think that dead dog was fourth or fifth in rank among the pirates."

All heads turned to him; his was slightly bowed. "Such was Bethel, when the Kolnari came to us," he said. "They have the souls of " he spoke a nonstandard word.

"Rats," Simeon said. "rats that walk like men. They kill for killing's sake, they rape and tenure and steal, and what they cannot steal, diey foul out of depravity."

Another holo came up. "Keriss," Amos said. There was total silence now. A city by a bay, astride a river, lower-built than the worlds influenced by Central's architectural styles, Brifriht-colored buildings amid broad gardens. A scattering of taller buildings at its center, and one that led the eye up and up in a leap of towers and domes.

"The Temple," Amos said. "This was a remote pickup, a news-sendeer shot, just before the end."

White light flashed. The city dissolved as the bulging donut shape of the shockwave billowed out. The slow scene gave it a terrible grace; trees exploding into flame under the heat-flash and scattering as less than splinters an instant later, the water of the bay beginning to flow and swell into a wave taller than the hills.

"So died Keriss," Amos whispered.

"I'm not calling wolf this time," Simeon said, matching that same tone. "If anyone doubts, speak now."

He let the ensuing silence echo. "Does anyone think they're better equipped to play me than Simeon-Amos is?" No one gainsaid him. "This emergency is all too real. Until help arrives, we're going to have to rely on each other. I believe we can do that," he said confidently. "If you weren't pretty brave and independent sorts of individuals, you wouldn't be on a station anyway. You'd be on a planet somewhere trying to figure out how to get the bugs off your vegetables."

This got more of a chuckle than it deserved, he thought, but they needed the release from tension.

Channa rose, ubiquitous notescreeen in hand.

"There will be a meeting for council members at two," she announced, "and there will be a meeting of evacuation group leaders at four. Subsequent to those meetings, evacuation groups themselves will meet at times appointed by the group leaders. We aren't going to take questions because we're now on a need- toknow basis. We thank you for your cooperation. Ladies and gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned."

"Right, listen up, you crap-headed rock hounds," Gus bellowed.

The noise level in the docking hamber fell fairly quickly. Stands to reason, he thought. *These were working spacers, not data-pushers and entertainers. About fifty of them glared up at him as if he'd thought up this little crisis himself. The shages of the tugs and miners in the interior dock bulked at their backs, huge and shadowy with all but one of the overheads turned off. That cast a puddle of light over the assembled pilots and crew. He had staged the meeting this way at Simeon's suggestion, to make them feel like a group.

"You know what's coming down," he said, making his voice intense without making it loud. "All our shipping with interstellar capacity has been moved out"

"Not all," one of the miners said, running a hand over her luridly tattooed head.

"Can it, Shabla. You can do maybe ten lights, scouting for minerals. That won't get you to the next system."

She shrugged, grinning at those ranged about her.

"What we've got left is the tugs," said Gus, "and some mining scouts. It isn't much, against four frigate-class warships."

"It's fardling nothing," another said. "Unless you want us to ram 'em?" The man didn't think much of that idea even as he voiced it. Ramming was not completely out of the question; if you cut something heading toward you at high speeds into smaller pieces, you were just multiplying your troubles. You had to blast it into gas, or deflect it, before you were safe. They all understood the principle, and the limitations.

"Ramming's not on," Gus said, shaking his head even as he gave them a sly grin. "Not when we lose to any beam-weapon they care to turn on us. But," and he waited until a schematic of a standard tug came up on the screen behind him, "what has a tug got? A normal-space engine, a great big power plant, and a fardlin' humongous grapnel field. Mining scout's about the same, only with a sampling laser. So there isn't much sense in us getting into slugging matches with warships." He caught the universal sigh of relief that wafted about the bay. "But " and he held up one gnarled finger " there are things we can do."

Then he outlined the changes needed on the screen behind him. Gratified and slightly vulpine grins replaced frowns even when he explained the strategy to be effected by such alterations.

"Hey, wait," Shabla said. "I got a husband two, actually on this tin can. You want me to leave 'em here while the place is taken over?"

"Exactly," Gus said, giving her stare for stare. "What the crap could you do for 'em here? Get your head kicked in? Start a firefight in a corridor and blow the pressure hull? Out there, we've got a chance to do something worthwhile for all our skins. We've all got someone here, or nearly all of us. This is what we can do for 'em. Who's with me?"

The cheer was more nearly a howl.

He's really much more attractive when he isn't trying to be, Channa thought dismally. And when he's really working. Which he was, now.

"And it's been so long," she murmured to herself.

Amos turned to look at her, his brow furrowed in concern. "Something troubles you, Channa?" He grinned. "Besides, that is, our possibly imminent demise?"

She gave him a jaundiced smile. He would mention that, she thought, just when I was getting involved enough not to think about it. Well, since we might all die, why not take the plunge?

"This is beginning to get to me. I feel so... so alone."

His eyes kindled, and a lovely feathery warmth tickled her lower belly. Her smile spread to a grin, and he rose from his place and came to sit beside her, their thighs lightly touching. He took her hand in both of his.

Ooooo, she thought. If this one were on the holos, there wouldn't be a dry seat in the house.

"You're not alone! I'm here," he said, his voice rich with sympathy.

An hour later, things had progressed to the point where they had drifted into Channa's quarters arm in arm. And damn Simeon's opinion, Channa thought. I'm going to enjoy myself.

They were both three-quarters undressed and a lot warmer when Simeon imitated the sound of a knock on the door and shouted from the lounge.

"Simeon-Amos, Rachel's here." The voice was flatly neutral, but Channa savagely thought she could detect a suppressed giggle.

"What!" Amos shrieked softly as they both sat bolt upright "Here?" Channa demanded. "What do you mean, here?"

"She's in the corridor outside," Simeon said cheerfully. "Should I let her in?"

"Just a moment," Amos said desperately, leaping from the bed and frantically grabbing up clothes.

"That's mine," Channa said, rescuing her shirt from the pile.

Amos bolted from the room, opened the door to his quarters, flung his clothes in and ran to the door. Realizing he was in his underpants, he ran back to his room, grabbed his robe, and struggled to pull it over his head as he staggered back to the lounge. The arms seemed to knot and tangle so deliberately, he wondered if the robe had turned animate and was resisting. Amos made desperate, despairing little sounds.

Channa rolled her eye and headed for the bathroom. "Cold water? Pulsed, shower," she told the fixtures. As if I need one with Rachel at the door, she thought Amos took a deep breath, finally pulling the robe down over his head.

"Why am I agitated?" he asked himself. "I do not have to account for my actions. There is no one in authority over me." On the other hand, Rachel could make an unfortunate scene. At least there would be no outraged father, brother, uncle, or cousin likely to break in with a hunting rifle and blow off the offending equipment. He opened the door. He hopped backward just in time to avoid a blow from Rachel's fist, aimed at the lounge doors. "Rachel!" he snapped.

She stood glaring at him. She was breathing fast, her nostrils flaring, a sheen of sweat across the pale olive of her skin.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

He looked at her in astonishment "You know perfectly well what I am doing here," he said. He had himself sufficiently under control now to speak with his usual gentle authority, and he could see her purpose falter. "I am living in the manager's quarters because I am to be a co-manager of the station. I'm studying very hard and constantly to be worthy of this honor. I have told you this. I told everyone." He let his eyes widen slightly in unaffected innocence.

She narrowed her eyes. "It is true, Amos, that you told everyone. But, you did not tell me."

"All right," he said soothingly, "all right, come in."

He placed his hands delicately on her shoulders and steered her to the couch. "Sit!"

She looked first at him, then at the couch as though she suspected some trap before she cautiously folded herself down to the cushioned surface. Looking up at him, she patted the place beside her.

"You sit down, too," she insisted.

"You will have some refreshment?"

"No. I will have an explanation."

He drew over a straight-backed chair, placed it in front of her and sat down. Her eyes widened and she sat up straighter, looking, if possible, even more affronted than she had been.

"I am sorry," he said, "if I have offended you, but I have been very busy." Unspoken was the inference that she should be also, helping to brief the Bethelites and settle them into their temporary roles. "I told Joseph about our plans, and I assumed that he would explain everything to you."

"Oh!" she said sarcastically, "You told Joseph. Well, then of course there was no need to enlighten me! He could tell me whatever he pleased of your plans and that would have been sufficient. Then I could go to sleep this night, knowing that you had moved in with that blackhearted slut-bitch, with an untroubled heart."

"Rachel bint Damscur he said sharply. "You forget yourself!"

She raised both fists above her head and shouted, "It is not I who disport with the daughters of the heathen, an act forbidden by every scripture! Nor is it Joseph's place to tell me of what we do. It is yours, yours alone! Are we not to be betrothed?"

He stared at her in shock. "No," he said in blank astonishment "Whatever gave you that idea?"

She blinked. "No?"

"No," he repeated, shaking his head in the negative.

All of the color drained from her face and he could see the white of her eyes all around the iris. She breathed in and out through her nose with a sound like tearing silk. She trembled. She tried to speak and only a garbled sound came out, then she said in a grating voice, "She has seducedou."

"No," he said and shook his head again, waving both his hands in the same negative gesture, but his eyes slid away from hers.

"Always," she said harshly, "from the time we first met, I knew that you were mine. Mine!"

"No," he said. "You are meant for Joseph, who has always loved you. He will make you happy, and he wants you." He forced his voice to gentleness. She has become unbalanced, he thought desperately. Of all the times for such a thing to happen! He had thought her only a little more given to hysteria than most of her sex, but something had changed her; perhaps the trauma of the attack, perhaps the massive drug dosages they had been forced to use on the trip.

Her eyes widened still more, until the whites showed all around the iris. He had heard of such things, but never seen them, except once when an ancient hermit had gone into a trance and prophesied. / should have paid more attention to my first-aid training, he thought ruefully. Perhaps then he would know how to deal with her instability. Whatever her faults, she had sacrificed much to follow him. She had been invaluable in the chaotic scramble of the last days on Bethel. My dear friend, I have failed you.

"He wants me," she said in the same low growl "And you do not?" Her mouth twisted, and she bit her lip as she turned her head from side to side and nodded several times. Abruptly she rose and was out the door before he could rise from his chair.

He grabbed his hair in both of his hands and pulled. "Arrughh! Simeon," he asked, "what have I done?"

"Pissed off Rachel, I'd say."

Amos sighed, then groaned. "No," he said despairingly, "I have done worse than that I allowed myself to be talked out of doing what I knew was right. I knew in my heart that she should be-evacuated, but Joseph asked me to let her stay. Perhaps I gave you the wrong answer today, my friend. Perhaps I cannot play this role if I am so easily convince*} to go against my better judgement"

"You thought Joseph could keep her in fine?" "Yes. I hoped that, because he would be nearby and considerate of her, she would turn more to him and less toward me."

"Not a bad reasoning," Simeon replied truthfully. "Sending her away might break whatever hold she has on reality."

Amos looked unassured and more miserable than ever. He might be a good-looking man, but he sure had cornered the supply of gloomy looks.

"Today, you have said quite correctly that you are older than I, and also that in many ways you are wiser. Today I should have been the wiser." He shook his head sorrowfully and shuffled into his room like an old man.

Well, Simeon thought, what an interesting evening! Looks like the forecast for true love is not smooth. Such marvelous material for teasing Channa. So tempting to see how she'd react. No! He had to keep his mind on more important things. Like that Rachel. The girl had shot out of that interview with Amos as if she'd lost her rag. Better keep an eye on her, he told himself. And so should Doctor Chaundra, if he's got the time. Most acute mental illness was chemical, or could be adjusted with the judicious use of neutralizing chemicals.

With a weary wwoof, Doctor Chaundra sat at his desk and, setting his coffee cup in the most spill-proof area available in the surface clutter, he keyed up his mail. It had been two days since he'd had an opportunity to look at it. Twenty-five attempted suicides, four of them among the refugee Bethelites who chose gruesomely old-fashioned methods. One had actually hanged herself! Good in one respect: easier to revive, although there might be some memory loss from oxygen deprivation, and-he'd have to use a nerve-shunt. The sight of that bloated, blue-tinged face with the protruding tongue lingered unpleasantly.

He slipped himself a calmer; just one, although the gods alone knew what it would do with all the caffeine he'd been absorbing. He had to get on with this accursed viral project even if he was a doctor, not a gene-sculptor! It disturbed him to deliberately make a virus more harmful: too much like making medicine into a weapon. Chaundra had grown up on a planet where personal violence was fairly common, and

done his internship in a trauma ward. His own family came from a pacifist tradition, and the internship had confirmed him in it. At least Seld is out of this, he thought with relief. The first message was yet another requisition for calmers. He signed it out; the organosynth machines were going to be running overtime. Would pirates take notice of supernatural calm? The doctor smiled ruefully at that and told the machine to show him the next message. It was flagged personal, which was odd. He began to read.

His heart stumbled; he could feel the pain in his chest quite distinctly, but it seemed distant and unimportant. Vision grayed down to a tunnel; it was long minutes before he could speak. At last he managed to croak "Simeon? Simeon!"

"What is it, Chaundra?"

I don't like the way he looks. The sound of the doctor's voice had been sufficiently worrisome for Simeon to activate visuals. The doctor was visibly tired but, considering the work load he was pushing, fatigue would be normal. Nor unusual for Chaundra who tended to push himself. If Simeon had been capable of experiencing fatigue, he would be knackered right now. The slightly built dark man was gray-faced with sweat beading his forehead. Simeon ran a diagnostic program; not good. Extreme stress, to the point of endangering the man's health. Chaundra was not young anymore, and had endured some very hostile environments in his career. Not to mention the current problem.

"This message..." and Chaundra managed to point to his screen.

Dear Dad Simeon read.

"Why on earth didn't this trip my watchman programs I'll have Joattsfade for this, by God!" I couldn't go, Fmsorry. Ihopeyou can understand and forgiveme, but artythmg were to happen to you and I wasn't there, Td never forgive myself. I have to be here, because Mom can't be. Iloveyou.

Seld.

"Oh!" Simeon paused in full comprehension of Chaundra's state of mind. "But didn't you put him on...."

"No," Chaundra said, in a voice drained of affect. "He was in line, almost to the lock. Then I received a bleep message the most urgent of codes. Seld said I must answer. He understood that. We embraced, said good-bye and I left him there."

Chaundra flopped one hand over weakly, unable for more effort than that. "He was practically on the ship. How the hell did this happen?"

"I'm sorry. I've too good an idea!" Simeon told him. "I'll try to find out where that wicked young rascal is right now." He didn't mean Seld, but did not qualify his term. After a moment's pause he came up blank. "I'm not finding him, so he's well hidden wherever he is. That should be some consolation, Chaundra," he said in a firmly reassuring tone. "If I can't find him, neither can our expected visitors. I'll keep looking. Count on me for that! I'm Looking with every eye I own, Simeon said grimly. How could the well-mannered, well-brought up Seld have fallen for one of Joat's schemes? And what part would the kid play in it? And Fm to blame for this situation and Chaundra's heartache, Joat had been so eager to learn, and he'd seen no reason to restrict her terminal's access to the schematics. She had been bad enough before this emergency sent her to cover; now, he didn't know what she was capable of doing.

Fve an idiot-savant running feral in my station, he thought bitterly. Ten years' precocity in advanced engineering technics and the morals of a five-year-old. The selfishness of small children can be charming,

when they don't have the power to do much harm. In a nearadult, and a brilliant near-adult at that, the possibilities went out of bounds, "Well, Seld is here somewhere!" Chaundra said, recovering himself enough to shout and to be livid with rage. "The clock says this message was entered ten hours after his ship left!"

"I know, I see it Don't worry, Chaundra. We'll find him."

Hi know we'll find him. What worries me is that he should hide! That he is no longer as safe as I thought he would be by now. Do you understand? My son could die. My heart is pounding with the anxiety."

Simeon ran another quick scan of the station, this time including apartments left empty by the evacuation.

"Still searching. There are so many places he could hide and even I couldn't find him," he said by way of reassuring Chaundra. "He's a big strong kid who can handle himself" As well as any of us, he thought The odds for anyone on the station were not good, but there was no point in reminding Chaundra of that now.

"No," the doctor said between clenched teeth, "he isn't a "big strong kid,' and he can't handle himself. He's never going to be strong. Thejague that took his mother left him with nerve damage."

"Nerve damage?" Simeorjsaid incredulously. Regeneration of nerve tissue was an old technology, and well understood. Without it, shellpeople would be impossible, for the same technique knitted their nervous systems into the machinery that supported them and that they commanded.

Chaundra shook his head. "I have done what I could to bypass the damage, but if he puts too much strain where the repair exists..." His voice trailed off, and when he raised his face to Simeon's visual node, he had turned into an old man.

"It was a little clinic, you understand. Mary, she was the meditech, I the doctor. A new continent on a new colony world. Much to do, we were on research grants. Then people began to die. There was nothing I could do... They imposed quarantine quarantine, in this day and age! When I found what had happened, already it was too late for Mary. The virus... was a hybrid. A native virus-analogue combined with a mutant Terran encephalitis strain. The native virus wrapped around the Terran, you understand. So the immune system could not recognize it and had no defense. The Terran element enabled it to parasitize ourDNA.

"Seld was damaged, on the point of death. It took three years of therapy for him to be able to walk and talk and move as well as he does."

Chaundra turned, picking things up from his desk and putting them down.

"But he will never be strong. If they seize him, hell be as helpless as someone half his age. There could be convulsions: stress accelerates the damage. It is cumulative. Why do you think I took this position? He must be near a first-rate facility at all times. He must not suffer extreme stress or the effects could snowball As it is, he will probably r̄ t live much past adulthood."

Chaundra slumpefl in* his chair, anger, even anxiety draining out of him as he buried his head in his hands.

"Then we'll make sure they don't hurt him," Simeon said grimly." First, let's find him. He's probably withjoat"

"Seld's mentioned her." Chaundra's voice was muffled "He has many-friends, but she sounded... different"

"She is. Oh, she's different, all right. And she wouldn't leave, either. So in a way, you and I are in the same boat."

Chaundra rubbed his mouth and chin. Whiskers rasped; unusual, since he was normally a fastidious man. "Yes," he said and laughed sardonically, "and the boat is about to leak."

"Not necessarily." Simeon said firmly enough to make himself believe it "Seld has something else going for him."

"He has?"

"Yes. Seld has Joat, and she's got such a strong survival instinct that even if the rest of the station blew, she'd find a way to stay alive... and keep Seld alive, too. He's actually far safer with her than anywhere else he could be. So I wouldn't worry about his infirmities, or stress. Though I hate like hell to admit it, I can't think of anyone better qualified to mind him than Joat!"

"Seld," Simeon called. "Seld Chaundra, come out where I can see you."

Joat popped into view rubbing her eyes, "What are you yeUin' about, Simeon?" she asked, yawning.

"Send him out, Joat This is the only place he can possibly be."

Joat crossed her arms and looked sleepily defiant. "Your father is worried, Seld," Simon went on. "He sent you away so that you'd be safe. So you know he's not really going to kill you for staying, even though you deserve it."

Seld appeared beside Joat, who*shoved him in the shoulder. "Tbldja to stay outta sight)"

He hung his head and said, "I know. But I can't let you take my rap. Mom wouldn't like that in me. At least that's what my dad says she'd say." He shrugged and gave her a feeble grin.

Joat rolled her eyes. "Do what'choo want," she said in a scathing tone, and disappeared.

"Actually," Simeon told them both, "I don't see any need to rough it just yet. Why not sleep comfortably while you can, eat what everyone else is enjoying, because we're certainly not going to leave it to the pirates to gobble up. I'd prefer that you hide out when the pirates arrive. Meanwhile, Seld, give your dad the benefit of your company: he needs it. Save your rations,Joat Eat with us. Food'sbetter. For now."

He picked up her disgusted sigh, and then she walked into view, arms still folded, expression still defiant. Simeon warmed to her all over again. I don't think I was ever that young, he thought, but, y'ftnow, she makes me tvish I could swagger. "Okay guys, let's go."

* CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Very large mass," Baila said, whispering. "Several score megatons, at least."

"You nee4 not lower your voice," Belazir said, amused and more so when several of the bridge crew jumped. "We are proceeding stealthed, but sound waves do not propagate in vacuum."

He turned to the schematic and long-range visual views. Impressive indeed, he thought. Far and away the largest free-floating construct he had ever seen. Twin globes, each at least a thousand meters in extent, linked by a broad tube. More tubes at the north and south axis, evidently for docking large ships, although none were there at the moment. Around the station was an incredible clutter of material: loose ore, giant flexible balloons of various substances, radiating networks, fabricators, Large but soft, he decided. Like a huge lump of wellcooked meat, steaming in its own juices and touched with garlic, waiting to be carved into bite-sized pieces. It was a target so rich that he had trouble convincing himself of its reality. Mentally he accepted it, while his emotions could only kick in every minute or so, as jolts of near-orgasmic pleasure. He stretched like a cat, acutely conscious of the anticipatory tension beneath the quiet ordered activity of the bridge. Everyone in the flotilla would come out of this a hero. He couldn't believe this plum could be snatched away not from the Kolnari and especially not when he commanded the Kolnari flotilla! And he, Belazir t'Marid Kolaren, would be more than a hero. He would be placed firmly in the logical line of succession to Chalku t'Marid.

"A pity it is so big," he mused. "A shame to have to waste any of the possible plunder." He sighed for, of course, they would have to destrqg what they could not take.

The flotilla were warships by sfjetialty, not cargo carriers. Even if they had time enough to bring in the heavy haulers from the Clan fleet, only the merest tithe of the goods to be found in this size station could be transported. On the othgrhand, the ecstasy of sheer destruction had its own euphoria the knowledge that so much data and effort could be casually blown to dust.

"A message torpedo to the fleet?" Serig asked.

"You echo my thoughts, Serig," Belazir said. "Ready for instant transmission once we close our fist on our prey."

The message sent back with the captured merchantman would have the Clan fleet on alert. But the transports could not yet have arrived at Bethel, much less landed there. Rigged for deep-space running, sufficient ships could be diverted to assist him without hindering the effort at Bethel. Say, ten days' transit from the Saffron system, to be conservative; two or three days loading, depending on how many Father Chalku decided to send. Then set demolition charges, nice large ones to leave nothing larger than gravel. There might well be prisoners worth taking for skilled labor. The huge rectangular frame of a shipyard was now visible on one side of the station, and that meant that there would be rare and valuable slaves to sell.

With an effort, he restrained himself from rubbing his hands together. "Oh, what a surprise they have in store," he said.

"Indeed," Serig said. His eyes and teeth shone in the dim blue lights of the bridge and his voice was husky, a man in the grip of lust Which, Belazir reflected, was exactly what it was. Metaphorically and literally.

"Keep your eagerness in chains, my friend," he said genially "It is a good slave but a poor master." He 'aimed to Baila. "Whattraffic inbound?"

"None, Great Lorl." * "None?" Belazir raised a brow.

Curious, he thought, a space station built in an area nearly devoid of traffic. Is it old and due to be abandoned? Or is it new and as yet rarely used ? A small chill diluted the perfection of his pleasure.

There were alternatives here; he might be the hero who brought unimaginable wealth, or the immortal villain who revealed the existence of the Clan to an enemy more powerful than they.

He shook his head with a small, tssk of disgust. Impossible. The merchantman had been rich with treasure and it had just left the station. "Indications?"

"Great Lord, the background radiation is consistent with large-scale departures over the past five days." Baila paused, hesitant. "Lord, it is difficult to be certain, with the density of the interstellar medium here. Subspace distortion damps out very quickly..."

The small chill became fingers of ice stroking the base of his spine. His testicles drew up in reflex.

"I want information, not excuses!" he said in a harsh voice. "Ready the seeker missiles." If the accursed Bethelite cowards had warned the station prompting the normal traffic to flee they would destroy it and run immediately. He was nearly certain he had crippled the prey's communications apparatus in the pursuit, but "nearly" grilled no meat. But, if it had escaped, where was it? Or had the station done his work for him? A rich station would have cause to be wary of unexpected visitors. "Continue stealthed approach."

That meant running with the powerplants down, off accumulator energy, on a ballistic sublight approach.

Slow, they would take years to come near at this speed, but quite safe at a respectable distance. At any moment they could power up and close in swiftly at superluminal speeds. This was a modification of a tactic the Clan sometimes used against merchantmen on the outskirts of a solar system. And they were close enough that lightspeed was not much of a problem for detection purposes. Briefly, he considered running back on FTL for a few parsecs, to see if he could pick up traces of in or outbound traffic over the past week. Then he shook his head, rejecting that plan. Signal degraded too much over distance, and his own trail would advertise his presence. While the station retained subspace communicator capacity, it presented the Clan with a deadly risk.

Taking time to consider a problem from all angles was no excuse for inaction. Strike the hardest blow you could, then see if another was needed; that was the Kolnari way.

"See if you can pick anything up from their perimeter relay beacons," he said. In dust this thick even local realspace beacons needed amplification. "Message, Great Lord," said Baila. "I would hear it" Immediately a woman's crisp voice filled the control center, "Warning all ships, warning all ships, SSS-90Q C is under Class Two quarantine: I repeat, Class Two quarantine. The following species are advised not to make port at these facilities under any circumstances." A list of alien species followed, most of them unknown to t'Marid.

"Human visitors are restricted to the dock facilities and the entertainment areas immediately adjacent to them. You are advised to continue on to your next port of call. Warning..."

The message began to repeat and Baila cut it off. "Further scan, lord: there are two debris fields. Both of them between us and the station. The one nearest the station is largely of natural ferrous compounds, probability ninety-seven percent-plus semi-processed asteroidal material. The other, nearest the Bride, is of metal and ship-hull compounds, finely divided. Computer assessment S that the mass represented by the metal debris is equivalent to the mass represented by the prey ship."

She touched several controls, and the multiple screens displayed a scene of tumbling scraps of halfmelted metal, no single piece larger than a meter wide or long. Most were a fog of metallic particles.

His eyes narrowed. The quarantine could explain the absence of shipping. Baila's analysis suggested that, either the prey ship, which he knew had been ancient, had disintegrated under the stress of redlining or the station had destroyed it. The former was more likely since no weaponry had been detected on the station. No doubt the truth of the end to the Bethelite refugee ship would be found in the station's records.

"Your appraisal?" Belazir asked his weapons officer.

"Great Lord," the man said, collating a probability run, "the bulk of the fragments are definitely the result of ultra-high temperature breakdown. The profile is completely compatible with sudden energy discharge from the main internal drive coil of a very large ship. Some of the other debris " he called up relevant views " show blast fragmentation. That could either have been the result of direct hits with chemical-energy warheads, or secondary propagation effects when the engine blew. The shockwave through the hull..."

"I'm aware of the phenomenon," Belazir said dryly. The weapons officer shrank back. Belazir t'Marid had fought his first space engagement before the younger noble was born. "Continue scan and analysis. Inform me of any anomalies."

They blew up," Serig said.

"Just as they arrived? How convenient," Belazir said. He gnawed a thumb. "Possibly too convenient?"

"Possibly. However, we were expecting their engines to foil catastrophically at any moment They were sublimating bits of their cooling vanes for the last thirty light-years." * "True. It is still coincidence." " j̄
"Once is coincidence," Serig said in ritual tone, "twice is happenstance " " and the third time is enemy action, yes," Belazir finished irritably. "But for the station to be plagueridden at the same time?*"

"The scumvermin races are weak of body, lord," he noted.

Belazir signed confirmation. The seed of Rolnar was strong. It had to be, to have survived so long on a planet not suitable for human beings, and further devastated by so many centuries of reckless development and continual war with every nuclear, chemical and biological weapon ingenuity could produce. When the Clan fled a losing struggle, they had kept the tradition of culling any child who showed signs of vulnerability to infection. In fact, it was a stroke of fortune to have the enemy immobilized by a menace that was no menace to the Kolnari.

"Hold position. Call in the consorts." "Yes, Great Lord."

Belazir glanced at his communications officer. Her face was bright with excitement, too. He smiled. She was young; this was her first term of duty. He remembered well that sharp, eager feeling. He grinned. Ah, but he was feeling now, at the ripe age of thirty, that his life was half over.

"All captains confirming receipt of your orders, Great Lord. Moving into position."

"Excellent," he said, glancing back at the schematic Km have abvady given a cry of distress, oh rich and beauteous , he thought vindictively. The entire universe was in conspiracy against the Clan against all of Kolnar and its children. Soon you mill scream.

Channa turned at her desk.

"Hi Joat, welcome ® " ® rome. I A relieved, shy smile greeted her. "Um... gonna take a shower."

"You can use it," Channa said, sniffing. "When you're through, I want to introduce you to someone."

"Ah," Simeon said lighdy. "We're a family again."

"Shut up, you hunk of tin," Channa said goodnatureedly, throwing a wad of scrunched-up tissue in the general direction of the pillar. "How does this look?"

She punched a key to feed in the distribution of supply caches.

"Hmmm. Not bad. Okay, how about we seal off the following passageways?" A schematic of several decks sprang up." If you didn't know about modern fabrication methods, that would look right for structural members."

"Good, good what does that give us?"

"About a thousand people we can stick away in corners the V list" Those were the ones that they hadn't had space available to evacuate.

"Nobody essential, I'm afraid," Channa said. They had agreed that they had to let essential staff take the risks, as their absence would elicit questions.

"No, but it'll cut down the number of potential victims quite nicely. Also, it'll give us a chance to scatter around some stuff that'll come in useful later. Ah, Simeon-Amos."

The Bethelite leader's eyes were red-rimmed, but his smile brought a warm lurch to Channa's diaphragm. "I think I have mastered the basic administrative structure," he said. "It is not too strange."

Channa raised a brow. A 900-series station isn't too strange to a backworlder? she thought. j The thought must have been obvious, but Amos only spread his hands and tossed his head, setting aswirl the coal-black curls of his shoulder-length mane. The blue eyes twinkled beneath the broad dear brow.

Oooooo, Channa thought, and fought to bring her attention back to his words.

"In any large organization* xhere will be certain constants," he said. "The central authority; officers in charge of various departments; a structure for meetings to coordinate activities; procedures for routine decisionmaking, and so forth. Tips is not too dissimilar to my family's holdings on Bethel. We, too, were essentially coordinators of the activities of many independent entrepreneurs. There are no ranchers or farmers here, of course, but both communities have mining, manufacturing, education, cultural facilities..."

"Culture?" Joat ducked back into the lobby, toweling her wet hair. For a wonder, she had on something more formal than the shapeless, patchwork-colorful overalls that were current fashion among SSS-900-C's youth. "Like holos and virtie games and stuff?"

"Ahhh..." Amos hesitated. He had been thinking more of choral song and traditional dancing. "The general principle is the same."

The servos had been setting out the evening meal. Simeon had programmed them to meet the basic dietary superstitions of the Bethelite religion, although Amos had turned out to be flexible. Channa

shuddered mentally at some of the things she'd screened in that Bethel text. How in God's name, for example, were they supposed to check that none of the materials had ever been touched by a menstruating woman?

They sat down, Amos murmured a prayer, and for another wonder Joat waited a second before grabbing the nearest bowl. She had turned out to be a monumentally unfussy eater, but in sheer capacity she belied the scrawny underdeveloped frame. Between or sometimes during mouthfuls, she grilled Amos about Bethel.

"Sounds dull," she said at last "I thought so, too," Amos said, pushing a bowl of steamed millet closer. She shoveled several helpings onto her plate and heaped them with sour cream and chives.

"Joat," Channa said gently. "That really doesn't go with pineapple slices, you know."

"Why not?" Joat asked, turning to her with a milk mustache on her upper lip. The girl licked it away with satisfaction as Channa searched for a reply, gave up, and turned her attention back to Amos.

"Hiding away all that stuff was smart of Channa," she said thoughtfully. "Always gotta have supplies in your bolt-hole unless you're fardlin* stupid."

"Sound strategy," Amos said seriously.

He certainly seems to be good with children, Channa thought, stirring her food around with her fork. Girls don't bother him. Not pre-pubescent ones, at least.

In her inner ear, Simeon began to croon an ancient song: 'Across a croooowded room...'

"Shut up," she subvocalized.

"This place has got more back-alleys than you'd believe," Joat was saying. "Not like a ship at all, really. You can get anywhere from anywhere and ain't nobody can stop you, if you know where you're goin'. Some of the places pinch grudly, but they're in-able if you're sveltsome."

"I would have thought it much like a ship of space," Amos replied courteously. Channa could see his lips move silently for an instant as he puzzled out Joat's slang. That was no wonder. Half of it was her own invention.

"A whole other order of magnitude," Simeon said. "No mass limits on a station the SSS-900-C wasn't expected to go anywhere. The outer shell was fixed, as well as some of the major facilities, but the rest was intended to allow organic growth up to a couple of hundred thousand people, max. We've found natural expansion is the best way to stabilize a real community, as opposed to a transient community, like a passenger vessel."

"That is good sense," Amos said meditatively. "On my family's estate, planning towns was similar. If you set down every detail, the place has no life. When Uncle Habib decides to put his tobacco store next to Aunti Scala's pastry shoppr Brother Falken's saddlery, and that brings an ice-cream parlor, it then follows that the town becomes a living and efficient entity."

"Why do you talk so funny?" Joat asked.

"Why doyou talk so funny?" Amos parried, and they both laughed. "Because Bethel was cut off for so

long. We did not even screen or broadcast data from other worlds, so our people's way of speech changed little, and those changes differed from those in the Central Worlds, which had dealings with many other worlds and cultures."

"Central Worlds?" Joat asked. "Oh, you're fardlin' 'cuse me way off there. This is the hikstik, frontier, you know."

"To you, not me." He paused. "I think, Joat, that someone besides yourself should know of these hidden ways of yours."

"You should see it," she said enthusiastically. "You wouldn't believe what's back there!"

"I would very much like to see it," he told her gravely. "But, I have not much time left for my studies." Her face fell. "Still," he said, "I think that it is important that trusted people, other than just you and Simeon, should know these back ways of yours. Would you be willing to show my friend, Joseph?"

"He's your head honcho, hey?"

"My brother and my right hand," Amos said seriously.

"Okay, if he's nanna grudly."

Amos gave up trying to interpret that remark and glanced over at Simeon's image in the screen.

"Grudly," the brain said in his most professorial. "An all purpose negative. In this context 'not too grudly' straight-laced, conventional, boring, unimaginative." "No, no. To tell the truth and shame the devil, Joseph was, in fact, a Jockside desperado when I met him," Amos said. Joat lit up, her urchin smile taking a year or two off the extra time life had dealt her, so that she looked twelve. "Sure! I'll be glad to show Joseph around. Whenever you like."

"Thank you. And now I must return to my studies." He sighed theatrically and rose.

"I know how you feel," Joat said, shaking her head in resignation.

"He's made a conquest there," Channa subvocalized. "Wonder how he did it?"

"Joat is no longer a feral child," Simeon pointed out. "We broke the ground for him. Being glamorous doesn't hurt. And he listens to her. He's naturally interested in people, I think, under the ivyird socvHvUgious stuff they rammed down his throat."

"You're right," Channa said aloud, looking dreamily at the now closed door of Amos' quarters.

Well, Simeon-Amos, Simeon thought, you're a hit with both my girls. A petty observation, but couldn't he indulge in pettiness in the privacy of his own mind? "Course I'm right," Joat said. She was having more of the pineapple slices, fresh from the vats, lavishly dooped with ice cream. "You flipping the sheets with him yet?"

*Joat!" Channa said warningly, reaching over to flick her on the ear with thumb and forefinger.

"Watch it!" Joat said, rubbing the offended lobe. "I'll report you to Gorgan the Organ." She grinned unrepentantly. "I know all about it, y'know."

"You may have observed and I wouldn't put that past you for a nanosecond, but you don't understand what you've seen. You also have no manners." "Yeah, that's true," Joat said complacently, "but needn't act so smug about the lack," Simeon cut in. "Why not?" Joat asked. "Lots of ways to get stuff you can't do if you've got manners." "My God, Channa thought, looking up from her notepad.

All of them were looking terrible, but Doctor Chaundra looked old. Antt looked haunted as well. Channa was a little surprised. She would have thought him one of the ones who could handle the fear.

"Here it is," he said bitterly, holding up a small synthetic container.

Channa automatically glanced down at the box, a capsule dispenser, standard model, but looked more closely at him.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" she said anxiously. There were other medics on the station, but only one Chaundra. Personal factors aside, he was also the only specialist with experience in original viral research.

"Tired is all," he said. The non-Standard accent in his voice was stronger than usual, a trace of liquid singsong. He stood for a moment by her desk looking at the box he carried, then he placed it in front of her. "They're ready," he said, pointing to it.

Channa touched the dispenser slot and it dropped a gelatin capsule filled with clear liquid into her palm.

"The virus," she said.

"Yes," he murmured. "I, who am a healer, have created for you a weapon."

"A nonlethal weapon for self-defense" she said in gentle correction.

"Hopefully nonlethal. How can I be sure, with a genetically nonstandard target population? I cannot even be certain nobody on the station will die of it!"

"The probability," Simeon began in a firm tone.

"It's vanishingly small, yes, indeed," Chaundra said. Then he sighed. "There is no sense in complaining after the fact. We have made enough so every man and woman on the station gets five. I can't imagine anyone being unlucky enough to need more than that. What you do, is bite down on it. Don't swallow and breathe it all over the Kolnari nearest you. It is contagious even if swallowed, you understand, but more so with direct contact. If the pirate wishes to kiss you, by all means let them."

"Ugh!" Channa said, making a face.

"I've alerted the group leaders to call in at the clinic to collect dispensers for distribution to their people," Simeon said.

"Remind them, will you," Chaundra said, "that anyone who uses a capsule should report as soon as possible to the clinic for the protective shot. They'll get a light dose then, but their... um... victim will get very sick indeed."

"Symptoms?" asked Channa.

"Headache, nausea, diarrhea, fever, possible delirium." He shivered. "I must get back to my lab. So much more needs to be done, and there is so little time to do it all in."

"You need to sleep," Channa said firmly. "Go to bed for a minimum of six hours."

"That's an order, Chaundra," Simeon told him, "as of now, you're off duty until tomorrow morning."

"Yes, of course." Chaundra nodded abstractedly. "And the volunteers," he continued, "have them in the hospital as soon as the pirates appear. We can accelerate the onset "

"Go to bed!" Channa took him by the arms and gave him a little shake, finally getting his startled attention.

"Oh..." He smiled. "Good idea. Um..." He paused at the door and blinked. "Oh, yes. Joat I have met young Joat She is a bit... more mature than I thought she was." He frowned, looking concerned. "Do you think it will be all right, their being together so much? Her and Seld, I mean."

Channa blinked. At least nobody has been unkind enough to mention any grizzly tales of Joat's life story, she thought "Uh, I don't think it will matter#" Simeon said, slightly amused. "They'll be kept well-occupied, you know, and they are neither of them physically adult."

"You are very off-handed for a proper father of a daughter," Chaundra said owlishly.

"Well, I am her father or will be when the papers are completed. Truly, Chaundra, I think we can depend on Joat to be responsible. I trust her. She may operate on her own code of ethics, but she is more consistent about it than many adults I have encountered. I'm not worried."

Chaundra sighed. "I wish I had a credit for every time someone has told me that they are not worried. They're at a volatile age and they can't even trust themselves. Hell," he said throwing his arms wide, "under all this pressure, the adults on this station can't trust themselves. How can we expect these kids to?"

Channa felt her color rise. "We can only anticipate the problem and talk to them and hope for the best. If they're so inclined," to her surprise, she couldn't force herself to be more specific, "they'll find a time and place where we can't interfere. So let's not wear ourselves down worrying about it."

A whole new set of problems, she thought. Correcting the damage done to Joat's psychosexual development was probably going to take many years. Right now the girl needed Seld to be her friend, not her bed partner. He was definitely her friend but... Channa remembered what boys were like at that age, too. There's more of a danger that she'd break his arm. But she needs a friend. Something else to lie sleepless and worry over. Or had anyone told Joat about Seld's medical problems? privacy, she thought Seld had the right to deal with that in his own time.

"Hey!" Simeon said. "Yoohoo! Channa! Chaundra. You're both tired. Everything looks manageable when you've had some sleep. So go sleep. We'll take care of the capsules and we'll organize the volunteers. Don't worry about a thing."

Chaundra sighed again and assumed a wry expression. "Amateurs," he mumbled. "What you're experiencing, Simeon, is denial. You can't avoid such problems by pretending they don't exist." His shoulders fell "I'll have Seld bring her home with him after they're through working today." He waved goodbye and left.

"Denial," Simeon said musingly. Strange, knowing what he did of her past, he knew that sex was the last thing Joat would think of as a recreational activity. That was the commonest symptom of the particular form of abuse she had suffered and still the idea made him uneasy, fatherhood.

"I don't want to talk about it," Channa told him, and marched briskly back to her desk. She sat down and spun the box of capsules around with one finger. "I was thinking," she said, "wouldn't it be great if we could up the ante on these?" She looked at Simeon's column.

"Yeah, it would. But we're already putting our people at risk. I'm not willing to do the enemy's work for them. Y'know?"

"Mmm. True. What if we could make them believe it's worse than it really is?"

"Hard to say without knowing their physiology, tissue samples... Oh. You're talking about a con game, aren't you, Happy?"

"It all depends on their psychology, of course. And I'm not happy."

"Well," Simeon said dubiously, "the Navy psych reports aren't too detailed. These splinter groups are usually aberrant. Generally speaking, the reports say the Kolnari are extremely aggressive towards those they perceive as weak, treacherous but willing to bargain with their equals in power, and have a tight/submission reflex towards superiors until the superiors let down their guard, which is a sign of weakness/ "Oh, what a love-feast their culture must be!" Channa said. "Hmmm. They'd be vulnerable to status and power anxieties, then. And lots of internal rivalries."

"You betcha. According to the reports, they're also as superstitious as horses. They know some science, but they're not scientific, if you know what I mean."

"I think I get the picture. So?"

"We could modify some of the holo-projectors beside the security cameras and flash 'hallucinations' for the benefit of those who've had the virus. Auditory hallucinations are no problem. I could project them and no one would be the wiser."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," he seemed to be whispering directly into her ear, "and without using your implant."

"Wow," she said, touching her ear, "that's spooky. How did you do that?"

*Just threw my voice heterodyning waves from multiple sources. It takes practice, but as you saw, the effect is worth it"

She shook her head, wide-eyed. "If you can come up with something visual to go with that, they'll be running for their ships the first day."

"Can't overdo it. It'll be easiest if they're alone when they see these things, otherwise it could be considered suspicious. I'll sound Joat out. That girl's a fountain of ideas."

Channa winced and forbore to ask what kind. Chaundra's comments almost visibly flooded back into her

conscious mind.

"Don't let it worry you, she's a good kid," Simeon said emphatically. "I don't want to think about it"

"You really are concerned about Rachel's sanity, aren't you?" (Amos and Channa were settled comfortably on the settee. Simeon had tactfully withdrawn his image from the pillar screen, leaving a strikingly realistic crackling fire in its place. Somehow he had even manage to replicate the scent of burning cedarwood. Amos had had to tactilely reassure himself that the fire was an image.

"Yes, she is definitely unstable," he said, his shoulders sagging hopelessly. "Among all the other problems, I must worry about this! It is so... sopetty."

"Humans can be a remarkably petty species," Channa said philosophically. Partiddarly that hysterical bitch Rachel. "When you get down to cases, lots of'big issues' have been decided on personal matters. From Harmodias and Aristogetion on down." Amos looked blank. "Two ancient Greeks. Never mind. Briefly, a government was overthrown because of a lovetriangle."

Amos sighed again and reached for his snifter of brandy. "I care nothing about her and my best friend would give his life for her," he said, shaking his head. "Channa * "Yes?"

"I know here " he touched his head " that this... delusion of hers, has nothing to do with me. But here " he touched his heart " I cannot help but feel that I must somehow be to blame. I was a... caller-of-spirit: you would say a preacher. Oh, yes, I knew that half the women in those crowds were in love with me. What of it? I would never touch any of them, for that would be dishonorable and destroy my cause more surely than any other oflense. The folk of Bethel are... inflexible about such matters. Yet if I knew and accepted love, if it flattered my vanity, am I not in some manner responsible? How desperate she must be, and how lonely. It is sad."

Channa patted his arm anjl smiled soothingly. "From your description, it was never this bad before. If you're to blame, then so is everyjcharismatic politician and holo star since time began. Her... delusion... may have been aggravated by those drugs, although she's not responding to medication. Simeon, has anyone talked to Chaunda about this?"

"Not yet," he said, after a tactful pause to suggest he hadn't been listening.

"I have decided to keep her under my eye," Amos said, adding reluctantly, "Mental care, the cure of souls. It is part of our religion that only those consecrated can perform cures of the human soul."

"Mmm." Your religion sucks wind, she thought silently, No sense in offending Amos, of course. Humans shouldn't be forced to take religion. That should be free choice. "Maybe we'd better let Chaundra know that Rachel isn't responding to treatment. She may need stronger calmers. Let's face it, when the pirates arrive, you're going to have a surfeit of problems to keep under your eyes."

"I can keep my eye on more than one thing at a time, Channa," Simeon cut in abruptly. "Simeon-Amos?"

He nodded. **I agree with Channa. I will speak with the doctor of this. This is my burden, my obligation. I will do it." He rose and disappeared into his room, shoulders bowed.

Channa shook her head, "You'd think he was sending her off to be executed."

"Who knows how his people view psych treatment? Confession seems to be a major element in their

religion. To him, treating this as a medical problem could be equivalent to blasphemy."

"Hmph." She turned to squint at his column. "By the way, don't try to tell me that you didn't enjoy that little interruption, Simeon. I know you too well by now."

"Okay." His voice was downright cheery.

She smiled rueful. "Just don't make a habit of it, okay?" i "There are no guarantees in life, Channa."

"Oh, no? If I ever get the idea that you're engineering any more little disruptions of my love life, / guarantee that you'll regret it."

"Hey, be reasonable, Channa! What could I possibly have to do with Rachel going bonkers? I didn't even let her into the lounge. I could have, y'know."

Channa shrugged and grunted.

"I thought about not telling you she was trying to beat the door down, I really did. But then I figured she'd go grab a laser and cut her way in. And, of course, if she had caught you two in flagrante delicto, she wouldn't have stopped at cutting up doors."

"Oh, thank you, Simeon, you are such a hero, saving me from a fete worse than death and death itself. Consider yourself hugged and slobbered over in an ecstasy of gratitude."

"That's short for 'my attitude's back,' isn't it?"

She got up and started for her room. "Yes, Simeon, my attitude's back."

"Well, why? What did I do?"

She spun on her heel and threw up her hands. "I'm horny, all right? I'm horny and I'm frustrated!" The door snapped shut behind her.

Simeon shut down his pickups in the lounge, escaping the charged atmosphere in the only way he could. Sheesh, he thought. Softshells -were strange.

"Nothing, Great Lord. Nothing but rebroadcasts of the same warning message."

Tsssk. You have had no success in monitoring internal communications?"

"No, Great Lord."

This time Baila's voice held a slight touch of resentment. This was no backwater, no half-barbarian slum that used electro-magnetic signals for internal communication. This was a sophisticated Central Worlds installation they were planning to attack. It had internal optical circuitry. What did the Great Lord expect her to do? Fly over to the station and burn her way through to tap a line?

We are all impatient, Belazir thought. The Clan impulse was to leap upon the prey and take it. Loot it bare, move on. They had been very successful following that course of action for a long time.

"Any other ships?"

"None since that freighter who acknowledged their warning beacon and sheered off," she said.

"Serig."

"Command me, lord." The verbal formula was more than routine in Serig's mouth; he fairly quivered with anticipation.

"We will move in exactly one-point-five hours from next day-cycle termination." This was about three hours Terran Standard time, since Kolnar rotated more slowly than Manhome. "All vessels to launch their seekers simultaneously and then begin subspace jamming pulses.

Cftwigter and Age of Darkness will remain on combat over watch, ready to provide fire support as necessary. Dreadful Bricte and Shark will move in to the upper and lower polar axis respectively and force-dock, then occupy the station. Here are the areas tabesjured."

His hands keyedja sequence, and the schematic of the SSS-900-C was overlaid with color-coded plans for movement.

"Move swiftly! Crush any sign of resistance with utmost force. If resistance slows the infantry down, secure those decks and blow them open to space. I will be with the second wave at the north polar axis."

"Lord."

"Captain Lord Pol is not to disembark before the target is fully secured. Those are my orders. Repeat them to her in the message."

"I hear and obey, Great Lord," Serig said. He made a few notes to himself. "Tightbeam?"

"Of course."

"I may lead the assault party?"

Belazir and his henchman shared an identical wolf grin. "Of course."

Joseph ben Said nodded gravely. "I am glad that you have shown me these things, Joat."

Joat looked downshaft between her legs it was the only way to see the Bethelite's face since they were both climbing up and smiled cockily. They had paused at this intersection with two small feeder ducts so she could give him directions. He had hooked one thick arm around a rung so he could squint down the other shafts.

"You learn pretty quick," she said. "Hey, and you don't get fordled up in a tight spot, neither."

Joseph's square fece split in a raptor's smile. *Joatmy-friend, where I grew up one learned quickly, or one died. Also I spent much time in narrow places.

Sewers and tunnels, rather than ductwork, but the principle is the same."

"Yeah, I guess we got a lot in common," she said. You, poor bastard, she added to herself. -Not aloud. Evidently these oscos were sensitive about Iqiguage.

"But I am surprised that you can move with such freedom when any section can be closed off and airevacuated," Joseph went on. He cracked his thick-fingered hands reflexively, and took out a long curved knife to trim a callus. "And then there are the maintenance servos, also centrally controlled."

"Yeah, well, you gotta look at that sort of thing from the bottom up," Joat said. "Follow me."

They muscled upward, back and legs against opposite side of the passageway, then crawled out into a slightly wider connecting way.

"See? There's the seal," she said, running one finger along the edge of the octagonal opening where the two ducts crossed.

"Ah." Joseph peered more closely. "I see a thin sheet?"

"Naw, interlocking pointed wedges, 's stronger or some fardling thing. Don't get in the way if it's gonna dose. They don't have no safety pressure stops here where people aren't supposta be, so they'll cut you right in half."

Joseph nodded, continuing his examination. "And this?" He touched a slight bulge.

"Access panel. Here."

Joat brought up a square piece of electronics from her harness and touched it. The bulge withdrew into the wall. Inside were readouts, a keypad, and a datajack. She squirmed until her backpack was on the floor between her knees, then pulled out a jackline from her Spuglish and clipped it into the socket. The machine lit. Hello, Joat, scrolled across it. Simeon's gone bye-bye wurfi

"What is that?" Joseph said, fascinated.

"I usta think it was Simeon in a grudly strange comedown," Joat said, her fingers flying in a rapid taptaptaptiptip. "Only it isn't. 'S just a really neat AI program running ca the station main computers. Fools ya, y'know? eaTeasy to get to thinking it's a real person, but it isn't. Smart piece of junk, but I can get around it. When it thinks you're Simeon, it really comes down as an animal"

Hello, Simeon, the screen printed. What's up, boss? Huh? Huh?

Joat's fingers scrambled. Nothing much, she keyed. Updating Shame on Me, she added.

Don't rightly know that one, pardner, the machine replied. Uhyip. The tip of Joat's tongue was clenched between her teeth in a rictus of concentration. At last, she leaned back and sighed, cracking her fingers twohanded.

"Now it thinks I'm Simeon again," she said. "Shame on Me?" Joseph enquired.

"Fool me once," Joat said, quoting, "shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me."

Joseph's laugh was quiet and appreciative. Joat felt the quiet glow of satisfaction you only got from another operator. Seld was neat, but he wasn't a... Well, he wasn't grown up, in the special way Joseph was grown up. She'd known a lot of people who were grown-up that way, but Joseph was the first one she had ever liked or trusted.

"So you manipulate the system through the central computer?" he said.

"Naw, not most of the time. Too con-spick-cue-us. Finkin' obvious, in fact. There's a distributed node system, fambly thousands of little compus, all got backup authority, if you can cut in. And nobody cuts in like jack-of-all-trades, my man."

Joseph clapped a hand on her shoulder. She stiffened and stared at it. He took it away, not snatching or lingering, either.

"How did you pick this up?" he said in admiration, pointing at her Spuglish.

"Dad." Fdrdlmg swiney. "Learned more from the bastard who won me from my uncle," she said. "He was smart, really smart, when he wasnX drunk or... well, when he was sober. Knew his way around any system there was. Never got caught, except once."

"Who by?" Joseph asked.

Joat turned her face toward him, and for a moment it was not a child's face at all. "Me," she said softly. "He forgot me. And I cracked his system. They think he's still alive. He went thataway out the lock, peeing blood. His ship's computer said everything was fine."

"Well," Joseph said with a cold smile, "if it's good enough for the official records, it's good enough for me. Now, show me how you decouple the local subsystems again."

"Like, it's got to be physical," Joat went on, animated again. "You "

"I am glad to see you two are friends," Amos said.

Joat and Joseph had walked in the door laughing uproariously, slapping each other on the shoulder.

Joseph smiled at his leader and bowed formally, hand on heart. "My brother, you have done me a great favor by introducing me to this young sorceress," he said. "And our cause."

"You guys are brothers?" Joat asked suddenly.

"No," was the spontaneous answer from Channa, Simeon, and Amos.

"Oh?" Joat looked from one to the other, frowning slightly, then she shook her head dismissing the problem. "Yeah, we had a great time!" she went on. *Joe here picks things up pretty good, for a grown-up."

"For a grown-up?" Amos said, raising a brow.

"You know," Joat explained kindly, "for somebody who's old"

Amos pursed his lips. He was a year older than Joseph. "I am glad to see you found him worthy," he said dryly. _ @.j "Yeah, I did. JojU frowned. "Can I ask you something?" she said.

"By all means, foster daughter of Channa," Amos said.

"Most grown-ups are funny about kids knowing things," she said. "You aren't. How come?"

Amos blinked. "You are... what, twelve?" he said. "'Bout. Gets hard to tell when you do a lot of FTL 'n some coldsleep."

"At your age, I was running my family's estates," Amos said. "Of course, I would not have been, had my father lived. Sons of poorer folk are apprenticed at twelve, doing a day's work and paying for their own food. Should I be surprised if you can do likewise?"

Joat glowed. "At last" she said, turning triumphantly to Channa. "Told you I'd learn more doing a real job!"

"What did I say?" Amos asked, flinching at the glare Channa leveled at him.

"Promised I'd go catch Seld," Joat said, wolfing down the last of her breakfast and sticking a few pieces of fruit in the pockets of her shapeless overall. "Ta-ta, all."

"Speaking of the Chaundras," Channa said meaningfully, glancing at Amos. "I have to run. More ack! pftht! meetings. Don't forget"

Joseph waited until silence had fallen again, then looked at Amos with concern. "Something is wrong with you, my brother?"

Amos looked at his plate. "No," he said. He gestured Joseph to a seat, but stood himself, his hands clasped behind his back. "There is nothing wrong with me. This concerns Rachel." He held up his hand to forestall Joseph's protest. "Let me finish. She came here the other night, furious, raving. She claimed we were betrothed. Her eyes, Joseph! They were wild, and she shook... her face was so white."-.He looked at his friend. "Our Rachel is shaking to njeces before our eyes. I am going to tell Chandra what I have told you, and if he decides that she needs treatment, then she shall have it"

Joseph nodded jerkily, resting his face in one hand. His shoulders moved convulsively, then he steadied.

"I am grateful that you sbare your thoughts with me," he said. "Though you now stand as her father."

"We have no Healer of Souls here, Joseph," Amos said with deep remorse.

"So Rachel must lose her soul's privacy before an infidel, an outsider," Joseph replied.

"I had not thought you so pious."

Joseph sighed, shaking his head wearily. "It is strange how ingrained is the training of one's childhood. At the last, I find I, too, am a son of the Temple."

"If you truly are against such procedures, I will not force her," Amos said.

Joseph rose and gave Amos the embrace of brothers. "Thank you," he said, "but, if my heart rebels, my mind tells me you are right... damnably right That is an irritating habit you have, Amos ben Sierra Nueva."

Amos grinned. "So I have been told. To myself not least, brother. Do you wish to be with her?"

Joseph hesitated, then shook his head. "No," he said, after a moment "As she is... it would be no

kindness. I will continue with my work." His mouth quirked. "Work is truly the mercy of God, as the Prophet said. No?"

"I find more truth in his words every time I return to them," Amos replied seriously, his hand on the other man's shoulder. "Truth too strong for the chains of dogma. Go in peace."

To make ready for war," Joseph observed.

Amos laughed ruefully. "Another truth the Prophet left us: 'If you would have peace, then prepare for war/'

"What a pity the Elders thought that meant the spiritual struggle alone," Joseph said.

"The Prophet was a surprisingly practical man," Amos observed. "I strive to emulate him."

"You do so. You do so very well," Joseph replied and bowed formally: a rare gesture between them.

"Let's go get Seld Chaundra," Joat suggested when Joseph caught up to her at the elevator. "We're supposed to go into hiding when the pirates show up, so he'll need to see this stuff, too."

"I have no objection," Joseph said mildly.

"You and Simeon-Amos fighting about something?" she asked blundy.

"No." Joseph shrugged. "We are angry together, at what is and cannot be changed."

"Yeah, life's like that," Joat observed.

They reached the main corridor and took two people movers down from the wall. Joseph looked a little dubious as he stepped onto the disk. As it silently lifted from the floor, he gripped the handhold tightly with one broad spatulate hand. Joat showed Joseph the address to tap to reach the Chaundras' home. The little floatdisks took off, dodging agilely through traffic and summoning elevators when their route took to the upper decks.

Seld himself opened the door.

"Hi," he said somewhat nervously.

"Hi, this is Joseph ben Said," Joat said indicating the swarthy man beside her. "Simeon-Amos suggested that I take him round, and I thought you might like to come."

"Aw, I'd love to," he said, all eagerness which dissolved the next moment. "I can't I'm grounded."

"You're what?" Joat asked, puzzled.

Seld blushed to the roots of his auburn hair; the colors dashed horribly. "I'm being disciplined. I can't leave our quarters."

Joat's expression was amused and agast. Glad I don't have parents, she thought. / won't get stigm someplace I don't want to be.

"Geeze, Seld, your dad can't seem to get it right First it's too much 'go,' now it's too much stay." She shook her head in awe. "You can't win playing that way. So come anyhow," she added, cocking her head at him.

"I can't," he repeated, glancing nervously at Joseph. The Bethelite crossed his arms and looked at the ceiling, humming an idle tune.

"He's okay," Joat assured him. "Why not?" "Cause Dad's gonna call and check up on me."

Joat rolled her eyes. "So call in to the answering machine ev'ry so often. If he's called, you can call back and say he caught you in the head. He's so worried about your safety, Seld, he should worry more if you don't know this. You gotta know your way around the backside of the station. Hey! If it really bothers you we can ask Simeon to help, or Joseph... ?" She turned appealing eyes up to his.

Joseph uncrossed his arms. "I believe it could be put to your father " He broke off, his eyes focused on some one in the corridor beyond Joat. "Rachel?"

Rachel bint Damscus stopped, looking him coldly up and down. "Well, Joseph ben Said. I wonder, do you have any messages that you are withholding from me?"

He was nonplussed. "Whatever are you talking about, my lady?"

"No lady of yours, peasant," she said, spitting the last word at him, her eyes wide and flashing. "Amos told me that he had delegated you to inform me that he was moving in with that lanky, sallow-faced slut. But you, apparently, chose not to tell me. Why is that?"

"We are at war," he said shortly. "Time is short.

Rachel bint Damscus, be known to Joat," he said, gesturing courteously to her, "the foster daughter of Simeon. Be known also to Seld Chaundra."

Rachel looked at the two young people as though he had introduced her to a pair of rodents. "Simeon... ?" she said, picking up what was important to her.

"Yes," he hissed In a whisper, moving closer to her. Nat now, his expression said. Spare these children.

"Who is this 'Simeon*' that everyone addresses with such respect?"

"He and Channa run the station," Joat told her.

"Ah," Rachel said, looking at her with a false smile, "does that make you the whore's foster-daughter, too?*" Joseph's hand moved very quickly, deflecting Joat's hand, which was halfway to delivering what it held.

"Drop it," he said. "Now, Joat."

Struggling against his grip, Joat drew her lips back from her teeth, but she had to comply. The grip on her wrist was not tight enough to hurt, but it had the implacable solidity of a mechanical grab. The Bethelite wrenched the small squarebox from her with his other hand.

"Weapon?" he said, turning it over briefly. "Do not strike without thinking, Joat. And rarely from anger.

That causes problems, always." He handed her back the gadget "Wait."

Rachel's face had turned an ugly mottled color, partly from fright and partly from being humiliated. Her complexion went brick-red as Joseph grabbed her by the upper arm and began to pull her further down the corridor.

"Take your hands from my arm, peasant," she shouted. Joseph ignored her stolidly, as he did her attempts to halt their movement "Let go of me!" she shrieked.

Passersby turned at the sound of her voice. Joseph cast a look up and down the corridor. There was little privacy here and none within easy reach. He released her arm and spoke in a firm low voice.

"My lady, you are not yourself. The coldsleep medications have affected your... balance. Please, accompany me to the sickbay and "

"Yes! Back to the infidel doctor, so he can drug me, poison me, leave so-wonderful Amos to wallow between the thighs of that w*, that awn? He reached out a hand, a pleading gesture. Rachel " " i* " tj struck it away with the contempt she would have dealt a spider.

"Don't touch me, you peasant whore's-get! You make me sick. Don't touch me"

She struck again, a hard ringing slap across his face, backhanding him again and again. Joseph's head moved only a little on his thick muscular neck, although a trickle of blood started from his nose and the corner of his mouth. On the fourth slap, he caught her hand. She began to thrash, trying to free herself from that implacable grip. He turned her hand, exposing bleeding cuts where her knuckles had smashed against teeth and bone.

"My lady," he said, cutting through her shrill cries. "Strike me if you will, but you will hurt your hand using it so. Here, take this."

His free right hand made a small flip, and a knife appeared in it: a short leaf-bladed dagger with a plain leather-wrapped hilt, looking sharp enough to cut light. Rachel shrieked and pulled back again, but Joseph's hand made another movement, holding out the hilt. He waited, his eyes on hers. Silence fell broken only by Rachel's rapid, gasping breath. The bystanders were crowding away, their voices sunk to a murmur. Then Rachel pulled loose and ran, blundering into a corner as she scrambled out of sight down a side aisle.

Joseph clicked the knife into its wrist-sheath, his eyes thoughtful. Wiping his face on a kerchief, he returned to the two adolescents. "I don't think I like her," Joat said laconically.

"I apologize," he said quietly. "Lady Rachel was gendy reared. She is suffering from stress and adverse reactions to medication."

"She's bughouse," Joat said bluntly. He's gone on her, she thought- Geh! What a fardlm' waste. People should reproduce the way bacteria did, splitting cells. That was cleaner. Even angrudies like Joe got strange when they had the hots. * Joseph frowned at her. "Negative reaction, as I said.*1 "Yeah, bughouse, like I said.... Okay, forget it How did you do that thing with the knife?"

"Spring-loaded sheath," Joseph said, obviously relieved to change the subject. He bent back his wrist and showed them.

Joat glanced at Seld, caught his eye. He shook his head in silent agreement. Adults! They're nuts.

Channa stumbled into the lounge and fell facefirst into the cushions of the couch. "I hate commuting," she said with a theatrical groan.

"Hah!" was Simeon's mocking comment. "Call that commuting? Why, in my grandfathers' day..."

"In your grandfathers' day," she said pulling herself into a sitting position, "they probably commuted by ox-cart through subspace and drifts of snow fourteen feet high, and that was in high summer, being dive bombed by stinging insects the size of ore-freighters, just to borrow a cup of sugar from their next-door neighbor three light years away. I," she said, indicating herself with a delicate hand and a raised eyebrow, "am not as hardy. And I hate to commute."

"Not a problem I'm likely to have," he commented.

"No!" she agreed.

"So I should just offer sympathy and understanding," he suggested.

"Absolutely, and I, of course, will accept this with gratitude as the very balm my bruised and battered spirit craves."

"Poor baby."

"Ah," she sighed. "Well! I feel better. What's new on the home front?"

"Apparently Joat's gotten Selchgrounded until he turns twenty-one." 3* "How'd she manage that?"

"Chaundra disciplined him foff itaying behind and she talked him into exploring the station with her and Joseph."

"Poor Seld. What's Joat's reaction?"

"Oh, it's all her fault, she's got the kiss of death or something..."

"Seld staying behind is her fault?"

"No, no. It's all her fault. The minute we decided to adopt her, Bethel was attacked, so that Amos escaped, the pirates chased him and the station is now endangered. You see the logical sequence of events. One of her depressed moods."

Those tended to be temporary but of unpredictable duration.

"I can't deny," she said, fighting a laugh, "that the logic's inescapable when the data is structured in that fashion."

They were still laughing when Amos came in.

"What causes such merriment?" he asked, grinning.

Channa looked at his handsome face, and it seemed to her that for a moment the station stood still.

"Oh," Simeon told him, "the horrors of being twelve."

Amos shuddered. "Indeed," he said, rolling his eyes. "Would that all horrors were both so transient and so amusing in retrospect. I fell in love with the cook. When that was over, I decided I was religiously inspired and never recovered from that."

Channa gave an involuntary snort of laughter, glanced over at him to be sure, then dissolved in whooping gales of laughter.

"At least," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, "you don't take yourself too seriously."

"I cannot afford to," Amos said, bowing with hand on breast "Far too many others do. If dieir prophet cannot laugh at himself now and then, they are lost as weH."

"My adolescence svorse," Simeon said. They turned and looked at tfce pillar. "Imagine my pure, unsullied, young self thrust among hardened asteroid miners."

"It certainly left its mark," Channa said dryly. "No one escapes without being marked," Amos said wisely.

"And no one gets out alive," they all said together.

"Are you talking about the station?" Joat asked in horror, emerging from her room.

"No, no," Channa said. "Life." Teenage life, actually, but let's not be specific right now.

Joat began to rearrange Channa's desk, banging down the implements.

"It's so stupid!" she said, clattering a note organizer screen down.

"What is?" Simeon said, soothingly. Sometimes that tone annoyed Joat so much she forgot what was troubling her. This time she was too focused.

"Seld," she said. "I mean, this could be the last week of our lives and Seld is locked in his room! What a great way to go! Y'know?"

No one answered her. Channa and Amos wouldn't meet her eyes. A look of mild exasperation crossed her features and she tried another tack.

"Look, I need him," she said earnestly. "He's really pretty good, in a junior-grudly way, hey? I want to help. Y'know? So, I thought we, Seld and me, could..." She stopped, tapped her fingertips together and stared upward, biting her lip. "I thought we could maybe make up some of those signal disrupters I use," she said in a rush.

"You mean the ones that keep me from seeing or hearing you?"

"Yeah," Joat appeared fascinated by her fingernails, "Those."

'Joat, you could do that in the engineering lab. Anyone there will be happy t5* help you. If we get enough people assembling thje elements, we could make quite a few in the time we h'ave left."

"No," Joat said and sat down, looking right at Simeon's column. "I mean, I like the idea of working in the engineering lab, don't get me wrong on that. But the signal disruptor is my idea, and I'm not going to just give it away. I know I'm just a kid, but I know you don't do that."

"I'm not going to let anybody steal the credit for your invention, Joat. I fully intend to watch out for your interests. I give you my word on that"

"Thank you," she said simply. A silence fell, oddly solemn. After a moment, Joat continued, "Y'know, it's probably not a good idea to have too many of them around. I mean, the more there are, the more likely some jerk will lose one and the pirates will find it and figure it out, then where'd we be?"

"A valid point," Channa said judiciously.

"So," Joat slapped her legs, then rubbed her palms up and down her thighs, "what I thought was, Seld and me could make up enough for you guys," she turned to point at Amos and then at Channa, "and as many of the council reps or team leaders as we can." She looked at the adults' faces, checking their expressions, then turned to Simeon's column. "Whaddaya say?"

"I'd say you're a heartless hard-bargainer, a blackmailer, and a techno-witch. That said, I'd talk to Chaundra, and I think I'll allow Seld to assist on an authorized project. But use more sense next time, Joat. When I adopt you, you're going to have limits, too. Oh, and don't work him too hard. He's just not..." Simeon tried to finish the caution diplomatically "... the hardy type."

"I know," she said softly, nodding solemnly. "I'll take care of him, I promise." Then she smiled a tight, professional-looking little smile, and rose. "Well, goodnight, everybody."

"Goodnight," they wished her in return.

When the door had closed behind her, Amos looked warmly at Channa, then dropped his eyes. "I, too, am weary, and there is still so much to learn."

"Do what you can," Channa advised, "and play the rest by ear."

"And don't forget," Simeon told him, "all you have to do is ask and I'll try to help. Channa, why don't you give him that contact button now?"

"Yes." From a desk drawer, she took a small box, which she presented to Amos.

"We should probably give one to both Joat and Seld," Simeon suggested.

Channa nodded.

Amos took out the small button curiously.

"That gadget will let me see what you see, hear what you hear, and respond in relative privacy," Simeon told him.

"It is so small," Amos said, examining the tiny device.

"But so effective," Simeon answered through the button.

Startled, Amos dropped it.

"I can see that it could be very useful," he said, laughing as he retrieved it. "Thank you, Simeon."

Channa hesitated. "See you in the morning."

"Yes, altogether too briefly," he replied, giving her a rueful bow.

Channa yawned hugely and looked up at the time display. Evening again already! Almost time for dinner. Hopefully it would be more cheerful than breakfast, which had been subdued in the extreme. "Gods, another day gone? Where is everyone?"

Anne McQffiey & SM. Stirling "Amos is on his way back home and should be here any second," Simeon said. "Joat is committing illegalities in the engineering lab, chortling madly with Seld, when I can pick them up at all Siie'll be back here to eat, or so I believe her plan to be." Channa stretched. "I need a break." She flopped into an easy chair and said, "Woul\$ you put on the 'Hebrides Suite/ please?"

He listened to it for a moment and said, "This is nice.

*One of my favorites. My great-grandmother once told me that this music held the soul of Earth's oceans in its phrases. I've loved it ever since."

"Your great-grandmother was from Earth, Channa?" "No, but she'd been there. Oh, this is my favorite part a litde louder, Sim."

She raised her hand, palm up to show that he should raise the volume again, and again. The door opened on Amos, who stepped backward as though the magnificent swell of sound had washed him out on a wave of music.

Channa laughed at his startled expression and signaled Simeon to lower the sound. "Sorry," she called.

Amos poked his head incautiously, "Whew!" he said. "Channa, it is dangerous to play music at such volume. Your hearing will be impaired."

She made a face at him. "Don't be a priss, Simeon Amos. No one ever lost their hearing on classical music."

"Beethoven?" Simeon suggested. "Hah!" she said. "You men all stick together," and stumbled to the galley for coffee. When she had doctored it with cream liqueur and whipped Jersey floating on the surface, she took an appreciative sip. "Ah! That's good!" Although when I learned where Jersey originally came from, Inearly lost -my lunch, she added to herself Simeon had picked up on her tastes quickly.

"Now, that is something I feel I've missed out on," Simeon said.

"Mmmh?"

"Coffee, food, everyone who sits down to dinner at " the Perimeter says, 'Wow! That smells good!' closely foDowed by 'MnimfThft is delicious!' and I haven't got an analogue for either of those sensations. Smell and taste you'd think they could have given me one of 'em. Oh, I can taste when something's offin the chemosynthesis plants, and I can smell an ion-trail, but it's not the same'thing. Sometimes the people at Medic Central are downright inhumanly utilitarian."

"Why don't you put Joat on it?" Channa suggested.

"Put me on what?" Joat asked, arriving at that point.

"I was just saying that I've missed out on tasting coffee, or smelling it even, everyone says it smells so good. I don't even know what that means. I just can't get my mind around the concept. I don't like the feeling that I'm being denied one of life's greatest pleasures. However, the thought of anyone poking about with my neural interfaces is enough to keep the thought merely wistful."

Channa and Amos locked eyes a moment, then flicked away. Not before Simeon had caught the look.

"That's terrible," Joat said sympathetically, "though, maybe if you gave me your specs..."

"Now, sex... sex provides a lot of mental pleasure." Simeon continued with relish. "I'd be willing to bet that I get almost as much sexual pleasure out of my own imagination as anyone does actually having it."

Joat made a derisive grimace.

"I'd say in your dreams, Simeon, but that would be redundant," Channa said archly, making her way back to her desk. "What have you got there?" she asked, pointing to the box in Joat's hand.

"Oh, this is something for you guys." Joat opened it to display the two short, gleaming metal rods, perhaps three centimeters long, with crystals at either end. Joat looked at Channa expectantly.

Channa took one out of the box, turning it over. In the center of the rod was a small gap, bridged by a narrow tube which joined its two halves. She touched the crystals experimentally, then looked queringly at Joat. "It's pretty?" she asked, puzzled at its use.

Joat laughed. "Seld said we should make 'em into jewelry, but I figured we didn't have time to experiment with the effect that might have. I wear mine in a sheath in my boot." She tugged up her pant-leg and pulled down the cuff of her boot to show the top of an identical wand.

"How does this artifact of yours work?" Amos asked her, picking up the other.

"You push the two halves together to make a contact"

Amos did so. There was a click as the two halves came together to form a smooth even surface. He looked at Channa and Joat, then at himself. "Is... is it working?"

"Ask him," Joat said, jerking her thumb at Simeon's column.

"Simeon?"

Simeon didn't answer because he hadn't heard the question. He had, however, seen Amos wink out of existence, and he was experiencing some very uncomfortable feelings about that disappearance. Suddenly, he was unsure that he wanted anyone besides Joat to have this ability. Such disappearances definitely gave him the willies.

"Apparently not," Channa said, pleased. She clicked her own rod together and vanished from Simeon's sight and hearing.

Amos leaned close to her. "I can already see much potential for his device." His smiling eyes were warm and full of meaning.

"Seld and me knocked seven of these off today," Joat explained to Simeon. "We'll contrapt more tomorrow, now that we've found the parts we need. What's the matter?" she asked in response to Simeon's groan.

"Sorry, Joat, seven is pretty good really, and there's nothing to say that we can't share these around. Right, Channa? Channa? OUIe-ollie in-free!"

Channa grinned smugly at Amos. "He really can't see us, can he?" Then she pulled gently at the rod.

"How nice of you to drop in," Simeon said in a sour tone. Damned if Til let you know how much that bothers me.

"Sorry," Channa said. "I know it bothers you," she subvocalized. Somehow Sim connected it with being cut off from his sensory input. Me, now Fm a sensory input? She turned to Joat. "Urn, do you actually have to have it on your person for it to work? Or would it work if, say I had it on the desk beside me?"

"It should keep you disappeared if you stay very dose to it. You're not really blanked out It's more like a local override command to the sensor not to record you, you know? I didn't really measure it very close." Joat gave a self-deprecating twitch of her hands. "I need more theory and stuff, I know."

"Well, I'm impressed, Joat" She clapped her hands together. "Let's celebrate, and send out for dinner." She took the rod out of Amos's hands and unsnapped it "You know," Simeon commented as Amos reappeared, "this invention of Joat's could be the biggest boon to burglars since hacking."

Channa froze, then looked over at Joat. The girl managed to look sweet, innocent and furtive at the same moment. It was true. AI-driven surveillance was universal in public places. So were attempts to counteract it Joat's seemed to work better than most Of course, once the device was publicized, countermeasures would be initiated. No wonder Joat wanted to keep her ace-in-the-hole secret.

Well, of course, she steals! Simeon whispered in her ear. How did you think she survived before you took a hand?

"Like many swords," Amos agreed, "it is two edged. But, they will be of help, and I shall enjoy testing mine." He smiled at Channa.

Channa looked at Simeon's column. *Just think, well be able to keep secrets from youjSim. How will you stand it?"

Amos tiptoed carefully out of Joat's room. "She never woke," he said ina hall-whisper. "I put a blanket over her."

Channa shook her head. Joat's subconscious seemed to know who to trust This evening was the first time she had noticed die girl sleeping with the limp, irresistible finality of the trusting child. She'd also had along, hard, if triumphant, day.

"I thought she'd never get enough of your stories about Bethel," she said. And neither would I. It didn't have the urban sophistication of Senalgal, but Amos could make his world and his way of life sound...

beautiful, she decided. Of course, he was an eloquent man, and he was describing what he truly loved. He had described what she had always yearned for in a planet-side posting: the hugeness, the variousness, the aliveness of a breathing world.

"It was as much for me as for her," Amos said, leaning back on the sofa and raising his face to the ceiling, eyes closed. "I speak, and I see what can never be again."

She put a hand on his. "Bethel will be freed and made beautiful again. The Kolnar only stripped the surface, not the nature of the planet"

"Yes. Yes, I believe must believe that." His fingers curled around hers; fine long-fingered hands, a little calloused. From riding horses, she thought. A sport she had only read of before. Simeon had provided holos, and riding looked more dangerous and exciting than piloting mini-shuttles.

"Yet when the enemy are driven off, the wounds... and beyond that We need to change, we must change. More than I thought or wished, and I was a rebellious youngster, a radical, a breaker of images, or so they called me." He turned his head to her. "The enormity of the task ahead overwhelms me. Yet with help..."

Oh, great, she thought. To herself: "Lost prince of beautiful, exotic planet, seeks helpmate/companion/lover to assist in rescue/reconstruction. Requires intelligent, forceful manager with strong sense of duty. Will furnish lifelong love and affection, plus palaces, estates, interesting experiences. Apply Amos ben Sierra Nueva." What was that quotation? Get thee behind me, Satan?

Amos sat quietly beside her and placed Joat's box in her lap. His glance was filled with meaning. Channa opened the box and they each took out a crystal-tipped rod. Then they glanced at Simeon's column with identical scheming smiles and clicked the two parts together.

Amos leaned over. They kissed; she stroked his dark hair and gently cupped the back of his head in her hand.

"It is good to have privacy," he said huskily.

"Yes," she agreed, "it is good." And it adds spice, she thought. Like sneaking out of bounds when you're in school.

Simeon watched Channa's door open and close, though no one appeared to be near it. He suppressed a burst of resentment. He had told them he'd turn off the sensors if they requested it. But no, they'd just gone and shut him out without a word...

What is the universe coming to? he thought in irritation. Besides, there's a child present!

A child who had presented him with a techno-itch he could not scratch. On reflection, he decided the analogy was maddeningly accurate. Try as he might, his attention came looping back to the nagging gaps in his recordings. He was accustomed to knowing everything. At the moment, the SM. Stirling that went on. Joat's earlier white-noise machines and attention-deflectors were minor irritations compared to this newest gadget. Of course, she hadn't had access to the engineering labs before this.

"The child was probably bopo with a microtool in her hand," he muttered. Now, how did the wands function? Joat had, after all, given her a hint. She might be a genius, but Simeon was a shell person, with all the computer power and experience that implied.

And I'm also constitutionally unable to resist picking up the gauntlet, he thought happily. There were times when the only way to get rid of a temptation was to give in to it... / can't believe this, he told himself, fifteen minutes later. Equipment made by the best minds in the Central Worlds flummoxed by a preteen! Which confirmed longheld thoughts about the quality of minds attracted to the Central Worlds bureaucracy. Simeon had long thought that it was a private miracle he hadn't come out prosthetized into a camel, since the design teams were committees. Now, he must meet this challenge.

Chaniia arched her back against Amos's weight, her hands caressed the slick, silken skin of his back. He kissed her throat and she sighed happily, ready for "Oh, Chaaannaaa, Iseeeyooou."

HAck,ckgak!"

Amos raised his head from the crook of her neck to look at her. The mixture of puzzlement and sensuality on his face looked very silly, not to mention slightly nauseated. Simeon laughed.

Oh, this is terrible, Channa thought. Yet it was impossible not to see the moment from Simeon's point of view for a second. She laughed, caught between rage and helpless mirth. Amos bobbed up and down with her laughter. His expression assumed a martyred quality that caused her to lose control completely.

"Channa," he said desperately, rolling off and holding her in his arms. "Channa, my darling are you all right?"

She struggled to speak, to reassure him that her sanity was intact "Sim... Sim... he... hehe... hehehe," she had to avoid the word he. "Sim..." she gasped, "my implant... he... heie,nmrrmph... can see us."

She stopped, panting and watched his look of concern melt. Suddenly she was slightly frightened. This was a man accustomed to redressing insult, and his ego had just received a terribly humiliating one.

"Simeon!" he roared. The door seemed to recoil before his headlong passage, and the cooler wind from the lounge brought goosebumps to her skin.

Amos picked up the first thing his hand encountered, a vase, and threw it against Simeon's column.

"You incest eater!" he bellowed. "You filthy pi dog! BanchatT Channa appeared in her doorway, wrapped in a sheet, fve never seen a naked, erect man in a/it of rage before, she thought dazedly. Oh, I really shouldn't have broken up. Mengetso focused at that particular moment!

"How could you do something so vile! Have you no decency?" Amos was demanding.

"What the hell is goin' on?" Joat asked, and stopped, poleaxed at the sight of a naked and raging Amos.

Amos dived for the sheet Channa was wearing and they tussled for it. He settled for dragging a small corner of it over his hips.

He drew himself up. "Go back to bed, Joat, this does not concern you." The pure mad anger had drained out of his voice. Bethel had a nudity taboo, and he was suddenly and acutely conscious of being naked before a twelve-year-old girl.

"Don't take it out on her, Simeon-Amos, I'm the one you're mad at," Simeon said.

Amos spun round, losing his grip on the sheet **I am unlikely to forget that!" he said between clenched teeth.

"Nice buns," Joat murmured in abstract appreciation.

Channa and Amos turned to stare at her.

"Hey, you guys," she said blushing. "I'm young! I'm not dead." * "What kind of people are you? Amos murmured in shock. "Your children leer, yo#r sheUpeople are voyeurs..." His gaze snapped to Channa. "And you, what sort of pervert are you?"

"Me? Oh, now wait just one minute, Simeon-Amos, I'm a victim here, too." s' "I do not think so. You find this amusing, but I do not!" Turning his back on them all, he strode to his quarters in a fury, the door calmly swishing shut behind him.

"Whoa!" Joat said enthusiastically. "What's a voyeur?"

Channa's mouth firmed grimly. "A voyeur, Joat, is a nasty-minded son of a bitch who keeps poking his nose into private matters."

"Ah. Sorta like Dorgan the Organ from Child Welfare."

Ouch, Simeon winced.

Channa nodded, with crisp malice. "I promise I'll explain tomorrow, but right now I have to talk to Simeon."

"Oboyoboy," Joat said. "Are you ever in the deep pucky, Simeon." She slapped his column on the way back to her room. "Naughty, naughty!"

Channa hiked up the sheet and sat herself down in one of the lounge chairs. She clasped her hands in her lap, saying nothing, chewing her lower lip.

"Um," Simeon said. "He's still furious. He's throwing things around in there."

"Stop spying on him!" Channa said irritably.

"I don't have to spy. Just listen."

It was true, even through the door the sound of objects hitting walls could be heard. Then an ominous silence.

After a minute, a fully dressed Amos emerged and left the quarters without a backward glance or a further word. Channa rose quickly and took a step in his direction.

"Hey! You can't follow him like that! Besides, where'shegonnago?"

"Well... I suppose mis show of your vigilance was our own fault," Channa said grimly. "We would challenge you." She smiled, a wintry expression. "I guess you showed us."

Simeon gave a soft groan. "I'd rather end the evening on a positive note. I now know that I can contact

you even when their sensors can't find you."

"Yes, there is that application of tonight's experiment," she said tiredly. Til be sure to point that out to Simeon-Amos when next I see him. If I see him."

"I'm sorry, Channa," Simeon said contritely after an awkward pause. "I was out of line."

"Yes, you were. For that particular activity, an invitation is required."

"And I know that it's difficult for you folks when coitus is interrupted."

She raised a brow. "Are you asking for information?"

"Um, nooo," he said hopefully.

"You are a swine, Simeon, an utter filthy pig! If you want to know, look it up, in a medical text, skip the pornography," And then she gave a despairing laugh. "Oh, God, hell never speak to me again. Where is he?"

"He's still on the move. At a guess, he's going to Joseph's. Best thing for him really, a litde male bonding. Maybe they'll get drunk together and complain about how badly the women in their lives treat them."

"This woman in his life was treating him just fine until you showed up!"

"Is it my fault he's so parochial?"

"Parochial!" Channa exclaimed. "Simeon, wrong use of that word. A man, any man who is one, will take offense at being spied on while making love. So now Anne McQffiey 6? 5JVf. Stirling you've called him a name, it's all his fault, and none of your own, is that it?"

"No," he said calmly, "I still accept responsibility for what I did. Let's not fight about Simeon-Amos, Channa."

She leaned her head against the back of the chair, "No, let's not fight about Simeon-Amos. We don't have time." She looked at his column from the corner of her eye. "It occurs to me that you were defending him not so long ago." "Maybe I was wrong."

"No, you weren't. You jpaow it, too. We are putting a lot of pressure on him when he'd arrived already under a crushing weight. He's lost everything, Sim, a whole world, family, friends. He blames himself for bringing the pirates to our door. Now he's working himself into the ground to save us from them. We should try very hard not to subject him to these little power games we play." "Ah... sure."

"Because, Simeon, if you can't, you're not the person I thought you were. And if you aren't, I don't want to have anything to do with you once this is over." "Channa!"

"Think about it, Simeon. You're sixty-eight years old. Grow up!"

Amos returned to the lounge for work the following morning, pale, distant, and polite. Simeon found an opportunity to apologize and convinced the Bethelite of his sincerity, vowing never to do such a thing again. Amos accepted the apology with the same detached courtesy that he received Channa's explanation, then dosed himself firmly in his room.

Dinner conversation that evening was so stilted that even Joat noticed. It was still early when Channa was left sitting alone next to the titanium pillar.

"Simeon, come talk to me?"

"Ah, she asks now instead of demanding."

"Your charm has humbled me," she said with a grin. "Besides, I'm bored and really crave your company."

"You sure if s my company you crave?"

"Heh. Last night I was horny! Tonight I'm bored. Different things, fella."

"I think that if I wei4 you, I'd rather be horny."

"Then you'd be an idiot," she said scornfully.

"But I wouldn't be bored."

She was silent a while. "Simeon, I'm scared. We may die."

"Yeah," he replied. "I'm scared, too, Happy. Real scared. We don't have much time left." Another pause, and he added more brightly, "That was a i " i" hint.

"Nah!" she said, shaking her head. "The moment came, was interrupted, and went. Amos needs someone kinder than a ball-buster like me."

"Channa!" Simeon exclaimed, laughing and appalled. "I wouldn't call you a ball-buster."

"You probably have."

"But that was before I knew you," he admitted. "Rachel is a ball-buster. You're just a bit prickly."

"Prickly?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe I am horny," she said thoughtfully. "Lordy, all the male generative organs that are creeping into this conversation. But you know I'm right We have to maintain a certain distance to carry this thing off... Simeon, say something to make me feel better."

"Um, how about..."

"Stern daughter of the Voice of God! O Duty! ifthat name thou love... When empty terrors overawe;
From vain temptations dost setjree..."

"Hey!"

"No huh? Wrong mood?"

"You might say that," she answered between clenched teeth. "Right now, the stern voice of duty is overrepresented in my thoughts."

"True. Hmm. Different mood Okay, how about j&t "Sound sleep by night; study and ease Together mixed; sweet recreation;" And innocence, which most does please With meditation."

"Sarcasm becomes yon', Sim. Don't you wnwfnftohelp?" "Sorry, one more try, "I am like lion, and his lair! I am the fear that frightens me! I am the desert of despair! And the night of agony! Night or day, whatever befall, I must walk that desert land, Until I dare my fear and call The lion out to lick my hand."

She was silent for a long time. He could tell by her breathing that she was not angry, and he waited for her to think it through. At last she sighed.

"You know me pretty well on short acquaintance, Sim."

"Channa, he won't refuse you. He needs you as much as you need him right now. I screwed the pooch! I admit it My only excuse " she gave him a tired smile " is that it's an area of life I'm just not equipped to understand very well. Why should you both be miserable alone, when you could be much happier together?"

"After last night? And don't forget, I've already turned him down once, Simeon. He's got one free refusal coming to him."

"What is this? A competitive sport? There are scores and free throws and penalties?"

She laughed. "Sometimes. Depends on who you play with."

"Take up military history, Channa. It's a lot easier on the psyche."

She sighed again. "Not when you're about to become military history A "Oh for Christ's sake, Happy, get your butt off the couch and go knock on his door! You know you want to. C'mon, be honest."

"I'm going to get changed, first, at least," she said glumly, striding into her room. "And don't call me Happy," she called over her shoulder.

Why should I accommodate you on that, Channa, when I've noticed that, whenever I call you "Happy," you do what I tell you. I'm not giving up an advantage like that.

"Ready?" he called.

"What do you think?"

He opened a sensor inside her room. She now had on a simple black skinsuit, but he thought it showed her off to advantage.

"You'll do."

Channa walked glumly to the door. "Here I am, courting rejection. You'd think I learned about that back when I was Joat's age."

The door slid aside to reveal Amos on her threshold, his hand raised to knock. They exchanged looks.

After a moment, they reached out to one another, and touched. Amos stepped into the room and the door slid firmly closed.

They melted into an embrace that marked the first step in a climb to the heights of passion.

Simeon echoed the thought off the computer. When it came back, it had a fruity announcer's voice. He keyed on Ravel's "Bolero," an insinuating thread of sound that swelled and grew in intensity and volume until its passionate, vibrant climax. On the council table, he projected scenes: palm trees crashed in the wind and waves rolled in to welcoming shores, trains roared into tunnels and out again, wild beasts roared in the forests and people worked wet clay into messy phallic symbols on spinning potters' wheels.

"Perfect," he decided, saving the program to hard storage. It wouldn't be tactful to show it anytime soon, but someday they would be a lot older and more mellow. Providing, of course, they survived the next weeks. Shellpeople had a lot of time to fill in. He listened to the music as it billowed and soared and swooned.

Bless you my children, he thought in the direction of Amos and Channa. And now I will check in again with the auxiliary bridge. Soon to be the fake/real command center for SSS-900-C's encounter with the Kolnari. eHAWERSIXTEEN "Hey, Simeon," the Traffic Control watch said.

"Yeahjoke?"

"I think I've got something here."

Simeon shunted much of his attention to the sensors. This was part of the reason no computer could ever replace a colloidal brain; apart from the inherent lack of self-consciousness, of course. Computers were wonderful at collecting and collating data, but they could never really interpret it the way a human could.

And there's no interface like that between a shellperson and his extensions, Simeon thought smugly.

"Yeah, that is something," he said aloud. "But what?"

"No powerplant neutrino signatures," Juke Cielpied said. He was a fresh-faced young man with a thatch of blond hair. "But the mass is there, that's for Holy shithouse." Suddenly the sleepy torpor of Communications and Navigation was a blur of activity. "Missile signatures, multiple, homing!"

Simeon made an incoherent prayer. This was it. They might have no more than thirty seconds to live.

"Starting mayday call," he said, 'jammed! Engines pulsing."

"Oh, boy, I'm getting powerplant signatures now" Juke said. "They just kicked online and then steadied. Four. Big mothers. Way overpowered for the masses, even more than a tug."

"Warship engines," Simeon said grimly.

The missiles were streaking in from all sides. He deployed the anti-meteor laser. Seconds later it slagged and exploded in a spectacular burst of vaporized synthetic and metal.

"Neutral-particle beam," Simeon said. "Damage report follows." Thank The Bfcwers That Be that it hadn't hit an inhabited area, at least. "Red alert. All personnel to emergency station."

This time there would be no fooling around. It was for real.

Ooops.

Simeon activated his sensors in the lounge and listened, hoping that things hadn't gotten too far in the very few moments that had passed since he'd politely turned them off. Unfortunately, judging by the soft sounds emerging from Channa's quarters, that was a vain hope.

She'll never believe I didn't plan this, he thought, and wavered. It's an hour before they'll be here. His sensors showed the ships boosting at a very respectable normal-space acceleration. But if I don't tell her, I'm going to be in the same bad odor, just a different situation. A more important situation. Okay, here goes everything. He knocked.

Channa froze and Amos slowed down. "I'm going to kill him," she said.

Amos chuckled and kissed her; his hips moved and she gasped. "Why don't you ask what he wants first," he advised.

"WHAT IS IT NOW?"

"Uh, the enemy's just come into sensor range, four heavily armed ships, E.T.A. forty-one minutes. Sorry, guys, you needed to know!"

Channa clasped Amos to her with arms and legs. "That's... enough time," she gasped. "And if you... stop I'm going to fall you."

The hull of the station toned like a giant bell as the sprayshot slammed into the subspace antennae.

Automatic alarms made their banshee wail. Dutifully waiting with his sensors turned down, Simeon might have mistaken Channa's high shriek, under other circumstances, for a cry of alarm.

"Brief us," she called a few moments later.

Quite brief, Simeon thought, but did not say. He began, using a focused beam to cut through the noise of a very quick shower.

The corridors had been full of rushing people. Now their floatdisks were speeding down empty hallways, banking at the corners in emergency-override maneuvers as the population suited up and huddled in their shelter-sectors. The silence held no calm, only a tension so great that Channa expected sparks to pop from her hair. She gripped the handhold and looked aside at Amos. His face was set and remote, a carved image framed by the fluttering black curls of his hair.

"I'm sorry," Simeon said to Channa, whispering through her implants for the tenth time. "I wish this hadn't happened."

"Oh, give it a rest, Simeon. I'm hardly going to blame you because the rest of the universe won't organize itself for my convenience."

"Sure! Sorry!"

She grinned. "And for future reference, buddy, I much prefer 'Carmina Burana*' to alarm klaxons as

background music."

The enemy warships were in plain sight now. Simeon magnified, analyzed, and projected the results on the big screen in the secondary control chamber. The room was the usual shape, a C with a large virtualscreen at the flat section and a bank of positions and consoles. There had been a full crew here for the past few days, to eliminate the slightly fusty air of an unused facility. Now the circulators were working overtime to carry off the ketones of tension-sweat, and there were very convincing coffee-stains and rings by most of the recUner seats.

"That is the enemy," Amos said somberly.

The ships were very different tjpm the usual stubby egg shape: elongated darts, with triangular vanes swelling along most of their lengths, like flight-feathers on an arrow. Designs scrawled across their sides in the spike-and-curve script "Yup, Kolnari naval architecture," Simeon said. He set the computer on thejafcmes. "Phonetically: Shuk, Kelyug, Dhriga, Rumal." " Why the odd design?" Patsy said, leaning forward. "Not your most efficient layout"

"It is optimized for rapid atmosphere transit," Simeon said grimly. "Courier Service ships are much like that I think the Kolnari have different maneuvers in mind for their vessels. For example, swooping down to sack a town planet-side. Note the design's not uniform. They probably build, or rebuild captured hulls, as they get the chance. But it's still a class-type. Roughly equivalent to a Navy frigate, I'd say. Bigger hull, though; they must carry a humongous great crew. A hundred, at least." He studied the armament and whisded. "And, with all those weapons mountings, they must sleep in shifts."

"I'm glad you've finally gotten a chance to indulge your hobby," Channa said tighdy.

"I'm not," Simeon said. Odd, he thought That's true.

"Closing," Juke said, licking his lips. "Two of them are orbiting the station around our notional equator. The other two are closing at the poles. Closing fast. HeUT Exterior screens dampened to cut the energy flux of sudden deceleration. Alarms cheeped and burredled as energetic particles sleeted into the exterior shielding fields.

A voice roared through the hull; an induction field, vibrating the substance of the station itself. The words were blurred by the coarseness of the medium and by a thick accent Itsounded like the shoutingofan angry god.

"SCUMVERMIN SUBMIT!" Then a feedback squeal tore at their eardrums as the broadcaster adjusted. "SLAVE TO THE SEED OF HIGH-CLAN KOLNAR ARE YOU, PERSON AND NONPERSON THING OUR POSSESSION. CEASE EXTERIOR SCANATONCE!"

"What " somebody began.

Then the lights faded for a second. Everyone gasped as pressure fluctuated, and the temperature rose perceptibly. On the heels of the pressure wave came a rising wave of vibration through the hull. Banks of lights flashed from amber to red.

"Hit! We have been hit!" Patsy was shouting from her environmental systems console. "Loss of pressure, N-7 through 11!"

Simeon's hands itched, metaphorically. He had to step back and let the infuriatingly slow responses of

softshells handle his station, his body. There was one thing he could do. He cut all the active exterior sensors immediately. Except, of course, for the one that had just been converted to vapor along with a section of hull.

"Passive scanners only," Juke said. "Th... that was a high-energy particle beam."

"Chaundra here." The doctor's voice had the slightly flat tone of a vacuum suit pickup. "Rescue squads in place. The people here were all suited up. No fatalities so far. There will be radiation problems." From secondary gamma sleeting, where the beam had struck matter.

Channa acknowledged his report. Injuries could have been much higher. Would have been if the warship had come on them with no notice whatever. A screen activated, showing suited forms moving down an interior corridor, but it had the depthless bright look of light in vacuum, no blur at the edges of the shadow.

The huge voice struck again. "OBEY. GENTLE WARNINGS NONE MORE WILL BE FOREVER. STAND BY TO BE TAKEN INTO THE FIST OF HIGH CLAN KOLNAR, SCUM VERMIN."

"Eat shit and die, you fardling maniacs," Channa muttered. Amos cast her a quick look, then nodded and gave a thumbs-up gesture.

"Still closing," Juke whispered. The infrared and other passive receptors were still working. "Closing on the docking tubes, but inboard of the docking rings."

"Quick," Simeon said to Channa, like thought in her inner ear. "Get anyone there away from the tubes."

"All personnel in north and south polar docking tubes, into the core! Move!" Channa barked. Then, to privately to Simeon: "Why?"

"They're going to force-dock. I've heard of it."

The Dreadful Bride floated close to the docking tube. So close, that of a sudden she seemed small to Belazir, waiting impatiently in the off-corridor to the boarding tube, with his personal guard around him. He had an exterior feed, one of the multiple tiny screens around the lower rim of the helmet's interior. It took long training to assimilate the information without being distracted. His ship seemed like a tiny fleck of brightness next to the huge bulk of the target.

"Now," he said. But a knife is smaller than a man, too, he thought with hammering glee.

Serig stepped forward and slapped an armored palm on the bulkhead beside the combat lock. The assault party filled the antechamber. Decking shuddered beneath their feet. From his helmet's exterior view, Belazir could see the accordion-folds of the boarding tube extending their armored length. Grapnels and cutting-beams protruded from the forward edge, like the teeth of a hungry monster. A faint clung went through the ship as the tube struck. Then a savage roar of white noise as the weapons punched an oval hole through hull, conduits and inner surface, into the enemy vessel, fonn-sealing it with a sudden crude weld.

Air whistled past them from the higher pressure of the Bride into the station.

"Go!" shouted Serig. The first team leapt forward, pushing a floating, armored powergun platform before them. "Go, go, go!"

Serig followed them. Belazir bit down on his tongue, suppressing the impulse to take immediate command. Instead, he froze the joints of his armor and commanded the faceplate to show Serig's inputs, seeing what he would see.

"Oh, smooth, very smooth," Simeon said in some dismay. Channa made an enquiring sound into the denched silence of the control room.

"To begin with, they're wearing heavy field armor," he replied, calling up interior shots.

The Kolnari were in powered hardsuits. At once more massive and sleeker than the Central Worlds naval equivalent, the suits were a soft matt black, and moved with the jerky quickness of servo-powered systems. In a dosed environment they looked more elephantine than they had in Amos' shots from Bethel, more unstoppable. The deck thundered under their weight, though the pirates moved with fluid precision and the snapping quickness of long practice. Teams of three or more secured corridor junctions; techs moved behind them, tying down control of one facility after another.

"And look at the way they're moving," Simeon went on dolefully. "Look." He brought up a schematic of the station. "Power, atmosphere, communications. They're coming here, too. They've done this before."

And those plasma guns they're carrying like rifles are crewserved weapons in the Navy, he added to himself "Yes," Channa said, "that's how it looks to me. They've done this before. Only where?" "Xnd did that station die? Do I remember ever hearing of a died station? She watched in a morbid fascination as the units moved inward, following the direction of the conduits. "Of course, they're heading here now." "No resistance," Serig reported.

Either they are wise cowardsr simply wise, Belazir thought "Secure the control center! Pol?"

A miniature of the scarred face of the Shark's commander came up on one helmet screen.

"My people are meeting no resistance," she said. "All targets occupied on schedule. We have them in a nutcracker fist."

"Good, dan-kin Captain," he said. He trusted Pol more than most. She had no ambition to climb beyond her present position. Any equal of his own rank and age was a dangerous rival rival by definition, and dangerous if they had survived to climb so high. "Now we will crush their stones. Serig! Watch and wait when you've secured their command center. IT|joinyou there."

"I hear and obey, lord," Serig said, slamming through another door with his assault team.

Serig*s pickups showed a roomful of suited figures. Plain vacuum suits, some small enough to hold children, and the chamber looked to be an emergency shelter, reinforced and near the core of the station. The people moved away from the armored violence of the Kolnari like grass rippling under wind. To Serig, their cringing was a profoundly satisfying sight "Faugh!" he said in sharp disgust "There are nonhumans here! Shall I open fire, lord?"

"No, Serig," Belazir said patiently. Of course, nonhuman sentients were worse than scumvermin.

They bore none of the Divine Seed that made Kolnar. "We're going to destroy this place and everything in it, Serig. Or had you forgotten? In the meantime, we need it functional."

"I abase myself before you, Great Lord," Serig said formally another one-ord expression in the tongue.
"Proceeding with plan."

"Ooof," Channa said.

They were all lying with their faces in the fortunately soft decking with their hands tied behind their backs. The Kolnari had not moved or spoken since they ordered the others down on the floor, except when one of the stationers so much as twitched in which case they prodded them with the muzzle of a plasma rifle, hard, as one had just done to Channa. None of them spoke Standard, she thought, except perhaps the leader with the gold slashes on his arm. He had the same thick accent as the amplified voice which had hailed the station.

The iron tramp of powered-armor boots sounded in the corridor outside. Another squad of Kolnari entered. All she could see was feet and a glimpse of something heavy carried in by the last two. A voice spoke in the invader's incongruously musical, lilting tongue, and the feet with the load put something over the main communications console. There was a clunk and then a minute of high-pitched buzzing, followed by silence.

More clanks and clicking sounds. They're getting out of their armor, she thought, watching a pair of bare feet step to the deck.

"You may kneel," a voice said in Standard, much less accented than the first. Either an interpreter, or the big boss; from the authority in the tones, the latter. "Let those who once led here, identify themselves."

"Obey!" screamed the other voice, the first one, and a foot sank into her side.

Channa grunted and came to her knees, sinking back on her heels. Then she raised her eyes and gasped.

The pirate chieftain was the most beautiful human being she had ever seen. 190 centimeters, but so perfectly proportioned that he looked shorter. His skin was black not the dark-brown usually miscalled as such, but an actual gunmetal black; tightly stretched over long, swelling muscles, and he stood and moved as lightly as a racehorse. Much of this was visible, because what the pirates wore under their armor turned out to be a pair of tight briefs the same color as their skins, and an equipment belt. The chieftain's race had the same inhuman exotic perfection as his body: high cheekbones, slightly aquiline nose, full lips, slanted yellow eyes, and the long mane of white-blond hair was caught at the back with a clip of silver and iridescent feathers.

Channa blinked, shook her head, and forced herself to look at the others. Apart from a pair still in power armor, the rest looked eerily similar. Two of those were women, with the same features and long lean bodies. Even their breasts looked as if they were carved out of ebony... and the expressions differed, of course. The pirate beside the chief was paring his nails with a small sharp knife. He looked at her and smiled. Channa glanced down again.

Ok, great, Simeon thought, noting the reaction from the others as well. We've been boarded by the Ultimately Intimidating Elves from, Hell. Owl That hurt. Something tugged at him, catling.

Behind Channa, one of the armored troopers touched his belt. The unoccupied suits turned and marched like a line of lockstep golems to stand themselves along the walls.

Ow! Pain-signals flooded in from the computer extensions of Simeon's mind. Emergency overrides. He turned his attention inwards.

Channa subvocalized. There was no reply.

"Simeon!"

"I am the Lord Captain Belazir t'Marid Kolaren," the pirate chief said so My. "Master here now, by right of conquest. I hold your lives in my fist, to spare or crush as I will. Who led here before we came?"

I H CHAPTER SEVENTEEN " I* helpboss helpbossowowow OW!

Simeon had never told anyone about the AI system. Well, nobody but Tell Ration. He was interfaced with the computers directly, of course; he could "remember" anything in the banks and use their capacities the way he could those of his own human brain. The AI program was something else again. It was as sophisticated as anything this side of Central. He and Tell had spent many a happy hour tweaking it further. Simeon needed the best. There were limits to how many tasks even a shellperson could do simultaneously, and many were far too routine for continual supervision. An ordinary human had the hindbrain for running heart, lungs, and other physical basics, a consciousness for thought, and a subconscious for monitoring and mental housecleaning. Simeon had the AI. help! boss!

Of course, it was impossible to actually visualize what was going on in the AI system, any more than you could visualize every neuron firing in your brain. Simeon had chosen to make it something of a playground, with something he had always wanted.

"Here, boy!" Simeon called.

He was standing he had a softshell body in the virtual world of the AI on a grassy plain, cut up into pathways by tall hedges with gaps. The sensations were full-tactile; only smell and taste were missing. This part of the landscape was memory-scan and basic access control programming, all analogued to the physical.

Both sense and response, automatically translated into algorithms by a subprogram.

"Here boy!" He whistled sharply. "I'm here, boy!"

A dog bounded into view around a corner. It was the dog of his dreams, big and shaggy-red, with floppy ears ;ind a cold wet nose* It was also the SSS-900-C's primary artificial intelligence program.

Now it was surrounded by a swarm of wasps, huge malevolent things with wingspans a meter across. Their beaks were hollow, and out of them wormed long pink tongues, lashing and rasping with serrated teeth set along their sides. A dozen bleeding wounds marked the dog's sides. One of the wasps clung to its head, with the tongue pulsing out and into the animal's ear. boss! help!

The dog's barking voice was weakening. Simeon stepped forward, and the ground shook with his anger. Beneath it was fear. The pirates had clamped something to the communications console and now he knew what it was. A specialized battle computer, stocked with worm and subversion programs. If it took over his hardware, he was doomed.

He turned the Jets cap backward on his head and gestured. A glowing green enchanted bat appeared in one hand, a hand that was suddenly gauntleted with steel, part of the armor that covered him. With the

other steel glove he grasped the wasp on the dog's head and crushed it, pulling. The long tongue flailed as he pulled it out of the brain, jerking and cutting bone with a tooth-grating sound.

On my own, then, Channa thought. "I am Station Chief Channa Hap," she said. "This is my colleague, Simeon-Amos."

The Kolnari commander remained motionless, like a statue in oiled ebony. His companion reached down and jerked her to her feet by the front of her coverall. Fingers like steel rods slammed into shoulder, ribcage, hip. Pain flowered through her in a wave that snapped her teeth shut with a grinding clack and left her limply boneless when he released her to sarawl facedown on the decking.

For minutes she was too limp, to do more than sprawl. Amos had surged halfway to his feet. The Kolnari who had struck Channa turned and gave him a casual buffet across the side of the head: the sound was like a wet board hitting conqyete. Amos flew backwards two meters and ploughed into the deck at an awkward angle. One of the others hooked him back to Channa's side with a foot. He lay with glazed eyes, breathing in a harsh rasp that sent bubbles of blood oozing from nose and mouth. She forced down an overwhelming impulse to rush to him, but their lives depended on her wits.

"Scumvermin address the Divine Seed of Kolnar as 'Great Lord,' " the second-in-command said. He put a foot on Channa's neck and ground her face into the coarse fabric that covered the floor. "When the Lord Captain Belazir addresses them, they respond with 'Master and God.'"

Eat shit and die, Master and God, Channa thought.

"Master and God," she managed to choke out, the words muffled by the synthetic fabric.

Belazir nodded benignly, a slight smile on his carven lips. "Let her rise to her knees once more. Ignorance pardons nothing but explains much. Do you understand?" he said to Channa.

"I understand perfectly, Master and God," she said to the Kolnari leader. "You're the Good Pirate and he's the Bad Pirate, eh?"

Belazir frowned a moment, then threw back his head and laughed in delight as he caught the reference.

"No no," he said, restraining his companion with a slight gesture. The feral aggression in the other man's face was unchecked, but he sank back obediently. "You do not understand my good Serig's role at all." He turned to the other prone figures. "Up on your knees, scum vermin. Announce yfour functions."

The lights flickered? Belazir looked up sharply. One of the Kolnari spoke from beside the mechanism damped to the communications terminal.

Channa felt her stomach damp with a fear older and more visceral than the pirates. Something was interfering with basic station functions.

The dog lay panting, healing visibly but more slowly than it should. The wasps lay crushed or buzzing malevolently at a distance. Simeon's great bronze shield prevented their approach. On its surface were concentric rings of figures. Great heros: Armstrong, da Luis, Helva. At last the dog crawled over and licked Simeon's ankles, whimpering. good better make'emgoaway(!) boss Simeon checked the dog, who had sustained no permanent damage, although there was some memory loss.

"Get up," he said. "Run." runl "Change it as you go," Simeon said. "Game.** He added specifications.

game!

The hedges melted and shifted as the dog ran, long ears flopping in the mild afternoon sun. A new sound came from around a long corridor in the memorymaze. A long raw raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa sound, like what was that ancient holo? Like a chain saw! Then the beast that made the noise surged around the corner.

Wow, Simeon thought. Wormprogram, indeed.

The end of the creature stretched off into the distance, a grayish-pink tentacle covered in rough-edged scales. It was two meters thick, an endless segmented arm of tough fibrous muscle, dripping acid mucous. Where it passed, the bare ground smoked. Each drop of slime turned the dust into a pulsing globule the size of a fist, like a wet cyst. When jjiiese popped, a longtongued wasp crawled out, flexed its wings, and took to the air to join the buzzing cloud around the worm. The head of the thing reared up suddenly, sprang open like a fleshy blossom. Twenty looping pseudopods whirled around it, each one tipped with a lidless eye. At their meeting was a series of qpcular mouths, one within the other, each ringed with pyramid-shaped teeth of urine-colored diamond. The teeth spun and clenched and gritted over each others' adamantine surfaces in a continuous blurred roar of hostile sound.

"By their programs shall ye know them," Simeon intoned, suddenly wishing that he had not made the construct he inhabited in this virtual reality quite so vividly lifelike. He could definitely do without the dry mouth, pounding heart, and sinking stomach right now, for example. He could change the setting, but that would deprive him of one more slender advantage; his familiarity with it. So long as the matrix remained, the intruder had to fight on his terms.

"These people are not going to garner many SUM's," he said resolutely, and stepped forward, raising his shield. Central awarded Social Utility Marks to a number of unlikely people, but this would really be stretching the bounds of possible recipients.

"Come on, you bastard!" he shouted aggressively. "Nobody hurts my dog!"

The worm program struck. Simeon groaned, stamped his feet into the ground, and braced his shoulder against the shield. Data/fangs gnawed at it, recoiling with a sound like frying bacon amid choking clouds of green vapor. His bat flailed, knocking aside eye-tentacles and tongue-wasps. For a long subjective time there was only batter and strike, leap and wiggle and dodge. The oozing serrated mouth loomed in constant menace. It wants to swallow my pattern whole and assimilate it in one gulp.1 Tongue-worms flicked alarmingly around his head. They would subvert the Master Control Program with Ikeir probes. He continued to flail the wasps out of the air, stamped them underfoot, swung the bat, and an eye exploded in a shower of black syrup like a giant overripe fig. Finally, the worm recoiled for a moment, and Simeon whirled aside and fled, dodging and jinking through the maze.

Got to keep it off-balance, confused, he thought, listening to its triumphant screeching hard on his heels. Every muscle in his "body" already felt bruised. But it was more satisfying that way, too. Knowing you'd disorganized a section of code wasn't nearly as much fun as seeing blood or ichor, in this case fly and feeling flesh pulp under a blow. The howl sounded again, closer.

"Talk about your slash-and-burn data collection," he gasped in time with the pounding of his stride. What sort of maniacs would let something like this loose inside an information system? It had to be destroying as much as it gathered.

Got to make it think it's won, eventually. Isolate it in the outer subsystems of the computers, keeping the ultimate control-keys behind barriers the worm thought were the edge of the entire system. Otherwise, it

would infest the whole system, like maggots in rotting meat. Including his own mind, unless he committed suicide by severing all connections between his organic brain and the data system.

That was an unfortunate image. He flashed back to the refugee ship and the dead Bethelites, their bodies moving with burrowing life. / will pull the plug first, he thought grimly. Theoretically, it was impossible to self-destruct the station. In practice, he probably could. Win or die.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar the worm screeched.

"As Channa would say, eat shit and die." Simeon panted the words out as he turned a corner and took a stance again. Thorns and leaves Hew into the air as the data-worm tried to smash directly through to him. Then there was a huge splat sound and a wailing cry of pain as it ploughed into the stone core of the hedge. That persuaded it to come around the corner. It seemed larger; frothy pink blood streamed around the working, palping mouths. Some of the teeth had shattered on stone, but they generated as he watched. The worm's approach made the ground shake. Behind him, he could hear the wuffle and growl of the AI, setting new barriers and deceptions.

"Step right up, lay right down!" Simeon bellowed. Don't worry about the others. This is going to take attyour attention for a while.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

This time the gravity bounced them about as the lights flickered. Belazir turned to the technicians with a well-controlled snarl of impatience.

"What now?"

"Great Lord, there is unexpected resistance. We thought the worm was successfully penetrating the Master Control programs, but they wiggled free. We are making progress, but the AI is exceptionally agile the parallel "

Belazir cut them off with a gesture. "I am interested in results, not jargon-laden excuses. Grasp the core in your fist, and quickly."

He turned back to his prisoners. What naked faces they have, he thought. In a new conquest, it was often so. Those who survived long learned better, but it could be entertaining.

Reports of the station's assets and supplies were flooding in. getter than I expected, he thought exultantly. Far fatter. Unimaginably rich! This facility could build dreadnoughts, given a little time and the plans which were available in the Clan's computers.

The High Clan's greatest weakness was the lack of ;arge purpose-buttt \rarships. They could turn out frigates, more or less, but for larger craft they could only modify captures. Nocobbled-togethermerchanter could rival the performance of real battlecraft. A warship was more than a ship with weapons and defense-systems: it was a single organism, almost living in itself. Must we abandon the shipyard"} The frustration was as agonizing as the satisfaction of taking the station was euphoric, with its destruction as a second orgasmic "hit." On the other hand, possession of such equipment would cut generations from the great plan, the spreading of the Divine Seed of Kolnar and the power of the Clan.

Even worse was the humiliation the Clan had suffered for too long. The human galaxy teemed with such

prizes, yet the Clan fleet must skulk about the outworlds, gnawing discarded scraps: border worlds, miserable settlements of poverty-stricken exile, like Bethel. Skulk like jackals, even as they had been driven from their lands and possessions on their ancient homeworld. Gnawing poor bones, while feasts like this lay spread before them. Intolerable! It was not to be borne!

His pleasure dissolved. "You have maintained physical separation?" he asked, his irritation at this check palpable.

The technician ducked his head. "Of course, Great Lord. No data enters our machines from this system save by hedron. All such hedrons are first analyzed to the last byte of information. Our duplicate backups are kept powered down and physically severed while any captured data is running."

Belazir nodded. "Continue," he said, satisfied that elementary precautions were being taken. You will suffer, you will suffer, ahhhh, how you will suffer, he thought, barring mental teeth at the universe that stood between the Clan and its apotheosis. All of them would writhe in the fist, one day. "You have a preliminary report?"

"Affirmative, Great Lord," the technician said, Why can technicians never use a simple word where their accursed slang can be stretched to fit? Belazir wondered as he heard the technician out;

"We captured the message logs in the first penetration, before the AI reacted. No nonroutine messages to Central, except the arrival and spontaneous destruction of a large, mysterious ship. Little evidence was left. Central said they would search their files."

With a white-toothed grin, Belazir condescended to give a nod in reply. "Excellent! Order: launch the message torpedo. Summon the transports, all that can be spared; also personnel for the disassembly."

He looked around at his fighters, smiling. "Well done. We will settle in, drinking the prey dry and eating it to the bone at our leisure. Staff, draw up a preliminary plan to strip as much as possible as quickly as possible and load efficiently when the transport arrives."

Smaller, high-value loot would go to the victorious flotilla, of course. He would have to arrange priorities: priorities that would give the Bride the first and best pick, and the Vrsrk's Age of Darkness the last and worst, of course.

Part of his attention had been on Serig's interrogation of the prisoners. He brought his head up, smiling at the executive officer's wit. "He says," he translated for the benefit of the scumvermin Serig had been taunting, "that he will explore your internal environment, Environment Systems Officer Coburn."

No! Channa thought hard at her. Don't resist, Patsy!

The older woman's broad fair face was flushed, red spots on her cheeks showing her rage. The pirate reached a hand down her shirt and squeezed a breast casually. Patsy spat in his face.

Channa started to rise. Belazir jabbed a precisely calculated toe into her bruised stomach. She collapsed to the deck again. The pirate grabbed her ear in strong, almost prehensile toes and forced her head around.

"Watch, scumvermin," he said pleasantly. "And learn not to defy the High Clan."

Behind her there was a flurry as Amos tried to rise again. A Kolnari pounded her heel into the small of his

back over the kidneys and he collapsed with a stifled shriek, thrashing. Nobody else moved.

Simeon, she thought desperately. Simeon!

Serig touched his face where the spittle ran and spoke in his own language. The other Kolnari laughed or grinned, watching with bright-eyed interest. Patsy took advantage of his inattention, lashing out in a kick at his groin. A fist snapped down and met the rising foot with a sound like a mallet hitting rock. Patsy gave a sharp gasp of pain. With bound hands, she was thrown off-balance and staggered back against the coffee table. The Kolnari laughed as she almost fell, stripping away his harness and tossing it aside. The briefs came away with it, memory-plastic rolling up into the belt. The stationer's clothes followed, torn away as if they were paper while one hand held her immobilized, clamped to her jaw. He stepped back and stood like a licentious Greek statue, gestured.

"Down," he said in Standard. "Spread."

Yes, Belazir thought, looking down at Channa. In the end, this one is mine. But not at once. With subtlety.

As a child, Belazir t'Marid had been the despair of his mothers and nurses. For all their whippings and shockrod treatments, for all the day-cycles spent locked in the hotbox, they could never break him of the nasty habit of toying with his "food."

Simeon dropped to the ground, panting. Atop the distant mountain, another wing of the castle crumbled and fell into the gulfs below with an earthquake rumble of rock. The worm screamed triumph and wound itself further around the central tower as flames billowed into the darkening sky. A tiny figure stood on the battlements above the monster, waving a bat that glowed iridescent green. Queasy, Simeon switched viewpoints, just in time to see the open maw engulf his pseudo-construct duplicate. The gnashing teeth ripped it into shreds. The illusion faded and his last sight from it was a rushing universe of light and onoffonoffonoffonoffonoff as the code was disassembled and "digested" by the intruder.

Phew, he thought, shakily turning his Jets cap rightside around again. That ought to hold km. For a while, at least. The worm would be here, always probing and testing, as long as the Kolnari battle-computer stayed clamped to the SSS-900-C's system. Even if he destroyed the program and purged his system, that would merely ring every alarm the enemy had. They'd only launch another worm immediately, with a different configuration. Despite its self-modifying abilities, he knew this one now!

Gently, stepping backward, brushing his footprints out of the sand, he faded from the blasted landscape of cinders, where pustules in the soil spewed line after line of questing wasps.

"The Knight came home from the quest; Muddied and sore he came. Battered of shield and crest, Bannerless, bruised and lame "

Charma was weeping. "Jliat was his first thought, as his "other" awareness flared back. Everything was a little murky, but he could see dearly enough down into the lounge. She was sitting on the sofa next to Amos, head cradled against his shoulder, sobbing with slow misery. Both of them looked battered, as if they'd been thrown from a moving vehicle. Amos winced every time he moved.

"Channa!" Simeon said when a few microseconds' of a scan told him the room was safe. A little further adjustment put an innocuous scene on the security system the Kolnari and their computers were monitoring. "Channa, are you all right?"

"Where were you!" Channa shouted, springing erect. "Where were you, Simeon?"

"I was "

Simeon noticed what was playing over the general channel, again and again, locked in from the command circuits. Nearing the end of one loop, Channa was kneeling by Patsy's side, trying to staunch the hemorrhage with the scraps of her clothing.

"Please, Master and God, may I summon the doctor?"

"Of course," the pirate chieftain said. "We are a reasonable people." A broad smile. "As you see, you were wrong. / am the 'bad pirate.' Serig is the worse pirate."

Simeon blinked back to the present. He felt his automatic feeds cut in, damping down hormonal flows and adrenal glands, filtering his blood. Even so, he came as close to feeling faint as he ever had.

"I... oh, God, God" he whispered. "Shit." There were no words adequate in any lexicon.

S14 "Where were you, Simeon?"

"Fighting," he said. "Channa, they put a worm program into the station system. I had to fight it, it was a monster. If I hadn't, it would have burrowed right into my brain and eaten me. I'd also be under their control and telling them everything they wanted to know. I couldn't even self-destruct!" i * "I see," Channa said, "Not that there was anything you could have done for us. Excuse me." She walked quickly into her quarters: he could hear water splashing.

Amos stood, left hand clenched around right fist. "Though they be thieves from their birth, for this, they shall pay," he said softly, almost to himself. "For Patsy, for Keriss, for my sister and my father's house and for all they have done, by the living soul of God, they shall pay in full, every jot and tittle."

Channa came back, her face set harder than Simeon had ever seen it. She waved Amos back and turned to the pillar.

"What damage did you sustain?" she asked in a professional tone.

"Nothing crucial yet," Simeon said. "I've got to keep a fair share of my attention and the system's capacity involved in just watching and waiting. That worm program mutates like a retrovirus: the sort that never gives up. I could dean it out if I dared. Apart from that, I've lost about a third of the memory and computational capacity. That's what could be termed 'occupied territory*' at the moment. With luck, their computer will keep thinking that's all there is. It's powerful but specialized. They haven't hooked up their ship computers to the station, yet Probably afraid of us hacking in to them.

"But," he went on, "I've got to be really careful Any action I take in what they think is safe territory has to be elaborately screened. I can jimmy the records. However, even I can't make the impossible convincing."

THE CITY vmo FOUGHT S15 She narrowed her eyes. "Could you take back those functions in a hurry?"

"Somewhere from seconds to minutes. They'd know pretty quick, and that battle-computer they've got jacked in could... hmm. Come to think of it, I could probably take that over* too. But they'd know."

"No problem...later. Can we conference?"

"Yeah, I've got all of their people under continuous surveillance."

"We'd better get moving as soon as we can," she said.

Simeon made an affirmative sound. "Our people are going to be pretty shook up," he said. I sure am.

"We've got to get things in hand, before they start lashing out It'll take some time though, for a cycle when they're all available."

"Good. Let's get, hmmm, Chaundra, the section leaders, and " Amos began.

"Everyone's gone," Seld Chaundra said in a low and careful voice. "You sure we oughta do this, Joat?"

Joseph said ** "Joe can wait a minute, 'n so can you, carrot-face," she whispered. "Now keep that thing running, hey?"

He nodded and bent again over the two modules and the jack clipped to the main conduit above them. This way was very narrow an adult would have to be a dwarf to get through but it came in conveniendy over the sickbay entrance.

"Look," he went on, without glancing up. He was still breathing hard from the effort of crawling up the axial ventway. "Look, maybe Ms. Coburn doesn't need someone else talking to her right now? It's been less than a day, and "

"Yeah, I saw the broadcast, too," she said. She had. Seld had fainted. His meets weren't doing him as much good as they should. "You stay here."

She crawled forward, pushing the local sensor-override unit ahead of her. To the naked eye, the cover of the duct was a panel just like all the others. The only real difference was that it was selectively permeable and much thinner. It recessed obediently and Joat looked down into a darkened room. One float bed, the usual Jurnhure, and a figure under the sheet She curled herself into a bafI and somersaulted slowly through the opening, holding on with her fingertips and then dropping the final meter to the floor.

"You awake?" she said, moving to the bedside. "It's Joat"

Coburn's eyes were open. She lay motionless, but they tracked through the darkness. Joat shone a small light under her own chin. She had procured for herself a very expensive coverall, made of adjustable lightfibers. Simeon had gotten it for her because it was fashionable, but with a little creativity you could rig it to mimic the ambient background color, which was right now a mottled charcoal gray. Her face floated above it in the lightstick's feeble low-setting glow.

"Go 'way, Joat," the woman said in a dull voice. Her face looked old, under the sealant bandages. "I don't need any more sympathy. Leave me alone."

"Great, 'cause sympathy's not what I'm gonna give you," Joat said. She brought her face closer to Patsy's, and her own eyes held the same flat deadness. "Let me tell you something about me." She explained, in a flat, matter-of-fact tone all about her father, her uncle, the captain.

"So I know, Ms. Coburn," she went on. "Forget what anyone else's said. They don't know jack shit But Joat, she knows exactty how you feel. And like I said, you don't need sympathy right now. I know what

you do need."

Slowly, Patsy raised herself on her elbow. "An* what would that be?"

Silently, Joat reached around and opened her haversack. Her gloved hand came out with Patsy Sue Coburn's gunbelt and arc pistol.

"Payback," Joat whispered steadily. "And here's how it's gonna be "

The medical-storage room had its own surveillance subloop. That made it a good place for the clandestine-meeting. It was also chilly, bare, and crowded. The walls were gray metal bins outlined with fluorescent paint. Appropriate, given the state of our morale, Channa thought "I have two hundred fifty-seven people down with the virus," Chaundra said. "The symptoms are spectacular but not life-threatening, as long as they stay hooked to the machinery. I have also treated sixty-four patients for traumas and wounds of various sorts. No fatalities, so far. One or two are in critical condition, but they should recover. This total includes several of my medical aids who have been assaulted by Kolnari coming to check up on our 'sick.' They seem to find the sight disgusting and... exciting at one and the same time. Several of Outpatients have been assaulted."

So much for scaring them off with the virus, Channa thought "Patsy?" she asked aloud. She's my friend. Patsy hadn't wanted to talk to her or anyone else, which was understandable. Did I want to know about her.

"She... there were no broken bones, apart from the foot. I internally splinted that " gluing the bones together in a synthetic sheath stronger than the original material, to give them a matrix to heal " replaced the lost blood, and plas-sutured all the soft-tissue injuries. Ms. Coburn is mobile although in some... physical... discomfort. With the usual growth stimulators, full recovery should take no more than a week."

He licked his lips nervously. "I cannot answer for her mental state. I fear catatonia. I have administered the usual psychotropics, but the mind is more than the brain and its chemistry."

Channa nodded jerkily. "Anything else?"

"Yes. I now have... abundant tissue samples from the Kolnari. There are things we should discuss privately."

Amos looked at the faces in the screen. "Continue as planned," he said. "The enemy are pushing you to work. Be as stupid as you dare. Make mistakes as often as you dare. Above all, keep as much material half-disassembled as you can."

"When are we going to fight them?" somebody burst out. "You and Simeon, talk a good fight, about Cochise and the Viet Gong " Gong, Simeon corrected silently " so far all we're doing is rolling over!"

"There is the virus," Simeon said. "That's working, they're catching it. I've begun psychological operations. Most important, I've deciphered their language." That brought a rush. "It's not much like the ones in the survey files both are pidgin Sinhala Tamil, but... anyway, I've got it. They've ordered sixty units here."

"Oh, great!" the man barked. "More of them!"

"Shut up," Channa remarked. "That means they're not just going to strip the station of everything they can

carry in their warships and then blow it up. You can't kill a cow and milk it. It'll be at least a week before the transports arrive. There ought to be about sixty of them. You know how long it takes us to load sixty freighters with homogenous ore when we're trying to work fast. Imagine what it will take to remove and load fixed equipment, with everyone dragging their feet. And the more of them that are here, the more will be caught when the Fleet arrives."

"And," Amos said, with a feral smile, "that means we can be more direct in the interim. Do not worry, my friends. They, too, will suffer, know fear and pain."

That brought a chorus of satisfaction.

We think revenge is primitive, Simeon thought, until we need it to satisfy indignity and humiliation. He was feeling considerable desire in that direction himself Amos lifted a hand. "Wait We want to lure as many of them into the station as possible as Insurance, and so we can wear them down. JBut we cannot risk key people who know a good deal about our plans and our station prisoners being dragged in for interrogation because they thought they could be clever. No action is to be taken save on my express orders. The personnel to effect those orders will be fitted with a suicide tooth and have psych profiles which assure its use. Wait until you receive orders. We have a fine general " he nodded in Simeon's direction" and wemust follow his words."

That brought silence.

"We'll try levering them to cut back on the atrocities," Channa said. "Say it's reducing working efficiency that's true enough. Stay tight, endure! We'll see them all fried yet! Out."

One by one the faces vanished from the screen, except for Chaundra's.

"The bad news, Doctor," she said.

This meeting was a fleeting thing, time stolen as they were all supposedly on their way somewhere else. They could fool the sensors for a while, but nobody could explain being in two positions at once, one of them under the real-time eyes of the enemy. Only the fact that there were fifteen-thousand odd of the stationers and less than a tenth that number of Kolnari made it possible at all. That and the invaders' imperfect control of the surveillance computers.

Channa studied Chaundra's grim face. "What is it?" she asked him.

He scrubbed his face with both hands and shrugged, exhaustion in his voice. "It's not working."

"What is not working?" Amos asked impatiently.

"The virus," Chaundra said. "They are infected somewhat but it hardly bothers them at all."

"Shit!" Channa swore. She had hoped die illness would make the Kolnari shun civilians of their own volition. "Doesn'tit have any effect?"

"Mild headache, some nausea, onexr two cases of diarrhea for a day or so. All in all, much l|ss than our people have experienced even with the immunization. The afflicted individuals act embarrassedjiot frightened, and their companions laugh at them." Chaundra shrugged in despair. "I move that we discontinue this plan. Our people are getting raped, beaten, humiliated and catching the flu while the Kolnari just havefun. I tested their tissue samples the Kolnari immune system is barely human. If some of

the rape victims were not pregnant, I would doubt that the Kolnari are human. No, I correct that Of human origin. Their actions certainly are not," he added bitterly.

"Pregnant?" Channa asked, bewildered.

"I terminated," he said, "ectopic pregnancies, in the fallopian tubes. This despite slow-release implant contraceptives." Those made the body's own immune system treat sperm as foreign matter until counteracted.

"Channa, the pirates seem to have metallic-salt and other contaminant levels that should make every one of them stone sterile. Instead, their sperm are a whole order of magnitude more motile than the norm. The rest of their systems are built the same way. Their antibody response is... their bodies use the poisons to kill bacterial or viral invaders. Their DNA is locked into position with redundancy and self-repair mechanisms like nothing I have ever seen, resistant both to radiation and to viral contamination."

"I refuse to believe these animals are supermen," Amos said.

"Oh, they're not that," Chaundra said. "From their DNA, I'd say they have shorter lifespans than ours. I imagine the degeneration past early middle-age is... spectacular and swift, as the whole system abruptly foils. Several other disadvantages; for example, they could not live without dioxin and arsenic compounds in their food. An equivalent of scurvy would strike them."

He fell silent' * "There's something else you're hiding, Doctor," Channa said quietly. Amos sat more erect, glancing narrowly from the woman to the screen, "Tell us!"

Bingo, Simeon thought, narrowing in on Chaundra's pupil dilation and breathing.

"There is a possibility," Chaundra said, looking aside from the pickup. "Another virus." A long pause. "The one that killed Mary. It is of unparalleled virulence. Possibly the worst natural... unnatural disease ever to be discovered."

Amos' head jutted forward. "Why did you not mention this before?" he asked harshly.

"Because it killed my wife!" Chaundra shouted suddenly; the more startling coming from so mild a man. "Because it is killing my son!" More softly, more rationally: "Because I swore that the filthy disease should never kill another human being. I no longer classify the Kolnari under that heading."

"Still," Channa said, "the virus is a good plan. The enemy don't have much medical capability at all And Chaundra has lucidly explained why they don't need it For our purposes they are medically ignorant Little expertise beyond treating wounds and broken bones, really. I get the impression they just sort of...junk anyone who's sicker than that"

Chaundra looked thoughtful, professional competence taking over despite himself. "I do not have the live virus, you understand. But I have the information on a minihedron. The protein is nothing, the replicator can produce it immediately. But modifications... yes. What sort of disease did you have in mind?"

"Something scary," she said.

"Something fetal," Amos added.

"If possible," she agreed. "But at the least, spectacularly incapacitating, disgusting, horrifying. Something

with mental deterioration? We want them terrified, and what's more terrifying than madness?"

"Whoa now, I dunno," Simeon said. "Do you really want a stationload of crazy Kolnari? Crazier than they already are, I mean."

They looked thoughtful and slightly sick.

"No, no, wait a moment," Chaundra said, and paused. "As Channa suggested, we could target only those who've had the virus. They catch it. It's just not capable of getting much beyond the first few cells. Antibody response is very quick. That's a manageable part of the Kolnari force, enough to hurt and rattle them without driving them into a killing frenzy. It would be cumulative, spread among themselves. Close contact is needed, and I could increase that. Immunize our people stealthily, under the guise of normal treatment. It can be done. I'm sure of it."

"Get on it, then," Channa said. When the doctor's image had faded: "That takes care of that!"

Simeon's image nodded. It was less mobile than usual, with so much capacity tied up. "This is a war of morale. Guerilla war always is. We have to demoralize them, and much more important, maintain our own morale."

Or our people will crack and someone will go to the Kolnan, went unspoken among them.

"Speaking of which," Amos said, rising. "Must you?" Channa said quietly. "Yes, I must," he replied, walking over to her and lifting a hand to his lips. The gesture seemed far more natural than it had at first, less staged.

"This isn't going to work for long," Channa said to the air, after he had left.

"It doesn't have to," Simeon replied. "Only long enough."

"Get ready, Seld," Joat breathed.

"I'm ready" he whispered back. He was pale and sweating heavily. --"A Her hand rested on the diaphragm that separated the vent from the corridor. Her other hand gripped the spring-loaded device, adjusting it so the red dot on the notescreen image beside her lay precisely over a spot in the corridor. Below, Patsy waited at the junction of the passageways, one hand behind the concealing wall. That hand held the arc pistol, but if all went well they would not need it.

If all did not go well, they were probably going to die in the next twenty seconds or so. Die quickly if they were lucky.

"One of them," Seld said. "Still only one." He was peering into the miniscreen jacked into the security cameras from their local lead. "Still coming."

Bare feet scuffed lightly below. The Kolnari came swiftly, not running: they seemed to walk on the balls of their feet in a light half-trot most of the time. He checked slightly at the sight of Patsy.

"Who goes?" he called.

Stationers not on essential duties were supposed to be in their cabins. Then he recognized her and smiled. One taken by the na Marid was a prestigious victim and here she was, walking alone. He started

towards her, speeding up as she dodged around the corner.

The warrior was stopping and turning even as Joat keyed the diaphragm open. His speed was awesome, but she had triggered the hand-cobbled device at the same instant the panel came down. Behind her there was a click that meant Seld had cut in the damper. For the next few minutes, security records would show an empty corridor. Safe, unless a human observer were looking. Even checking the files would show recording errors, normal enough considering the havoc the Kolnari had caused the station computers.

The darts struck the Kolnari as his finger was tightening on the trigger of his own* weapon. A hundred thousand volts flowed through the thread-thin superconductor wires behind them. He convulsed.

K-tash. Hot air blossomed away from the plasma rifle around a rod of sun-hot violence, literally sun-hot; it was an ultra-miniaturized, laser-triggered deuterium fusion pellet focused by magnetic fields. Normally the pirate's muscle and reflex would have been enough to hold it steady on his aiming point. Now the superheated gas slewed his lifeless body around and the substance of the walls sublimed away, the beam chopping through synthetics and conduits and the empty chambers beyond. There was a hiss and cherp-cherp-dierp of pressure alarms as the outer hull was punctured.

Joat winced. That was -not part of the plan. "Quick," she said in soft urgency. Dropping down into the corridor and grasping the pirate's weapon, she heaved it up.

"Here," she gasped, wobbling under the burden of the clumsy thing. Between them, Seld and Joat got it up into the duct. Then she bent and grabbed one of the Kolnari's arms. She heaved and her heels skidded. The juddering, twitching body was heavy, far heavier than a man dressed only in a belt and briefs ought to be. Patsy darted back.

"It's not hm?" she said.

"It'll do for starters," Joat said with a grunt. "C'monr Together they dragged the body to the airlock around the corner and cycled it through.

"Meet you at N-7a x L," Joat panted, trotting back to the open diaphragm. "Need that stuff on the list."

"I'll be there," Patsy said.

"H will work," Joseph said reassuringly. "At least once," he amended. "Joat is an odd child, but any contraption she claims will function, will function."

Amos nodded dubiously. / have never found reason to doubt you in matters of violence, he thought. That was fomforting. On the otnbr hand, no man was infallible, and even Joseph was an amateur at war.

They were in the lower-equatorial park, near the central core of the station's upper globe. For a wonder, there were no surveillance cameras here. By Central World law, there had to be such places in any substantial habitat. Most of the inhabitants being law-abiding types, SSS-900-C's was in the park. It was fairly large, several hundred hectares, with part of the station water-reserves deployed as lakes and ponds. Currently it was in nightcycle, and the Kolnari seemed to find that fascinating. Amos could understand that. He had found it heartbreakingly like, and yet unlike, Bethel. The scents were strange, greener, and fresher than the arid hills of the Sierra Nueva estates, milder than the irrigated lowlands. Strange birds or was it small animals? chirred and rustled in the undergrowth. He was an outdoors man, but these were not the fields he knew.

"They come," Joseph said. "To stay," he added.

He moved off into the shadows of the bushes, bent low, moving with a skill he had learned in the alleys of his childhood and the hunting grounds of his leader's properties in later years.

God was not entirely unfair. The Kolnari hearing was not quite as good as human norm; it need not be in the thicker air of their homeworld. Amos crouched with hunter's patience, waiting as if for sicutooth.

God of our fathers, be with me now, he prayed with utter sin "Hai, dog-turds, what brings you out this fair night?" Joseph's voice rang clear. "Tired of banging your mothers or looking for sheep?"

Amos felt a lurch of fear. They were counting on the enemy's inexperience with guerilla tactics, their arrogance. That was perilously close to counting on the Kolnari being stupid, and that was dangerous.

Pounding feet came closer: Joseph's heavier tread, and the lighter, fester sound of ffie folk the hell-planet bred. Joseph flashed between the trees with his head down, arms and legs pumping. The pursuers seemed to float by contrast, loping effortlessly like men on a low-gravity moon. Their eyes and trailing manes glowed lambent in the simulated starlight, and their movements had the aching gracefulness of swans taking flight. They were beautiful, and horrible beyond belief, and he feared them in a way that had nothing to do with the long knives in their hands.

He stepped out. They stopped with a plunging abruptness. Their heads turned to scan him with the smooth accuracy of gun-turrets tracking under computer control. Joat had counted on that in designing her gadget A scanner detected the alignment of their eyes.

The thing he carried strapped to his chest yawped. Then it was red-hot, and he was scrabbling to rip it loose and toss it away. The pirates stumbled as if they had run into a wall of iron. They screamed as if that iron were white hot and dropped their knives to tear at their feces in a frenzy of pain.

Scream, dogs, Amos thought, gratified. Scream as Bethel screamed, as Bstsy screamed, scumvermin/i&A.

Cries of pain were not going to attract attention on the SSS-900-C: not while it was held in the Fist of High Clan Kolnar.

A dozen men and women edged out of the shadows. Cutting bars and lengths of dull-gleaming synth tubing were in their hands. Amos reached over his back and drew a long curved sword from its sheath with the slender sound of steel on steel: the motion so long practiced from blade-dance training that it was as unconscious as breathing. The heads of the Kolnari turned toward the sounds he made; their ruined eyes were circles of blood-red now, and tears of blood dribbled down their cheeks. They moaned in their agony, but they moved toward him, teeth bared in a rictus of pain a&d savagery.

"Quickly, but carefully," Amos said to the others dosing in on their victims.

Afterwards they must throw their clothes into disposal and go through full decontamination cleansing.

Joseph was behind the blinded pirates, a half-dozen stationers at his back. Two knives glinted in his hands.

"Now!" Amos said. ® CHAPTER N&ETEEN "Shall I perform an autopsy, Great Lord?" the eunuch

medico asked in its shrill whine.

Belazir t'Marid looked down at the bodies in their separate bags. Separate bags, but who knew what went where? One bag might be a few parts short or extra, for all he could tell.

"Creature," he said to the eunuchs, cuffing one aside, "when men have their skulls crushed by heavy blows as these have and their eyes gouged out as these have and their throats cut to the neckbone as these have and their bodies cut to pieces, as these have, then generally speaking, as a rule, they die. An autopsy seems somewhat superfluous."

The noble's voice was even and pleasant, as it usually was, but the slave medico sank deeper and deeper into a crouch of abasement with every word, as if they were blows from the powered whip normally used on such. At the last, all the eunuch could do was whimper.

"Cease," Belazir said. "Now, this other; in that, I have interest"

The medico sealed the bags containing the bodyparts of the two dead Kolnari and hastened to the intact casualty. Relatively intact. He stroked a hand down the opaque material, and the stuff turned utterly transparent.

"Whatever killed him, he was not pleased with it," Belazir remarked to Serig, looking at the dead man's bulging, staring eyes. Shifting to the interrogative tense: "Creature?"

"It is uncertain, Great Lord. Either the electrocution or the explosive decompression would be fatal, of course. Here, the dart struck. See, a burned patch, high on the shoulder, towards the angle of the jaw. As he was turning to confront that which killed him, it struck from the rear."

"Blindingly obvious," Belazir said facetiously. "Go. Preserve the bodies."

"And what do you propose to do, t'Marid?" the third Kolnari noble present said.

"Do, lord Captain t'Varak?" Belazir said, turning with an expression of perfect courtesy.

TVarak's presence provided a welcome distraction. A kin-enemy was always more entertaining than outsiders, if more predictable. He waved a languid hand about them, at the dew-cool grass, at the holo for overhead that mimicked the blue cloud-scattered sky of Earth. The temperature was far below what Kolnari preferred, but they could endure anything down to and below freezing without undue discomfort. None of them needed to wear more than briefs and shipbelt for utility. For status, the nobles wore long open-necked robes of watered silk, jewelry of fretted silver, and homeworld fire opals. Their hair was brushed to shining shoulder-length waterfalls, pinned back with combs of sea-ivory and precious metal, and the knife-sharp feathers of Kolnari birds.

Belazir stretched. His robe was severely plain, dazzling white with gold and indigo trim.

"I shall enjoy the beauty of this place. So fair, and so tragic because soon it will perish as if it had never been." He added a classical quotation on transience and death in the three-tonal scale.

Anger glowed from the other man, lambent as hot metal. He might have been Belazu-*s twin, except for a hair-dip of gold rather than silver and the petulance of his expression. Belazir t'Marid never showed an enemy his frustrations. sso "Three of my men are dead, t'Marid," he said.

"Dead!" agreed Belazir in a mild tone. "One slain from ambush, another two destroyed hand-to-hand, by scumvermin. Of course, to be caught so carelessly, they became little better than scumvermin themselves. Far better for the Clan that they were cut off before they could breed." Or breed much; Kolnari became fertile early. "Culling by the universe, not so? They will leave no sons of disgrace to propagate lines of weakness amid the Divine Seed."

For a moment, he thought Aragiz would attack him here, while Belazir was in command, with Serig at his side and armored crewfolk from the Dreadful Bride at his back. If he did, he was better culled out of the Divine Seed. That was the point of the delicate insult, of course. Back on Bethel, old Azlek t'Varak had taken off his helmet a moment too soon and lost his head by such precipitousness. That had been a scandal of some note, shadowing the prestige and honor of all his sons Aragiz t'Varak not least. The t'Varak were always hotheads, Belazir thought, amused at his own pun. Azlek had been all of fifty, though; time enough to be slow and senile. Aragiz should know better.

He did, though barely. "You should bring the scumvermin here under better control," Aragiz said in a bland tone which matched Belazir's. "Kill a few hundred. A hundred for one."

"t'Varak, t'Varak," Belazir murmured. He bent and plucked a flower, sniffed deeply of it "There are fifteen thousand or so scumvermin on this great fat-dripping morsel that the Clan and Father Chalku, by the latest message yearns to pop into its ever-hungry mouth. And, if the scumvermin suspect that almost all of them will die when we are done, some one of them will sabotage this station and rob the Clan of that feasting, for all that we can do. Despair makes even scumvermin brave. Hope brings forth their cowardice, each one hoping for himself."

A songbird swooped by. Belazir's hand snapped out like a trout rising to a fly and caught the tiny creature within the cave of his hand. He brought it up under Aragiz's nose as the soft feathers brushed his skin, in rhythm with its heartbeat.

"I have them in my mt, cousin," he went on. "Shall I open it " he suited words to action " and let them go?" The bird flew away.

"Blood calls for blood," Aragiz said. "Avenge our blood, or you are no Clan leader."

"Blood-call can wait a few days," Belazir said, his voice flint-hard as the two men stared face-to-face. "Until the transports arrive," he added negligently. "Eight days to load and leave, and watch this station vanish in a spark of fire as we go. Because Father Chalku's message giving me mandate over all the High Clan in this action has already come, has it not?" "It has," Aragiz said. "Be glad, O cousin, be very glad of that!"

"Be assured I am," Belazir said ambiguously. "And now, Lord Captain, load your ship with choice loot. Let you and your fighters enjoy themselves as they will among the scumvermin, so long as they do not reduce the slave work-output." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Do not obstruct me, t'Varak. Not until you can bring the Clan a prize like this."

"No. Not yet."

Belazir watched him go. "Serig," he said, "behold. Never underestimate an enemy."

"Aragiz, lord?" Serig said incredulously.

Belazir threw back his head and laughed merrily. "No, no. I should have specified; never underestimate

even a scumvermin enemy. As that dolt does. This station's two leaders, they have between them a three hundred percent increment upon poor Aragiz's sum total of wits. He has the technique of a tungfor."

That was a metaphor for the younger Kolnari, who had never seen homeworld. In Kolnar's seas, there was an animal more or less an animal that concentrated the abundant transuranics from seawater in a specialized section of its gut. It sucked in water and sprayed it on the heated chamber that resulted, expelling it behind as steam for propulsion. Tunglor massed in at about the same as the Dreadful Bride, and they attacked by rising from depth at fifty or sixty knots and ramming with their metal-sapphire-fiber prows, never deviating from the shortest course. Belazir's ancestors had made themselves nobles by hunting tunglor, hunting them to gain plutonium for weapons and powerplants.

"As you do when you take your pleasure," Belazir went on, slapping his companion on the back of the neck in mock reproof.

Serig grinned slyly. "It's not as if they were women" He omitted the "lord" in this brief instance, speaking man to man. "And how will you take this Channa creature?"

"With slow care, fool, as all true pleasures should be savored: wine, a woman, revenge. And on the Dreadful Bride, when we have left," Belazir said.

Serig raised brows in surprise. "You think her worthy of bearing slaves, lord?" he said.

"Many." The male offspring would be castrated that was how such as the medico were made and the females bred back to the Divine Seed. In four or five generations, with careful testing, they could become Kolnari of the lowest caste.

"I will need some pleasure to relax me after our labors," Belazir added.

Serig nodded, needing no further explanation. They would have to destroy and leave for Bethel immediately. The Central Worlds Navy would be all over these stars as soon as they learned of the destruction of SSS-900-C. The Clan would run a long, long way, to wait among unpeopled, unsurveyed systems while they assimilated this treasure and bred the strength to use it. Empty systems held raw materials and energy in plenty, if you had the IOols, and the universe was unimaginably vast. That voyage would be a giant step nearer the good day when it was the Central Worlds' scumvermin who were the scattering of fugitives, and the Divine Seed the power that bred and covered world upon world upon world. A long, if necessary, flight would be tedious.

"So, leave me," Belazir said. "See to the preparations for the transports. Now I will speak with the two scumvermin."

Their Kolnari guards seemed incapable of letting them just walk through a doorway. The prisoners were always propelled over the threshold with a hearty shove. Thus far Channa and Amos had managed to keep their feet, which seemed to inspire ever more energetic pushing. Channa wondered if the two guards bet money on which of them would stumble first. Such treatment irritated her and it must infuriate Amos beyond endurance, since he was born noble among a ceremonious people.

The last door gave onto the nature deck, one of the jewels of the SSS-900-C. Amos straightened then, almost smiling. The deck covered several hundred hectares; lakes, several small wooded areas, and meadows. A stream wandered from savannah to a miniature rain forest, through prairie and into the softly informal confines of a classic country-house garden, here by the entrance. Herons stalked through the reeds by the river, alert for the fish that leaped after dragonflies. The smell was overwhelmingly green. Off

in the middle distance, a herd of small deer browsed.

Amu McCoffrey 6? SM. Stirling The air was full of birdsong. Normally there were parties of picnickers and the shouts of children. Now a plasma gun swung down before them.

"Wait the Great Lord's pleasure, scumvermin," the amplified voice of the Kolnar said, Ok-oh, Channa thought, with a sinking stomach. That sounds bad. She and Amos had discussed what to do under interrogation, but she had doubts about his ability to keep control of his temper.

As for me, FU live through what I have to. And Ptt dance on their graves, she thought grimly. She had been one of the first to take the new virus.

"Buck up, kid," Simeon's voice whispered in her inner ear. It had the odd gravelly tone he adopted in tense moments. "Remember, I've got no fixed sensors in there, so the implants will have to do. I'm with you, and I'll give a running translation of anything the pirates say in their jabber. Okay? And from the structure of their language, the phrase they just used means something like 'front and center.'"

"Got it," she subvocalized.

They jumped back against the wall smardy when a Kolnari bossman came through, looking as if he would rather walk over them. For a moment, Channa thought it was Belazir, and then caught the few subtle differences which told her he was not. Simeon's voice confirmed it Serig followed, a minute later. They both cast their eyes down, to avoid showing the raw desire to kill they shared.

"Now, scumvermin," the guard said.

"Ohhhhh, am I getting sick of hearing that word," Channa subspoke.

"You and me and Simeon-Amos both," Simeon agreed. The Bethelite had the button in his ear, but he hadn't been able to train a subvocal level that was inaudible. The Kolnari didn't hear all that well at the margins of audibility and had no reason to use sensitive hearing devices.

Belazir had set up his command post beneath a huge oak tree. He lolled at his ease on a reclining chair, a wreath of fresh wildflowers adorned his hair, dappled shade moving on his sleek skin and the priceless silks of his clothing. On one side of him was a mobile console and a table scattered with notescreens, printouts, small pieces of equipment Also some artwork which Simeon recognized, garnered from galleries and the museum.

One piece Channa did not remember and the brain could not name, a flamboyant carving in some bone or ivory of a... submarine with fangs? jet-propelled spearjish* Whatever, it had the same air of ruthless speed that a striking hawk might "Ah, your eyes light on the tunglor," Belazir said affably. As always, the sheer physicalpresence of the man struck her like a blow. "From homeworld... Kolnar."

The guard behind them reached out an arm to force them down.

"No, to one knee will do," Belazir said easily. His Standard was better, even in these few days. "Do you wish refreshment?"

He waved to his other side to the table where food and bottles of wine rested, patently supplied by the Perimeter Restaurant The young waitress was from the Perimeter, too, although there she had worn clothes.

"No, Master and God," Amos and Charma said in meek unison.

Belazir smiled and held out his hand. The waitress put a water-glass tumbler of Mart'an's famous apricotbrandy liqueur into it. He drank it off in ten long swallows and Channa knew a moment's wild hope.

Simeon's voice was sour. "No joy," he sent. "I checked with Chaundra. They metabolize ethanol so fast he'll only be mildly buzzed.** "Well," the pirate said in that voice like a bronze bell that purred. "There is business. The matter of the attack on the Divine Seed of Kolnar."

"He's not too upset, I think," Simeon told them. "Heartbeat absolutely Kolnar-normal, no pupil dilation. Got an idea the victims may have been from one of the other ships. Play it polite-firmj."

"Lord and God," Channa said "The criminals will be found and punished."

Subvocal from Simeon: "You hit hisfurrybone with that, Happy. He's killing himself laughing inside."

Channa went on. "I've made several general broadcasts calling for obedience, Master and God."

"So you have. I notice, joo, that it is always you and not your companion... colleague?"

"Simeon-Amos is " Channa fell silent as the Kolnari's hand indicated that Simeon-Amos should answer.

"I am the junior, Master and God," Amos said, eyes fixed on the ground.

"Look at me, Simeon-Amos." The stares met for long seconds. Then Belazir gestured again, turning his attention back to Channa. "Well and good. As we expect to hold the station in our fist for some time, these acts of stupidity must cease."

"Lying through his teeth, babe."

"You sent messages desiring audience, Channahap," Belazir went on. He rose, like a black fountain tipped with white gold, the loose sleeves floating back from his arms like wings. He looked down from his near two meters of height. "Continue."

"Master and God," she said, in a tone as empty of any but the formal semantic content as she could make it, "your troops fornicate like " she paused to search for a word " rotweilers."

"Big chuckle at that one, Charmie." Simeon was furious.

Belazir crossed his arms. "Why does this not seem complimentary?"

Channa looked up at him. "They bite," she said emotionlessly, covering her disgust, "all the time."

"Then the sc the chosen ones should not resist their fete," Belazir said. "It is our custom when we meet resistance."

"They don't resist!" Channa said sharply, then managed a taut smile. "Should we bite back?"

A rustle went through the line of armored troops behind Belazir and the duster of officers with feathers

and jewels in their hair. The noble silenced them with a toss of his head.

"I would not recommend it," he said sardonically. "The custom to which I refer is that of enjoying the fruits of victory. A most ancient custom, surely, even you must know of it? Make another of your speeches. Outline their duties. A hard, sincere effort to please. Then they shall be caressed as they labor, not savaged."

"Master and God, when you bruise the fruit too much, it goes bad! The problem is that I have a hundred people in sickbay being sewn back together and under medication due to human bites and various other wounds. Initially, there were three hundred sick to begin with, not counting the ones who've been flogged."

"Are they injured?"

No, apart from shaking and crying and waking up with nightmares, she thought The Kolnari had a whip that did something to the nervous system. "Master and God " however she tried, she couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of that" the problem involves vital work positions which are left empty. This isn't a planet It doesn't run itself. Everything has to be done without error. Fatigue leads to error, error leads to failure, and failure can lead to death. I cannot do the impossible, order me however you want"

"Now that," he said, "is the wrong tone." Suddenly he was much closer, and took her chin between thumb and forefinger. "Entirely. Do you understand, Channahap?"

"Yes," she murmured, "yes, I understand." Time seemed to slow.

He smiled. "Excellent. However, your remarks, if not the manner in which they were delivered, are reasonable. I shall give orders that my troops be... gentler with their slaves. After you have emphasized the proper attitude toward their duties."

Channa's eyes widened.

He actually laughed this time~"Yes," he assured her, "that, too, is our custom. Those of you that please us or are useful will leave this place on our ships." He watched her absorb this privilege.

"Walk with me," he sa;& putting a hand under her arm. She jerked slightly at the contact, like the touch of a live conductor.

Amos started to follow. A servo-powered gauntlet closed down on his skull, so gently that it would not have cracked an egg. A duplicate of the one that had crushed his sister's skull. Wind blew through the trees above them, making the leaves move in a dance that contrasted to the stillness of the humans below.

"A strange way to spend so much effort," Belazir said, as he nodded to the landscape around them. A chuckle passed his lips. "Preferable to expend effort and strength on this than on weapons."

"Who does he think buiU his ships and the weapons they're carrying* " Simeon whispered in her ear.

Channa shrugged in answer to both.

"Still, it is beautiful," he said. His hand traced the back of her neck, lightly enough that the pads of his fingers just touched the hairs. She shivered involuntarily.

"I am not Serig," he added, stroking the fingers down her spine and away. "This is like Earth, is it not?"

"Mosdy," Channa said. Unconsciously she tilted her head to one side away from Belazir as Simeon gave her the relevant information. "A few of the plants and organisms are from Rigel 4, but they're compatible."

"Like looking back into the past," he said. They stopped, out of sight of the tables. He looked up into the sky. "Computer," he said. "Night."

The constellations of Earth's northern hemisphere blazed out, as they had not in reality since men learned to bend electricity to light.

"Yes," t'Marid sakl, looking upward at the false sky. "Very beautiful, but it seems too much openness. As if a body might fall upward and be sucked out into limitless space."

Well, a weakness, she thought. Many spaceborn were slightly agoraphobic. That could be useful, if Belazir had been spaceborn.

She thought a smile appropriate. "The sensation is called vertigo. I've occasionally experienced it myself when planet-side. I was born and raised on a space station, so I feel more comfortable under a ceiling."

"Something of that," he admitted. "But also... Computer. Night on Kolnar. From Maridapore."

Channa gasped in shock at the change. The dark sky overhead vanished. In its place was a glowing mooncolored cloud full of colored lights from horizon to horizon. She blinked, then realized the light was not that much more brilliant than the Terran sky. Yet this phenomenon was not a sky: it was a ceiling across heaven.

"A dozen times full Luna brightness," Simeon supplied.

Off to the north, auroras circled and moved, scrolls vaster than worlds, electric blue and white and pearl. Beneath them, on the horizon, a volcano was a glowing firestorm spout, powered by its own natural fission reactor. Something gigantic and winged slid across the alien constellations. Smaller things pursued it, diving and tearing as it fluted an intricate song of grief.

"I have never seen this sky," he said thoughtfully. "Not really. Not even a simulation as good as this." He issued a second command and the Earth night returned. "This is more restful."

"Ah... The birds won't like it if you change day to night like this," Channa said. "You'd better set it back when you leave. Master and God," she added absently.

He looked at her in astonished amusement. "The birds won't like it?" he said. "Ghannahap, you are a wonder. The birds won't like iff*the insects will be disturbed... does this matter?"

"We brought them here, to a totally unnatural environment. If we expect them to thrive, then it's our responsibility to provide them with whatever they need. They're a part of this," she said gesturing widely. "Without the birds and the insects, this would be sterile, a lifeless tableau. So we have to be mindful of their needs."

He nodded. "I shall leave it on night setting and dawn shall be in twelve hours. Things have changed here. Even the birds must realize it"

Channa had no reply for that bit of arrogance.

"That is the supreme law, of course," he went on, "for Earth, for Kolnar, for the universe."

She made an interrogative sound.

"Adapt! Master changing circumstance, or die unbred. The Seed the genes, you would say are the reality that underlies all this. Taking energy from the Dead World, growing in complexity and adaptation. All this," and, with a swift movement of his hand, he caught a dragonfly by its legs for a second, then released it, "is waves on the surface. Beneath is the Seed, seeking to replicate itself. All beings, all mind, all war and trade and art and science, mere waves on the changeless sea." He smiled kindly. "And fittest of all, of course, is the Divine Seed of Kolnar. Of that Seed, fittest is the High Clan. Which is why you long for union with it, for such immortality."

"I disagree. Lord and God."

"No, you do not Your mind may, but that is merely the vehicle of the... gene. Watch, when we return.

Your Simeon-Amos will be enraged. Naturally enough, for he suspects the immortality you offer is to be taken from his seed." He sighed and turned back towards the tables, hidden behind a line of trees. She trotted to keep pace, although he did not seem to hurry. "Enough of pleasant idleness and]hilosophizing. To work!"

"Simeon, why do all my Prince Charmings turn out to be toads?" Channa subvocalized. Amos stood stiff and withdrawn beside her on the people mover as it slid down the corridor. "Is he really jealous? Under these circumstances, that's ridiculous!" ; ; "(5 also maybe involuntary. Your girl goes walking in the woods with Lucifer, chattmguup..."

"Absurd!"

"Beats me, Channa. But FU never, ribbit, turn onya. Ribbit!"

"Or turn me on, either. It's nice to know someone is still safe to be with."

Whoa! Kick me again, Channa, I think some of my ego is still unbruised.

"That is the scariest son of a bitch I've ever had the misfortune to meet," she said. Amos nodded silently.

"Simeon-Amos?"

"Yes, Channa?"

"Hold me, would you?" His arm went around her, and she melted into the firm supportive warmth of his side. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?" His tone was light "For not really being green and warty or eating flies."

"Ah, guys?" This time Simeon's voice came to both of them. "I just figured something out"

"What?" Amos said.

"Bad news about Bethel."

The Bethelite stiffened again, his face drawing in lines that showed what he might look like on his deathbed, in the currently unlikely event that he would live to die of old age.

"What?" Amos repeated, this time as a command.

"These scumbags I'm not going to use scumvermm, even in reverse they're planning to loot me bare and then blow me up."

Simeon was understandably upset if he was referring to the SSS-900-C as "me."

"That is bad news for you," Amos said, steeling himself for how that would also be bad news for Bethel.

"But if they do that, thCentral Worlds Navy will find out would find out, even if the Kolnari had pulled this hijack off the way we fooled them into thinking they had. Central Worlds'd send flotillas all through this sector and look behind every space rock. For sure, they'd inspect any inhabited system. While the Saffron system may be ferdlin' remote, it's still on the maps. And the Kolnari know that, hey* So they're sacrificing their chance of stripping Bethel in exchange for the station. Means they gotta leave both, fast. So what odds they plan on doing Bethel the same way they do me, when they go? Blow it, too, and cover any traces they hadn't time to sweep under the carpet. These guys are pigs, but they're not stupid.*1 "Yes, I see," Amos said, barely moving his lips. "Sound strategic analysis. Thank you, Simeon."

Thanks for nothing, the brain thought dismally. Amos had had the comfort of knowing the Navy would at least rescue the survivors on his homeworld, win or lose here on SSS-900-C.

"Anything we can do about that?*" Channa asked as they entered the lounge.

"Not much more than what we're doing now," Simeon said. "But it's going to be a very dose run at the end. We've got to be ready, at all costs. Minutes may make the difference."

Keri Holen tried to read, but she'd been on the same page for some time now and still had no idea of its content. Trivia, she thought. Before her life was put in danger, all her friends and family's lives, she hadn't known what triviality was. It was anything that didn't have to do with keepinj you alive; anything that didn't have to do with winning.

"On the other hand, fretting doesn't do me any good, either," she said. Why did I volunteer* she asked herself. Well, the risk mas there anyway, and we need to get the second vims working, she thought. Not everyone was a gymnast and martial artist, either.

Frustrated, she threw the reader onto the cushion beside her and rose to pace the room. There was a soft chime and Simeon's public face bloomed on the wall screen.

"The Kolnari are in your area," he said, warning all those in the threatened sector. "Get your virus capsules in position. Don't panic. Don't argue or they will harm you. Remember, place the capsule in your mouth, bite down, try not to swallow. Good luck," he added fervently.

Keri rushed to the cabinet where she had stored her supply among other pharmaceuticals. Her hands were shaking so much the capsules flew out of the bottle like confetti when she at last got it open.

Moaning, she rushed to gather them up and put them away before the Kolnari arrived. She put one in her mouth, holding it between cheek and gum.

She returned to the living area and stood watching the door, fingers twining with the tabs of her robe. She could feel her pulse beat in her lips and fingertips, she felt as though she'd been running.

The door opened.

God, she thought as she bit down on the capsule. There are four of them! The capsule dissolved with a rush of coolness. Keri smiled broadly and let the robe drop.

"Welcome to my parlor." Said the spider to the fly.

Mazkira entered the elevator and selected her destination. The mining components fabricator was a treasure of immense value to the Clan. With it, they could scavenge several crucial materials from uninhabited asteroids at need. Besides that, the scumvermin operator was a pleasure to torment, in several different ways. She grinned. Then the expression faded. She could smell him, the scent was heavy in the cage far more than it should have been when he merely passed through several times daily.

She looked up... into the barrel of a rock-cutter and above it the grinning face of Kevin Duane.

"Eat this, bitch!" he snarled and powered up the cutter. He cut the Kolnari woman in half lengthwise and smiled as he watched the two sizzling halves crumple to the floor.

The elevator arrived at his level and he replaced the hatch cover. There was the access tunnel, just where Joat had told him it would be.

He handed Joat the rock-cutter and she raised an inquiring brow. He gave her a grin and a thumbs-up sign. Suddenly the elevator dropped out from underneath him and he was holding on by his elbows, feet scrabbling against the slick shaft walls. He inched his way in, his broad shoulders making it difficult to maneuver. Far below he could hear the elevator coming up again.

"Hurry up!" Joat said, sliding the rock-cutter down the access tunnel and turning back to pull him in by his shirt.

All she succeeded in doing was pulling it up over his head; his arms were almost immobilized by the tough fabric.

"Stop," he said. "Stop it."

"Hurry up!" she cried and slid backwards to give him room. "Or thaj: elevator will smear your carcass all the way to the top of the station."

He was most of the way in now, but couldn't seem to get his feet in. He began to panic, barking his knees on the side walls of the tunnel, the space too narrow to allow him to turn or pull up his legs. In a panic, he caught at Joat's legs and yanked. Her palms squealed on the slick metal as she struggled futilely to keep her place.

The drag was just enough to get him all the way in, the side of the elevator lifted the soles of his feet gently as it passed.

Kevin dropped his head into his arms and giggled with mild hysteria.

Joat glared at him for a moment, then grinned and whispered, "Hooray! Another one for our side."

"Yes?" Belazir said, looking up from his notescreeen.

It was the medico again. The Kolnari repressed an impulse to kick it. If you hit messengers, messages ceased coming. On the other hand, his rime was valuable. Especially now, with the transports here and loading round the cycle.

The thought restored his good humor. Sixty ships, a fifth part of the Clan's fleet, under his command. Not only transports, but a fighting platform and a couple of the factory ships. It was as good as having Chalku proclaim him successor. Better, since his chances of living long enough to claim it were much higher. A formal announcement might drive some brick-skull like Aragiz t1 Varak to desperation.

"Great Lord, there is... a problem."

"Mine or yours, creature?" he said, slightly impatient The loading was going so slowly.

"Great Lord, we have disabling sickness."

"What?" Suddenly he was looming over the eunuch.

"No, please! Don't hurt me. I Ufc only old Veskis, the bonesetter. Please, my Great Lord?"

Belazir's aquiline nostrils flarett "Speak."

"Over sixty ill warriors have sought medical aid, Great Lord. We have never seen the like." It swallowed. "Great Lord, we do not know how to cure the illness!"

Belazir had just finished a large meal. Now it lay Hke curdled hot lead in his gut. Impossible. He tapped at the notescreeen, accessing recent files. Yes, over thirty warriors put down or suicided for infection. Not completely unprecedented, but among the heaviest numerically of instances on record. If another threescore had reported sick, there must be many who had not "How does the illness run?" Belazir asked.

"Swiftly in some, Great Lord. Fever, loss of nervous control, debility, nausea. Others more mildly. Still others recover quickly and are whole. From the blood of those I may produce a vaccine, in tune."

"Do so," Belazir ordered, "Swiftly." In time to avoid spoiling my triumph here, he thought "Wait"

He tapped his notescreeen again. Most sickness occurred among those on no fixed duty. Of those, t'Varak's ship suffered the most casualties. Belazir racked his brain for what he knew of diseases. Not much, since Kolnari were rarely bothered by disease: accident, yes. He reflected on this problem, queried the info-banks, thought again.

"Orders," he said. "Isolate those infected." Those whom they could, that is. A noble could be killed but not placed under restraint "This may..." He hesitated. "May be related to the disease troubling the scumvermin." Hideous, that a disease would strike the Divine Seed more strongly than mere scumvermin. "The infected scumvermin are to be avoided. Go, post the orders,** That such a scourge should arise nowy he thought, looking back at the notescreeen. Loading was moving far too slowly. Chalku œad given

him a deadline; past that, they were to abandon anything remaining, kill and leave. If there was much less than he had promised, he would go from hero to goat. Even if the total he did manage was more than any other Kolnari had amassed, performance and prestige would be measured against expectation.

"Time," he muttered. Time was wasting, and the margin for error with it. He stood. "Computer. Kolnar, noon at Maridapore."

White-blue light flashed across the parkland, hurtful even to him in the instant before his pupils shrank to pinhead size.

Jekit nor Varak prowled the corridors. He was not in powered armor. There were not enough suits to go around and their maintenance requirements were fierce. The patrol was to enforce curfew and prevent sabotage, which was becoming a problem. He was in a flexible suit, with a comlink and a plasma rifle. The corridors in this section were darkened, which gave his IR-sensitive eyes the advantage over any scumvermin.

As if I needed it, he thought. His main enemy was tedium. The corridors were changeless and identical. Ten paces left, take a turn at random. Trot down a long length, checking that the seals on the doors were unbroken. Flatten to a wall and wait. He did isometrics then, muscle pulling on muscle against the strong flexible bones of his body. Nothing much else to do; except that he tired too soon, probably because of the damnable light gravity he had been living in on this station. It would be a relief to get back to Kolnar-standard on the ship.

Although there were compensations. Keriholen, for example. Jekit's teeth clicked together as he remembered how they had taken her, he and his brothers. Many times since the first occasion.

Worth the trouble, he thought. Timber as an eel and tireless as a real woman. Women were scarce for commoners. The nobles took so many. He and his four brothers they were born at one birthing had only two wives between them, held in common, and a mere eight children.

Jekit was sweating. He wiped his face on a sleeve and resumed the pacing, trying to push such thoughts out of his mind. Not until after his watch. It was hot, whatever the gauge said. His stomach felt odd. Maybe the plundered food was bad, although the Divine Seed could eat pretty well anything organic.

Simeon watched the pirate. This Jekit was a perfect choice. Definitely had the Mark-II virus, too pigignorant to know it and he was almost asleep from boredom anyway. A little surprise would be good for his circulation.

He checked the progress of the relief party, ten soldiers and a squad leader. Plenty of witnesses, also perfect. Timing was the key. They had only two guards to relieve before they reached Jekit.

Hurt my people, will you, Jekit? he thought. Okay, now let's see how you like being on the other end of the stick.

He began whispering. The words were loud enough to be audible, but not loud enough to be understood. Just nonsense syllables pronounced in inflections similar to the Kolnari language, minute after minute, not steadily but rising and falling and stopping altogether for random intervals. Then an increase in the volume until the nonsense was a tease, tantalizingly on the edge of audibility. Add subsonics guaranteed to have the hair standing up along the spine, although Kolnari didn't have body hair.

Goosebumps, then, he decided. Jekit paced, stopped, shook his head and brought the plasma rifle to

port, thumbing off the safety.

Doesn't this snardfy have any nerves ? Simeon asked himself in frustration. Then he added the refinement; things flickering at the edge of vision. The pirate was probably seeing things without Simeon's visual aids since the sensors said his temperature was five percent over normal and rising. Sweat poured down his face. That was rare since the Kolnari metabolism didn't waste moisture.

Simeon constructed a less transparent image. Ah, that made him jump, Simeon thought. "Rankest!" he whispered, just loud enough to be understood.

Die, in Kolnari.

"Who's there?" Jekit called out, swinging his weapon around. "Who goes? Answer me." Simeon had a conversation going now, male and female voices whispering vehemently. He moved the whisperers down the corridors, through chambers and halls and galleries. Now they were around the corner, now they were overhead, now right behind him.

Jekit spun, his weapon leveled. "Scumvermin!" he shouted. The warning indicator flicked as his forefinger took up the slack on the trigger key.

The squad had exited the elevator on Jekit's level and were marching towards his station. Trotting like a wolf-pack, rather; the leader was in armor, moving at the same pace. Slam-slam-slam, half a tonne pounding down at every step.

The Kolnari had his back pressed to the wall Simeon overlaid the powersuit's footfalls, turning them into drumbeats in time with the fevered warrior's own heart His head was snapping back and forth wildly, rims of white showing around the amber of his eyes.

Off to the right, around the corner from which his replacement would come, a voice called.

"Jekit!" His officer called. "Turn to, idler, fool! Report"

Jekit almost moaned with relief, opening his mouth to call back. When he did he found the words matched, overlaid, neutralized by something. Shout, scream, nothing but the same blurred yammer.

"Painrod for you, seedless stothman," came the warning from his officer.

Jekit crouched and began making his way along the wall towards the voice. Halfway down the long wall, he jerked and vomited convulsively, bewildered. It had never happened to him before, that he lost his food.

Footsteps sounded from around the corner as the replacement squad advanced smartly towards him. He heard a soft hiss behind him and turned. He screamed as he looked into a shape out of homework! legend, a twenty-eyed worm with gnashing concentric mouths, thicker through the body than a man was high.

"Ancha!" he screamed and fired. Grinder. There was nothing wrong with his reflexes yet, and the spear of nuclear fire lanced through the monster.

Gotcha, Simeon thought again. He'd been pretty sure that worm program was modeled on something native to Kolnar. So its name was "grinder"! Appropriate enough.

"Grinder** vanished. Behind it was a figure in power armor, slowly topping over backwards with the whole upper pan of the torso gone. The squad behind had already gone to earth and returned fire. A line of light touched Jekit's right shoulder, and the plasma gun fell away. The blurring, blanking wall of un-sound fell away from his ears so suddenly that he could hear the slight whine as the weapon automatically cycled another deuterium pellet into the chamber. A plasma beam licked out at Jekit and his legs vanished from the knees down.

And he was still hot. His wounds did not hurt yet, insulated by shock, although he could smell the heavy fried meat odor. But his head hurt, it hurt... The others were rushing forward to secure him for interrogation. It would go very badly for them if he died first Aurnght! Simeon thought Still, it should be fun listening to Jekit, the mighty warrior, explaining why he freaked like that Now, rvho's next?

Belazir and Aragiz knelt together before Pol t'Veng. She was wearing the black robe and hood of an adjudicator and, in the dim light, that left only the yellow glow of her eyes visible. Belazir knelt with grace. The t'Veng was inferior by rank and birth, but she was efficient Also a woman, of course, but that meant less these days than it had on Kolnar. Everything in space was a protected environment, like the fortress-holds. You either lived or died, generally. Aragiz knelt in quivering tension and the smell of his rage was musky, irritating to Belazir.

"I find," she said at last, "that Jerik nor Varak, free common-fighter of subclan t'Varak, opened fire on clan-kin while in hostile ground, without prior attack." That was the only excuse, and motivations or reasons mattered nothing, by Kolnari law.

"He killed: one petit-noble officer of subclan t'Marid. He destroyed: one suit of powered armor. Here is the judgment of the High Clan.

"At the next rendezvous of all units, t'Varak gens shall render to Belazir t'Marid forty hundred units of Clan credit or goods to the same value, neutrally appraised. They shall also render five breeding-age but unbred females of petit-noble or higher rank, fully educated. In addition, Belazir t'Marid may go among the concubines and wives of Aragiz t'Varak for one cycle and sow there as he wills. Aragiz t'Varak shall do likewise among Belazir t'Marid's. Judgement is rendered."

As one, they bowed low enough to touch their foreheads to the deck. A good judgement, Belazir thought. Fair, wise, and most of all, expedient. Part of the longstanding trouble was that the t'Varak gens were not as closely linked by seed as the rest of the High Clan families. They had been landless mercenaries on homeworld, and had had the bad hick to sign on with the High Clan just before a war that ripped up half a continent and ended in headlong flight for the survivors. Technically mercenaries were not subject to the extermination-proscriptioivo'f the vanquished nobility. Like peasants and commoners, they could switch allegiance to the winning side. Technicalities did tend to get lost in the fine glow of victory, though....

Of course, Aragiz t'Varak would be unlikely to look at it in quite that way. Still, in the long term, knowing the closer relationship would reduce hostility. Hopefully.

Without word or gesture, Aragiz rose and stalked out. No style at all, Belazir thought The fine was a trifle compared to what the station was bringing in, and they both had sixty or seventy children already. He merely hoped the t'Varak intellect was training and not a taint. The lights came up, and Pol removed the hood. That changed her from adjudicator to ordinary noble once more. "Fool," she said, with no need to say exactly who. "Dolt," he agreed, and snapped his fingers. Serig entered. They settled in comfortably. "Loading is going too slowly," Belazir said. "Truth, lord," Serig answered.

"Okay," Simeon whispered in Channa's ear. "He's in position."

The loading bay at the south-polar docking tube was more crowded than it had ever before been in the station's seventy-odd years, mostly cluttered with disassembled equipment from the electronics fabricators two levels below, broken down just enough to let them be moved through the freight elevators. It would be more efficient to strip them down further and box the components, but that made them too easy to sabotage. There had been executions of stationers after Kolnari inspections showed how easy. Delicate electronics...

Weird, Channa thought, ostentatiously looking down at her notescreen. There had been no reprisals at all for the deaths and there had been a fair number. The Kolnari had just increased their patrols, as if taunting the stationers.

Channa turned to the pirate technician. Even weirder. You didn't think of pirates as having technicians. They looked much the same as the sleekly dangerous warriors and flamboyant nobles, but brisker.

Then again, they've kept thousands of people and hundreds of skips going for three generations seven of theirs.

"Lord," she said in the appropriate meek tone, "here's the next load. Do you accept?"

The Kolnari looked at the fabricator. It was a spindle-shaped synth-and-metal machine about three meters long and one through at the widest point; half tubing and molecular shape chambers, half modules. Both points of the spindle ended in tapered burls that fitted into a bearing race. Underneath it was a floater cradle with apparently six arms and a twenty-centimeter base.

The Kolnari said something in her own language to her team women were more common among their technical class, evidently and they went to work, plugging in their own info-systems and a portable power-feed to bring the fabricator up to standby.

"All order is,** the pirate said to her, waving her back. "Scumvermin, next bring.** The loading bay was one hundred meters by two hundred by three. Two Clan transports were docked at the outer hatches. Two-thirds of the way down the deck, the enemy had drawn a red line. On either side was a squad in power armor. Floating over them were pods of small servo-guns, antipersonnel weapons, heavy needlers that could be fired without endangering the fabric of the station. The weapons were highly dangerous to anyone not in combat armor, of course. Stationside of the line were civilians, working mostly in their own teams with a few Kolnari for supervision. Dockside of the line were only the Clan, crews. There were three checks from the initial position to the line: once while the equipment was being stripped down, a second when the stationer stevedores took charge, and a third when it was ready to go over the line itself.

If any of the checks showed damage, the stationers in charge were flogged to death with a powered whip. Falling below quota earned ten strokes, which reduced the team's efficiency drastically but was a very potent motivator.

It was ingenious, and working far too well.

Simeon murmured again. "Yeah, they're locked in."

Channa forced herself not to look at the eyes of the Kolnari. However Simeon was doing it, it was not

simple holographic projection. Maybe tightbeam on the retina....

Amos was whistling cheerfully as he swung the lifter around. God, he's even gutsier than he is pretty, Channa thought. They'd volunteered for this. Too many nerves had been shattered by the holocaust record of die floggings. Someone had to restore confidence. To the Kolnari, it looked like the leaders were giving an example of enthusiastic obedience. Joseph bowed low as he handed over the controller pad for the cradle. Across the back of his overall was printed Scumuermin Rule OK. One of Simeon's suggestions to build morale.

The cradle followed obediently over the red line, behind the Kolnari technicians and toward the waiting cargo bay of the transport. The line divided the gravity fields; one Standard gravity at the line itself, running quickly up to 1.6 at the lowered ramp-entrance. The work party moved through the crowds and the waiting chains of lifters. There was a howl as the four light arms _ suddenly there were only four of the cradle gave way. The Kolnari team leapt in fearlessly, but the lifter failed in a burst of sparks and boomed hollowly to the deck plates. The fabricator slewed out of the broken cradle and onto the bent legs of the crew chief as she heaved back at the weight ten times her own.

The pirate alarms rang like angry windchimes. Channa and the others froze. So did the damaged tech. The other Kolnari lifted the damaged fabricator and set it down on a pad of packing-fiber nearby; lifting with unison grunt of effort and walking six steps with a lowvoiced chant. They set the machine down with a mother's tender care. The tech lay with the broken bones projecting through the dark skin of her kneecaps, blood welling around them and the whites showing aU around her honey-colored eyes. The flying guns swooped in. Channa found herself looking down the business end of one, and so did each of the group that had brought the ruined machine to the edge of the Kolnari line.

Warriors followed; not the armored specialists, but crew on rotation duty. One was pulling a powered whip from his belt as he came. Channa dosed her eyes, but the first stroke never landed. She heard his voice murmur the Kolnari equivalent of, "Yes, sir."

She opened her eyes again. Amos and Joseph were rocking back on their heels as if they'd been ready to spring.

"Hequewdthebigboss," Simeon ghost-spoke through her implant. "Belastelhmtockeckthernctionrecords."

The Kolnari did, snapping away her notescreeen, then going over to check the injured technician. Nobody had attended to her. Despite her being an enemy, Channa felt a little squeamish looking at the white splinters and the quivers of pain that ran across the fine-boned oval lace.

"She's saying it mas a regulation medium-heavy Ufter, when she looked it over," he said. "He's checking. Belazir says it's not your fault."

Sweat was running down Channa's back. She began to relax, then swore under her brejœeh as the warrior drew a knife. The technician closed her eyes and tilted her head; a quick stab in the back of the neck and she was still.

"Well, that worked," she said to Simeon.

"What do you mean ? "*" 'Tm not quite sure."

The fabricator would have to go back to the machine-shop, two levels up, to be repaired. The machines required to produce replacements for the damaged parts could not be disassembled until the work was

done.

Belazir moved a squadron of light cruisers to a new quadrant and sat back. So, he thought.

Amazing. Channahap was fighting him to a standstill in this strategy game. She had actually won one of the earlier rounds. A very, very good player; few Kolnari senior officers could have done better, and war-game tournaments were one of the main ways they filled their leisure.

"The Channahap does well?" Serig said. He looked over his commander's shoulder into the Bride's display tank, then reran the opening moves on a smaller screen nearby. "Well, indeed."

Belazir nodded. What a woman! he thought enthusiastically. He had stopped referring to her as scumvermin to himself some time ago. The battle of delay and lies she had waged against him was just as skillful and tricky as the war games. It was a true pity she was not of the Divine Seed; an even greater pity that she would not live very many years in the environment of the Clan's ships. Outsiders rarely found the air, food, and r. water of Kolnar life-supporting. Certainly the Kolnari's own ancestors had not, until they adapted.

But I vritt enjoy her greatly while she lives.

"Now, these reports," he went on to Serig. "They read like the ravings of the insane. What do they mean?"

"An excellent question, my lord. One that I should like to ask some of these scumvermin."

"You consider this to be the result of enemy action?"

"It seems reasonable to me, my lord. Drugs to the troops affected. Or, they may know something about these phenomena."

Belazir considered his second. "Or they may know nothing. It could even be some sabotage scheme of Aragiz, difficult though that is to believe. Or a side-effect of this... illness."

"Bad for morale either way, my lord. And the illness itself may be a weapon."

He nodded. "Very well. Take five slaves, chosen at random, none critical to the station's function, and torture them."

"Only five, my lord?" Serig's soft voice expressed astonishment.

"These are an unusually soft and sensitive people," Belazir answered. "Five will be quite sufficient. More would cause panic. For now, let the scumvermin as a whole remain calm and complacent and cooperative. Let them panic later at a time of our choosing. Hmm? Torture the five for the information we need on this phenomenon. If they know nothing, take others."

"Shall I broadcast that?"

"No, no, Serig. If we broadcast our ignorance, we make plain that there is something our warriors fear. If it is enemy action, they will know what we seek or the next five."

Serig bowed from the waist. "Very good, my lord."

Belazir returned his attention to the game.

"Why?" Channa asked.

"You will take your hands from my desk and you will stand straight," Bdazir told her calmly, pointing a slender dagger at her. He stared at Channa until she complied.

"Two of those people are probjlbly going to die," she whispered, breathing hard. "Lord and God. They were tortured" !

"Of course they were. I ordered it so."

"ButaAp?"

He stood and walked slowly around the desk to stand dose behind her, then spoke softly into her ear. "We are conquerors. We do not explain our actions. This is not a game such as we play in your quarters, lovely Channa, this is reality."

She carefully folded her hands before her and lowered her eyes.

"I apologize for my impetuoussness," she said humbly. "I was trained to take my duties seriously, and sometimes this makes me rash. It's why I must ask about this terrible matter. I can't believe that you enjoy doing such things." She looked at him appealingly over her shoulder. "Please don't hurt my people."

"And you lie so badly," he said. He studied her face for a moment. "My troops," he went on thoughtfully, "spoke of things' flickering at the corners of their eyes, of Voices' murmuring things not quite heard."

"What has that got to do with us?"

He walked around her and sat on a corner of his desk. "Perhaps nothing, perhaps everything. That is what we wanted to know."

"And it never occurred to you that perhaps something in the mixture of gases that we breath might cause this effect in your people? Or that these 'things' flickering just out of sight might be an infestation of insects..."

"Oh no, they were, according to the reports, much too large to be mere insects."

"Some other vermin, then."

"Doubtful."

"Well, what about my first suggestion, perhaps our atmosphere requires adjustment?"

"Possible."

"Then perhaps you qpuld send some volunteers to our medical center for tests."

Belazir laughed. "No. We know that a virus is loose. However, we have no interest in a cure for it. If it causes troops to become nonfunctional, we will kill them ourselves. Unless it endangers this mission, we will take no countermeasures."

Channa gaped for a moment.

"We did not become the Divine Seed," he continued, "by pampering weakness. After investing so much capital and time in training, it is, however, inconvenient to have adults die. When we return, we will spread the virus ourselves, quite deliberately, among the children of the High Clan. If this sickness is your doing, you do us a service as do those who ambush our troops in the corridors. It reduces the ranks of imperfect Seeds."

"Ah, she is magnificent," he quoted softly to himself in his own language. "Her stride is the lightning striking. In her right hand is a sword of flame, in her left the goad of pain. Her voice is the shriek of the north wind. In her eyes flash comets, portents of wonder, and her hair is a storm at midnight. Between her thighs is the road to Paradise. I look upon her and my strength rises, yet I rage without fulfillment." He leaned closer and Channa could feel his breath on her lips.

Well, Simeon thought, that last bit rather neatly sums up my relationship with Charma. He relayed a running translation.

"You've made a real conquest, Happy."

"That is not funny" Channa subvocalized.

The Kolnari touched her lightly with the point of the dagger, then returned to his chair, leaving her shivering where she stood. He touched his tongue to the bead of blood on the steel.

"Perhaps," Belazir said, his voice amused, "I should take you with me when we go. I would give you something to fight besides boredom. You deserve the challenge." Then he smiled. "You may go."

Channa turned and walked away on shaking legs. When she was in the elevator, she vented her frustration in a savage tone.

"I really want to kill him, Simeon. I can see myself doing it, just what I would do, and I think I would enjoy it." She paused. "See how bad company corrupts my morals?"

"What did you think of that poem?"

"I wasn't listening."

"I think he was trying to flatter you." "Her voice is like the shrieking of the north wind?"

"I thought you weren't listening?"

"Well, I caught it." She laughed weakly. "Never tell a woman her voice reminds you of something shrieking. It won't win you any points."

"Important dating tip, Channa, thank you."

"Oh... I love you, Simeon. You keep me sane. And the Prince of Darkness can " " eat shit and die." /

love you too, Channa, and you drive me crazy.

* CHAFrRTWENTY-ONE

Another point of light flared in the holo tank.

"You have destroyed my dreadnought," Belazir said, surprise and amusement in his voice. He looked up at Channa. She was sweating heavily, strings of black hair plastered to her forehead. The Kolnari was calm as ever as he took another draught of the sparkling water flavored with metal salts.

"That makes..." He paused to recollect. "Seventyfive wins for me and three for you. Ah, well." He dapped his hands, and attendants brought his equipment. "Enough pleasure; there is work to be done."

"Okay, people," Simeon said. The voices died down. "We've got a little time. You-know-who's sleeping the sleep of the wicked."

The screens went silent, and so did the litde dutch of men and women seated around the lounge table.

"They're going to be more or less finished in one more day-cycle," he went on.

"One?" Amos said. "They have more items marked for shipping than they could handle in one day."

"Trust me. I've been eavesdropping. They're doing that to fool us. Nearly fooled me! Only their top people know."

"How long has it been?" Patsy whispered.

"Sixteen days," Simeon said.

Doctor Chaundra swallowed. "A hundred dead. Many times that are... injured, in various ways. We cannot endure more of this."

"We won't have to. One more day, and we're saved or we're all dead."

"Hie Navy?" Joseph said.

"They dropped a scout into the system today," Simeon replied. His image raised a hand to stem die babble. "It's heavily stealthed. I have the recognition codes, or I'd never have detected it. Yes, the flotilla is coming.

"They should be here, and soon. However, we've got to have a plan for the worst case.** He paused before he could go on. "The worst case is the Navy doesn't get here quite in time. We've got to give it our best shot. The Kolnari've got a lot of their people spread out, and their ships docked. They're planning on keeping it that way until the last minute. I've figured out a few indicators that'll tell me right down to the minute."

Channa swallowed and nodded. One of them would be Belazir coining to take her off to the Dreadful Bride.

"The battle platform will undock first. When they start that, we've got to begin our uprising! If we can cut enough of them off from their ships and keep the ships from undocking I've got some plans on that tactic

" then they can't blow the station."

Amos nodded somberly. "The cost... the cost in lives will be very high. But there is no alternative."

"We cannot fight for long," Joseph said. "A delaying action at best. They have the weapons, armor, organization. And they need not fear damage to the station. They will use their onwatch ships to force-dock through the hull, outflank us. We have no real weapons."

"How many times have we gamed the uprising?" Amos said, rubbing his hand across his face. "Forty, fifty? Not once have we won, no matter if you or I command."

Simeon nodded. "Better to die on your feet than die on your knees," he said. Grim smiles greeted the sally.

Most of them had seen his tapes of the Warsaw Ghetto. "I can disorganize them a lot more than they expect," he went on. "We've got some weapons, too."

They all looked at the column.

"Mikesun?" he said..

The section repcwas haggard and drawn, as you would expect from someone who had been working in cramped quarters for more than two weeks.

"I've got them unpacked and ready," he said. His hands moved into the light. "'Bout a thousand. Plus the explosives you told us to get ready."

Suddenly he had a needier in his hands. A huge chunky-looking thing, of no make any of them recognized.

"Where on... where did you get those, Simeon?*" Channa asked.

"Ah, um." Simeon sounded slightly embarrassed, she thought. "Well, you know how I like to collect stuffE They were cheap a ship needed some fuel bad and didn't have credit. And I just liked the thought of having my own arsenal. 'Someday we might need this kind of stuff.' I was right, wasn't I?"

"Yes, bless you," she said simply, because the relief she felt at seeing honest-to-God weapons was so intense.

Somebody swore. "Why haven't we had those before now? I've had my people attacking Kolnari patrols with their bare hands "

"Because we couldn't let them take us seriously too soon!" Channa said sharply. "Any sort of formal weaponry would have alerted them. We had to do as much damage as we could without such assists, until the last moment. They won't be expecting us to have needlers. We'll have surprise and shock on our side."

Amos leaned forward, more warmth in his tone than was usual when he spoke to the brain." How are they to be distributed?"

"Remember when I said I'd put some other stuff that might be useful in the sealed-off sections? And

Patsy and Joat've been mixing stuff around, too, through the passageways."

"With a thousand needlers -3-" Amos began, and then shrugged, oddly hopeless. Joseph nodded.

"Hmm. What make are those?" Patsy said, with a spark of her old interest "Ursinar manufacture," Simeon said. "Obscure race, big and hairy, always insisted that it was their right to arm bears." *"'

"This may only prolong the agony and delay the inevitable," Amos said. "So little against so much." Then he shook himself. "Still, it is better to die fighting."

"Hell, better to win and live," Simeon said.

"In the meantime," Amos said, standing and sweeping his eyes from screen to screen, "push them hard. They are incapable of resisting a territorial challenge from a weaker opponent even when it would be logical to pull back. Take more risks."

Well, he takes as many as the rest of us do, Channa thought. Quite the little commander all the same. Wry amusement colored her exhaustion.

"Security monitor's locked," Joat said. "Now, your bit"

Seld went to the electronics access panel and began fiddling with its innards. Then he inserted the hedron he had prepared. The resulting picture would be distorted in the way the security computers had been since the pirate worm program went in. But they would distort the images of Joat and Seld in selective ways. Making them appear taller, much darker...

Joat went in die opposite direction, placing herself at the end of the corridor in the lookout's position.

When he had finished he joined her and tapped her shoulder. "Time," he whispered. " Just a sec." She opened her pack and withdrew a monocrystal filament dispenser. The thread was a molecule in diameter but incredibly strong. Dangerous to handle, too. Thinner than the thinnest knife-blade could ever be.

"What are you gonna do with that?" he asked puzzled. "I thought you were planting something."

"Stick around and you'll see," she said, wagging her eyebrows.

She knelt beside the wall and attached an end of the beryllium monocrystal filament to the corridor panel at about knee height Using the tiny laser that was part of the dispenser, the end was soldered into place, leaving a slight stickiness when she touched the wall. She reeled out the invisible fiber and tacked the other end to the opposite wall, keeping a careful mental image of where it was.

Seld turned pale. "You can't... you know what that stuff does!"

"Sure do," she said smugly. "OII Jack-of-All-Trades is gonna give new meaning to 'cut off at the knees.'
* "You can't," he said, and grabbed her arm. "They're bastards, but they're... they're sentients. You can't be maiming them like that." His voice had taken on a tinge of his father's accent again, but he was shaking with tension. Drops of sweat broke out at the edge of his reddish-brown hair. "It's evil! What are you thinking about?"

She snatched her arm from his grip. "I'm thinking about what they did. Tortured people. What they did to Patsy, and your friend Juke. I'm thinking about payback."

He licked his lips. "Not like this, I won't have anything to do with it. Couldn't you just... kill them clean? C'mon, Joat?"

She pushed him back with her shoulder and tacked another line through at about waist height for a taD adult. "Sim says," she went on, drawing three more lines about shin-height, "that cutting the enemy up is better than killin' 'em. Shakes them up more, and they gotta take care of them."

"If we do stuff like this, how are we different from them?"

She turned on him, snarling. "'Cause we live here and we're not doing this for fun! Or to make a nardy credit offit!"

Seld sat down abruptly against the corridor wall.

"Seld?" she said, her face smoothing out abruptly and her voice changing. "Seld, you okay? You need your meds?"

"I'm okay. I just... I just don't like you as much when you're like this, Joat. And I really like you. You know?"

Sometimes I don't like me much, Joat thought. She turned away and blew out her lips in exasperation. "Don't go buckawbuckaw on me now, Seld, 'cause it's gonna get worse around here before it gets better. If it gets better." Everything always gets worse.

He raised his head from his knees. "If I'm going to die soon I want to die clean," he said. "Gimme your V-pills."

"Why?"

"Lost mine."

"Okay." They were supposed to take the pill if they came into contact with a Kolnari. Joat didn't intend to, or to live if she did. Seld pocketed the pills and stalked off toward his own escape route.

She pursed her lips and tacked a new line to the wall at the opening of the connecting corridor, at what she estimated as head-height for a Kolnari.

Then she ducked under it by a wide margin, tip-toed back toward the first line. She stopped well short of it and listened.

Come on, you gruntfudders, she thought. Rzrdling move.

They should be amazed that it was taking the first patrol so long to respond. She went to stand by the sabotaged panel and listened, hearing only the pounding of her own heart, which felt as if it wanted to tear free of her thin chest. Then at last, her quick ears caught the sound of movement. She counted to five and began to retreat toward the second line. She entered the corridor just as she heard a shouted "Halt!" in Kolnar. Perfect, she thought, all they saw was the cover. They hadn't said halt, scumvermin, either.

A couple of shots were fired; light weapons, needles spanging off metal. The squad leader barked an order for cease fire and pursuit. Feet tapped the mesh covering of the corridor, in the distinctive long

strides of the pirates.

Screams rang down the corridor, clanging and echoing in the dose space. Joat leaned forward from where she crouched and looked out around the corner. There was a malicious grin on her face, but it died at what she saw. Two of the Kolnari soldiers lay on the floor in a small pond of blood, hanging over the ultrastrong invisible wire that had sawn through their legs and opened them up from navel to backbone like a butterflyed shrimp. As she watched, a body fell to the ground in two pieces, and there was so much, so much blood and guts and all the colors, and a pink-purple lung...

One Kolnari trooper reached toward her severed legs and cut her hand in half to the wrist. Two fingers flopped uselessly as she clutched her arm and screamed and screamed, not in pain or fear but sheer terror of the invisible something that had killed her.

"Oh, multi grudly," Joat whispered to herself. The sound of the words against what she saw was so out of place that she felt hysterical giggles bubbling up. Something warned her that that sort of giggling would be very difficult to stop once it started, so she backed away. Her eyes were huge saucers in her thin pale face.

At the other end of Joat's corridor was one of Simeon's hidden elevators. She tossed the wire spool out into the corridor before she entered it. Behind her there were shouts: the next enemy squad. From the ringing sounds, they tested to find the wires with the barrels of their weapons. There was a double thud as one unwary Kolnari turned too iast into the corridor and decapitated himself on the final trap.

Moving briskly, Joat exited the elevator three levels up and entered an access corridor meant for electrical repairs. She transferred to one of the small ventilation shafts and dragged herself quickly and efficiently to a larger open area where an array of the shafts met. She was safe here: it was one of her bases, with a pallet and some ration boxes as well as tools pilfered from Engineering, if you could call it pilfering when they handed them to you willingly. They were calling Joat the "Spirit of SSS-900-C," or Simeon's Gremlin.

Then she was violendy sick to her stomach. Servos arrived, clicking and cheeping to themselves, and cleaned up the mess.

Joat lay down, cradling her face on her arms, and wept bitterly. Long wracking sobs, like nothing she could remember.

'Joat... honey, have you been hurt?' Simeon's voice was soft and warm, like a vaguely remembered something that once held her.

She lifted a face flushed with weeping, but her lips were white.

"I'm not as tough as I thought," she said through her sobs. "I didn't think... Shit, no! I've gotta heart like a rock. That's me, Joat the killer! Did you hear me snancing Seld for a wuss?" A cough racked her, and she wiped her eyes on the back of her hands. "He'll hate me! I hate myself! It was so " And she threw herself down and bit the mattress. An eerie crooning wail echoed through the corridor.

"Shhh, it's all right, it's all right."

"I wanna go home!"

"Joat. Joat, honey. I'm with you. You are home. You'll always have a home with me. / don't hate you,

Joat. You're not bad, honey. But sometimes things get through to the good part of you that doesn't like the tough part of you, and that's what just happened."

The servos rolled forward and tucked a blanket around her. Simeon began to croon, directing it at her ears where she hugged the blanket about her head and only tufts of hair escaped.

"IwantCharma"

I can't hold her, Simeon thought But I can smg....

"Do you call me liar to my face, Aragiz?" Belazir said.

"My people were killed," Aragiz t'Varak replied. "Security recorded Kolnari setting the trap, perhaps thinking to throw the blame on scumvermin. I knew scumvermin could not "

"Do you give me the lie, t'Varak?"

The other captain stopped, torn between unwillingness to retract and inability to attack. Belazir was under no such constraints.

"Did it never occur to you, oh so straightforward cousin, that it might be scumvermin posing as Clan? That they are as capable of playing on our divisions as we are on theirs?"

"You call me dupe of scumvermin?"

"I say that you bare me, Lord Captain Aragiz t'Varak. You bore me beyond words, beyond bearing. Your existence makes die universe a place of tedium beyond belief!"

Aragiz's face relaxed, into a soft, welcoming smile. "When?"

"When Lord Captain Pol t'Veng's judgement is fulfilled. To the fist" Adeath-duel in die old manner, with spiked steel gloves.

"And now," Belazir went on, "get your household and all else to your ship." Quick suspicion marked the other captain's face. "Yes, I know you were massing your groundfighters. There is no time for feud here, t'rak. Believe me." The screen blanked. Serig took a step forward, an eyebrow raised. , "Lord, he is the dolt you named rum. There is nothing wrong with his reflexes, though."

"As it may be," Belazir said. "I spoke the truth. It drives me to fury to have to call that one cousin, it truly does." He shook his head. Today, we triumph, Serig. By running, yes: but triumph nonetheless. So, we "

The dockside guards' chimes rang through the bridge. "Great Lord, we have a scumvermin female, claiming to have information for you."

Serig chuckled. There had been a fair number of scumvermin females coming to the dock and asking for Belazir. Some few he had taken himself, and passed the others on to Serig or the crew.

"No, wait," Belazir said. "Information of what?"

"A conspiracy, involving the scumvermin leadersthat-were and die prey-ship, lord."

"Send her up." Belazir looked at Serig and shrugged. "Why not?"

Waiting was swift. "I would speak with you alone, Master," the woman said, looking meaningfully at Serig.

"I am generous to women," Belazir declared. Quite true, or she would never have reached him. "So generous I did not hear you, scumvermin."

She blinked and swallowed hard, looking from one to the other.

"Why have you come?"

"The... they held me prisoner, Master and Gggg " Even then, she could not quite bring herself to utter the blasphemy. Then Belazir looked up at her, and she felt herself huddle down behind the barrier of her skull, knowing it was not enough. So a scatooth looked at a lamb. " God," she completed, uncertain if it was the obscene honorific they demanded or a prayer, "L... I have information." She sfemmered, put a hand to her face. / escaped, she thought They must be really conspiring against her against Amos, as well. Holding her from him. She whimpered slightly. She could remember his words of love, the promises and nightmares of rejection, of failure. The brass-colored eyes were waiting.

"I am Rachel bint Damscus. I am from Bethel. I was on the ship that you were chasing. Forty of us survived the journey and took refuge on this station."

Neither of the Kolnari moved or spoke.

"So... you are from Bethel?" Belazir leaned his head on his fist. One finger caressed his lower lip. "Turn your head. Stand. Bend. Sit once more."

Belazir turned to Serig. "Possible," he said meditatively. "Similar scumvermin race, but there are many varieties here."

"Unlikely, lord."

Belazir nodded. And in any case academic. They were nearly ready to go. If they have deceived us, what matter? The memory of his slap in the face of the Bride's joss came back to him. Perhaps the old customs had some real strength after all....

She stared at him. There was something odd about her eyes, Belazir decided. Her lips trembled, and her fingers, but not in terror; he could always identify that. Some nerve disorder, perhaps? He leaned forward and snuffed. Not a healthy scent.

"Yes." She nodded once, sharply. "Master and God."

"Why do you tell me this? Surely you know that it is dangerous?"

The woman began to tremble with rage, and tears filled her eyes.

"She... that black-haired, black-hearted whore seduced my betrothed! She promised him power! But she lied. He plays the fool for her, does what she tells him, sleeps in her bed..." Her voice broke and she stopped, swallowed a few times before she could speak again. "Hie one you have been told is Simeon-Amos is truly Amos, the leader who brought us here from Bethel. The real Simeon is a

shellperson, a thing they call a brain, and he is still running this station."

"A... shellperson?" Belazir t'Marid dosed his eyes for a moment "Ah! We have heard, but never seen."

Serig leaned down to him. "Lord, a sort of protein computer, no? But our worm subverted their system and holds it in our fist Would we not have known?"

"It would explain anomalies," Belazir said, chasing the elements that made him believe the impossible "And ah! I am as great a fool as Aragiz t'Varak!"

"Surely not, lord," Serig said, surprised. "Not on your worst day. Not on my worst day. Not on the worst day of this scumvermin womb here."

"I was about to dismiss this, time being short Dismiss potentially the richest single piece of loot on the station!"

"A shellperson is so much?"

"A strategic asset," Belazir said. "Come, we will look into this. It is time, in any case."

He turned his eyes back to the scumvermin. From all he could see, she was manic-depressive, swinging from healthy, normal terror to an exalted state where she had complete confidence in his interest, in his support As if he were a player in her play...

"Mad," he said. "Yet... My vanity, perhaps, but little Channahap plays the war game far too well. An encysted brain, tied to great computers and their data banks, though?" He cocked an eyebrow at Rachel.

"I can only tell you what I have heard," the woman said, babbling in her desire to be believed. "I have been ir told that they are people who have been put into a casing as infants and that they then become like a computer." She wrung her hands and looked desperately from one to the other. "I'm telling you the truth. They are plotting against you. Master and God!"

Belazir smiled in polite agreement "Of course they are." On that, at least, they were agreed. He rose. "Come, we will go and talk to them." He turned to Serig. "Have Baila tell Channahap that I will see her in her office. Tell her to have Simeon-Amos there as well."

Simeon spoke, interrupting Channa at her work station. "Channa, Belazir t'Bastard is heading this way with Rachel in tow. I don't know what's up, but he's looking both grim and pleased."

Before Channa could speak, the comm chimed and Baila's face appeared.

"Channahap," she said. "The Lord Captain t'Marid is on his way to your office. You will await him there. He commands the presence of Simeon-Amos. Obey." The screen went dark.

"Shit" Channa said, and tapped her fingers thoughtfully. "You're right, Simeon, this does not look good. I am so sick of that girl. She's driving me... crazy. Simeon?"

"You're right on the button about her state of mind, Channa. Our Rachel's crazy, not just going crazy but absolutely nuts, gonzo, a sandwich shy of a picnic, packin' a short seabag..."

"Sim!"

"Right, I'll have Chaundra draw up a case history about some kind of dementia. You brief Simeon-Amos, 111 spread the word."

"You got it. Simeon-Amos," she said over the intercom, "get in here."

"And Channa?"

"Yes?"

"I think this is it. The battle platform just started severing its stationside power leads. We've got a real opportunity to hurt them hard if we can get Belazir out of comm with his people. It could make the difference."

Channa nodded. She had been prepared to try an assassination on the Bride, but that, at best, was unlikely. Fear was remote: no time for it "Simeon-Amos," she began, when he entered the lounge. "Belazir's coming, with Rachel." His face froze. "Here's what we're going to do no time for an argument—"

The crates made gentle plopping noises as they slid out of the meter-deep green water of the algae pools and stood dripping on the slotted metal of the walkways. Ships had a closed system of tubing and enclosed tanks, but this arrangement open metal rectangles stacked like trays was more efficient for a station. The environment systems workers moved quickly, without wasted effort or much talking. This had not been a cheerful section since their chief returned to them, but there was a stolid satisfaction as the vac-covers were peeled back and the weapons went from hand to hand among the hundred or so technicians, office workers, and laborers.

Patsy Sue Coburn watched the needlers emerge, brutal and compact. She slung one over her shoulder. Ursinid weapons were submachinegun size for humans. Then she reached into the pool and retrieved her arc pistol, stripping off the plastic film.

"Wait for it," she whispered. If the Kolnari made one last swing through on their usual routes, they'd be by in half an hour or so.

The crew were crowding around the supervisors, getting a quick lesson on how to use a needler to best effect. Luckily, the weapons had simple controls: set the dial on the side to the full clockwise position and take up the trigger slack. Look down the barrel at the target and pull the trigger. Line of sight weapons with little recoil at short ranges, they should do well enough.

And they're all we've got, she reminded herself. She felt completely calm. In a way, she had been calm since she woke and saw Joan's face floating before her, like a ghost's in its pool of light. There was a feeling under that, a feeling that when she wasn't calm anymore, it was going to be very, very bad.

"Reckon I kin wait fer it," she told herself.

The others were looking at her.

'Just wait 'n till they come around," she said patiently for the hundredth time. "Simeon'll keep us all in touch." I hope, /purely do. "Now, when they git here, you burn 'em down. Then go down axial G-8 an' hit the bunch of'em there. Arnos'll be about then. If not him, then me."

She nodded curtly and slung the needler further around to her back, freeing her hands for the climb up

the interval ladder. The entrance to the venting system was where she would rendezvous with JoaL. Not a difficult climb at first, since these were the biggest vents on the station. The circle effaces fell away below her, growing tiny amid the rectangular Escher shapes of the ponds and the huge color-coded maze of pipes for nutrient and water and waste.

Amos stood impassively behind Channa, hands clasped at his back. They dropped to a knee as Belazir entered. He took the seat before her desk, gestured to Channa to sit. The squad of soldiers began to crowd into the small office. The t'Marid snapped out an order in his own language and all but two of them withdrew.

Rachel stood beside his chair. She glared at Channa and then turned away, her fists clenched by her sides. To Amos she smiled tremulously.

Definitely, as Sim would say, a few cans short of a sixpack, Channa decided. She looks as if she's rescuing Am.

Channa folded her hands in her lap. "Master and God, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Belazir smiled and indicated Rachel with his hand. "I have been given some interesting information.*" "I have told him everything!" Rachel said spitefully.

Channa and Amos regarded her blankly, then shook their heads and turned to Belazir.; ;

"Everything?" Channa asked.

"She has told me that she and forty others survived the trip from Bethel, and that this man," he flicked his chin at Amos, "is her betrothed. She tells me that he is pretending to be Simeon and that the real Simeon is in fact a brain in a container or some such thing, who is running this station and the resistance to the High Clan."

He folded his hands and regarded her calmly. "This truth would solve certain difficulties, Channa fought not to smile, making her eyes wide with disbelief. Belazir studied her closely. Amusement was not what he had anticipated.

"Simeon-Amos," she said at last, "please inform Doctor Chaundra that Rachel has been found and ask him to come and fetch her. Advise him that he may need some form of chemical restraint."

Belazir raised an eyebrow.

Channa looked to the t'Marid for permission for Amos to comply. Belazir flicked his fingers. Amos nodded and went into his own office to make the call.

"She lies yet again, lord," Rachel said, but she fell silent at a second flick of Belazir's hand.

Channa assumed an understanding expression. "This young woman is deranged. We don't restrain her because usually she is harmless and so are her fantasies. A tragic case, very resistant to psychotherapy."

"Foul whore " Rachel began, urgently stepping forward.

Belazir made a chopping motion with his hand. A jruard stepped forward and Rachel shut her mouth with an audible snap.

"Who is she, then?" he asked.

"We don't actually know," Channa said. "She was abandoned here, apparently by some transient merchant. She had no I.D. No one came forward with any information about her. The doctor isn't sure if her insanity is the result of drugs or trauma. He says the only way to be one hundred percent sure is to do an autopsy, which obviously is out of the question. She's usually very sweet, at worst a mild nuisance. Perhaps the conditions..." and Channa made a vague motion with her hand to suggest that the occupation might have added to her instability. Channa made herself lean back casually in her chair, appearing at ease. "Perhaps it's a sign of progress that she is this aware of, ah, current events, Master and God. She must have concocted this fantasy about Bethel from the newspapers, for example."

Rachel exploded. "She lies!" She lunged for Channa, coming up with a jerk when the guard pulled her back by her long hair. Her gorgon's mask of rage did not even register the pain. She struggled briefly and then subsided as Amos came back into the room. "Amos," she pleaded, weeping, "help me!"

He looked at her with sympathy.

"Of course, I will help you, Rachel," he said. His mellow voice rang with sincerity. "We all wish to help you." He leaned close to Channa. "The doctor is on his way, Ms. Hap."

"No!" Rachel screamed. "No! How can you do this to me? She is using you, my love! Do not betray me! Please..." Tears began to leak down her long nose. "Please... please."

Channa's stomach twisted. She is crazy. Probably curably crazy most were. Irritation faded before pity, and pity faded before the threat of the Kolnari putting any weight into Rachel's tale.

Amos' sympathy was achingly real "There, there," he said soothingly. "You are ill, Rachel. Daddy will call the doctor to make it right" He offered the rag doll he was carrying. "You can have Siminta with you." He pressed it into her hands.

For a moment Rachel's sobs stopped and she stared at him in confusion. "What?" she said. "You are my betrothed, not my father!" She looked down at the doll, then dashed it to the floor and stamped her foot "Stop mocking me!"

Amos shifted uneasily. "I cannot keep up with this. May I be excused until Doctor Chaundra comes?"

"It might be best," Channa said, addressing Belazir.

The t'Marid's eyes flicked over the three of them. "Daddy?" he said dubiously, then quirked an involuntary smile.

Channa sighed. "Last week, she thought she was five years old and Simeon-Amos was her father. She would start to cry if he left the room. For some reason, she's totally fixated on him. Chaundra supposes that he resembles whoever dropped her on us. We don't know."

"Lies!" Rachel shrieked. "Lies."

"The doctor should be here by now," Amos said, clearly uncomfortable. He picked up the doll and placed it carefully on a chair. "Ah... she will grieve later if it isn't there."

"You may go," Belazir said to him. His eyes never left Channa's.

Chaundra strode in. He walked over to the weeping girl and touched her shoulder gently. "Poor Rachel," he said soothingly, "poor little girl."

"Doctor," t'Marid said sharply. Chaundra turned and stood very straight, looking down. "This is your patient?"

"Yes, Master and God."

"I do not appreciate having my time wasted on the daydreams of this madwoman. If she is so much as seen again no, no point. You may go. Wait You have records of her illness? I want to see them."

"Yes, Master and God, but I can't access them from this computer. Medical records are on a dosed system to protect the privacy of the patient"

Belazir made an impatient, dismissive gesture. "Serig," he said. "See to it then back to the Bride, continue on the matter we were planning. I will join you shortly." Serig bowed deeply.

"At your command, lord," he said, his teeth showing slightly in cold amusement "The doll, too?"

Belazir snorted. "Go, insolence.

Rachel took a deep breath and seemed to fight for dignity; the twitching lessened in her face. "They are lying, Master and God, you will see. I am telling the truth."

That ended in a squawk as Serig turned her about and pushed between her shoulderblades. She ran to avoid felling, and the door hissed open before her.

"Now," Belazir snarled. Chaundra followed.

In the strained silence that followed, Belazir and Channa studied each other.

At last Belazir spoke. "Have your man return."

Channa pressed the intercom button, "Simeon Amos, would you come in here, please?"

"This Rachel is in love with you," t'Marid observed, a hint of laughter in the yellow eyes.

"I confess," Amos said bitterly, "that I am beginning to despise the very sight of her."

The Kolnari raised an eyebrow.

"One day," Channa informed him, "she became convinced that Simeon-Amos was God and went around the station trying to convert people to worshipping him. She's been a very difficult experience for all of us, but she's been a particular strain on Simeon-Amos."

"Simeon-Amos," Belazir said, "is rather obviously the victim of a similar fixation on you, Channahap. A strong reason to believe your tale."

"Yes, Master and God," Channa said. She dosed her eyes. Simeon? she asked.

"He's halfway convinced, but still wyndering. Impatient. Channa, it's starting. No more than twenty minutes until the pirates'sound alarm." _ " She opened her eyes again. "Simeon-Amos," she said. "Why don't you go see to the primary warehousing?"

He hesitated for a long second. "As you wish."

Now, Simeon commanded.

The worm raised its head from the ruins of the castle, looking out across a plain of volcanic fumaroles and blue-glowing lava. Flights of tongue-wasps patrolled there and arcs of lightning jagged over crater and canyon in patterned displays.

Thunder rumbled, A barking broke loose, louder than the thunder, and the vault of heaven split. The worm reared up, endless, longer than time, gluttoned with its feeding.

Simeon burst through and new skies sprang above the blasted landscape. The light changed from a pitiless white to the softer yellow of sunshine. The wasps fell, twitched, died. Three-headed and elephant-sized, the dog paced beside him. He raised the bat, struck.

The Grinder lunged and the concentric mouths damped on the end of the weapon. Then it recoiled, as the wood turned to a hoop and expanded, thrusting the rows of teeth back. It tried to shake loose, but the dog's three heads pinned its body to the earth. Wider and wider the glowing green circle swelled, until the mouths were a doorway.

A scalpel and icepick appeared in Simeon's hands. He walked into the worm's mouths and raised the tools.

"Heeeeeere's Sim!1* he shouted. "Openuwfe."

On the auxiliary command deck of the SSS-900-C, the Kolnari tech was reaching for the rear casing of the batde computer when he noticed die telltales.

"Lord!" he cried. "The "

At that instant, the se-destruct charge built into the base of the computer detonated. It was not much in the way of an explosion, but much more than was required to destroy the sensitive inner workings. The designer had intended that to foil tampering. However, the flattened disk of jagged housing was more than enough to decapitate the pirate.

His companion reacted with tiger precision, scooping up his weapon and leaping for the doors. They clashed shut with a snap, and the warrior rebounded into the control chamber. It was empty save for him and there was no other exit. He pivoted, holding down the trigger of his plasma rifle and firing from the hip into the consoles.

"Naughty," a voice from the air said. The vents began to hiss. Trie Kolnari staggered at the first touch of the gas. His last act was to strip a grenade from his belt and trigger it, carefully held next to his own head.

"Damn," Simeon muttered. The mess was considerable and the equipment wasn't going to be much use for a while. Then he took the equivalent of a deep breath and concentrated. Several dozen things must be done at once.

"Let me up," Channa said, stroking Belazir's back.

"Not for a while yet," Belazir said lazily. "I have hastened as it is. There is another five minutes available." His body was dry against her sweat-slick one, but much warmer, with the higher metabolism of his breed.

"Are we staying, then?" she breathed against his ear.

"No," he replied. "You suspected?"

"That you'd take me with you, or that today would be the day to go? Both." She wiggled. have to get some stuff."

"I shall keep you well," Belazir said, then rolled away off her. "Be swift."

He lay idly on the sofa, watching her disappear into the bedroom. Memorable, he decided. Starling with her skinning out of her clothes the moment they were alone. Anticipation is the best garnish! The Kolnari consulted his interior timesense:, twenty minutes, unusually swift. Well within the day's schedule, too. He grinned to himself, stretching and tossing back strands of white-blond hair. Tomorrow stretched out before him in a road of fire and blood and gold.

"We are close to Channa's quarters?" Joseph asked.

They were leopard-crawling down the ductway; an action that was hard for one of his shoulder-breadth. Behind them Patsy was having less of a problem, since much of her volume was compressible.

"Yeah..." Joat paused. "I haven't actually been this way, y'know. I was trying to hide from Simeon." A pause. "We're right over the main corridor to the elevator shaft. I think."

"I think I had better check," Joseph said, with a tight smile. "Are you all right, Joat-my-friend?"

"Yeah." She threw a smile back at him. "Just... I got a little shook, is all. I'm fine."

She touched the junction node and her jacker. The membrane beneath them turned transparent. Chaundra did not look up. Instead, he glanced behind him, shook his head, moved on.

Joat crawled past, then froze as two more figures came beneath. Rachel was running, but Serig caught her easily in one hand, pushed her against the corridor wall. She screamed, breathy and catching in her throat, like someone awakening from one nightmare into another.

"Don't do it, Joe, he'll kill you!" Joat cried sotto voce, lunging for the Bethelite's belt She missed and knew it would have done no good. Her hand could never have deflected the solid charging weight of the man. He was through the space and dropping to the deck before she could finish the sentence. His knives were in his hands: one long and thin, the other short and curved.

The Kolnari had his hand back to cuff Rachel again as she screamed a second time, hopelessly.

"Pirate," a voice behind them said.

The warrior threw her aside as easily as he might a sack of wool, and she thudded into the corridor wall.

The same motion turned into a whirling slash with one bladed palm, a blow that would have cracked solid teakwood. Joseph was not in its path, but the long knife in his right hand was. The yellow eyes slitted in pain and a broad streak of blood arched out to spatter against the cream of the sidewall and flow sluggishly down. The Clan fighter leaped back half a dozen paces, out of reach of the blades, but also farther from the discarded equipment belt. He was naked and unarmed, and the slash in his forearm was bone-deep. He dared not even squeeze it shut with his other hand. The raw salt-copper smell of blood was strong as the wound began to ooze more sluggishly. Superfast clotting would save him... if he did not exert himself, "Come to me, pirate," Joseph said softly. "Come, see how we fought in Keriss, on the docks."

The Kolnari snarled and leaped to one side, flipped in midair and bounced off the upper wall. He was a hundred-kilo blur of muscle and bone snapping at Joseph behind a clenched fist. Huddled against the wall, Rachel gave a whimper of despair, but Joseph was not there anymore. Anticipating such a tactic, he had thrown himself down on his back. Both knives were up. The pirate jackknifed in midair, but when he rolled erect, there were two more long slashes across his chest. His grin was a snarl of pain as he slid forward. The long wounds were orange, the Tunneling blood a shocking deep umber against his raven-black skin. He held his arms up: one in a knuckled fist, the other open in a stiffened blade.

"Come," Joseph whispered. Rachel blinked back to full consciousness and the sight of his face chilled her. "Come to me, yes, come."

The knives glinted in either hand, splashed orangey-red now, the edges glinting in the soft glowlight as they moved in small, precise circles.

What followed was a whirling blur. It ended with one knife flying loose and Joseph crumpling back, curled around his side. The other knife still shone in defiance. The Kolnari warrior staggered and shivered for a moment, then drew back his foot for the final blow. Rachel flung herself forward, grasping blindly. Her arms doped around the poised leg. It was like gripping a tree, no, a piece of steel machinery that hammered her aside like some giant piston-rod. But blood loss and the unexpected weight threw the pirate off-balance. He staggered forward into Joseph. For a moment they stood chest-to-chest, like embracing brothers. Long-fingered black hands clamped down on Joseph's shoulders, ready to tear the muscles of his bull-neck free by main force.

Then she saw the Bethelite's left arm moving. The right hung limp, but the left was pressed against the Kolnari's side. There was something in it. A knife-hilt, and the blade was buried up to the guard; the curved blade of the *theszca*, whose density-enhanced edge would carve steel. It slid through ribs as the pirate's killing grip turned to a frantic push that arched him like a bow.

The two men had fought in silence, save for the panting rasp of their breath. Now the Kolnari screamed, as much in frustration as in final agony. The cry dissolved in a spray of blood as the diamond-hard *sica*'s edge sawed open his ribcage and ground to a halt halfway through his breastbone. He flopped to the ground, voided, and died. Joseph wrenched his knife free and stooped. He forced his right hand to action, gripped the dead pirate's genitals, severed them with a slash. Then he stuffed them into the gaping mouth of the corpse and spat in the dead eyes, still open like fading amber jewels.

Blood. Rachel wiped at her mouth, suddenly conscious of the blood: in her mouth, her hair, over her body, spattered on corridor walls and ceiling, dimming the glowstrips, more blood than she had ever imagined could be. Joseph was coated with it, his eyes staring out of a mask of blood, his teeth red.

She stared at the mutilated corpse. "Serig," she said. "His name was Serig."

"A dead dog's name dies on the dungheap," Joseph said in a snarl. Then he turned to her and his eyes were alive once more. He bowed, checked himself with a sharp gasp, then completed the gesture. "My lady, are you hurt?" he inquired solicitously.

His face, for once, was naked. Rachel gasped and swayed, looking down at the body and then at the man she had despised.

"Joseph!" she cried, clutching at his arm. "I..." Reality whirled, splintered, as if a glass surface between her and her thoughts had shattered. "Joseph," she said more softly, wonderingly. "Something has happened to me. I... I remember things that cannot be. I " she blushed " I remember being so cruel to you, so vicious. And, and I " she looked up at him, shaking her head in denial even as she whispered in growing horror " betrayed Amos to the Roman?"

He touched her cheek, a feather soft caress. "Lady, you have been ill. You were poisoned by the coldsleep drugs that we took. It is not your fault"

"Oh," she said, "oh," and threw herself into his arms, weeping. "Please forgive me," she pleaded, "I am unworthy, I am foul, but I beg you, Joseph, do not despise me. Do not leave me."

"I could never despise my lady," he said simply. He extended a hand which she grasped, though the fingers were slippery with death.

"Come, we have little time," he said. "We must get you to a place of safety, and I have much work to do this day." * "Then let us hasten, Joseph," she replied.

Joat and Patsy dropped down, halting at the sight of the body. They scanned the hall tensely, then edged nearer. Joat looked at it out, of the corner of her eyes, but the older woman stared hungrily.

The arc pistol rose, then fell helplessly.

"It's him," she whispered. "It's him. And it's been done!" Her tone was aggrieved, indignant.

Joat moved up beside her. Boy, is he ever done, she thought with her newfound squeamishness, and tried to ignore the smell. This skudgesueker worked up an awful lot of mad against himself. It was not that she regretted his death, just...

"Sorry it wasn't you?" she said, looking up at her companion.

For the first time since her rape, Patsy Sue Coburn was weeping.

"No," she said, her voice thick. "No, I'm not sorry. Not sorry he's dead, not sorry it wasn't me. Jist glad this dawg will never hurt nobody agin. I... won't have to remember doing it, now."

"Yeah, that's right," Joat said desolately, slamming the doors of memory firmly shut "C'mon, we got work to do."

They turned to Joseph and Rachel. "Let's boost her up," Joat continued. "Axial up one ought to be safe enough to stash her. Then we can get on with it"

"Simeon?" Channa said softly. "You back?" "Part of me." His voice sounded dim, although the implant's volume was always the same. "I'm dancing on a sawblade, keeping their communications down and

fighting off their ships' computers. Can't keep them out of touch forever." More sharply. "You all right?" "You want to know" she said, dressing with calm haste. "Yeah."

"It was annoying as hell... and sort of strenuous." A moment's urchin grin. "And to tell the truth, I'd have been forever curious if I hadn't What I'd like" she said as she finished sealing her overall to the neck, "is to see his face when he realizes I'm not coming back through that door."

"I'll record it."

"And don't tell Amos."

A section of the ceiling paneling turned translucent and slid back. Joat's face showed through and then her body somersaulted down.

"There's a crawlspace we c'n get into now that leads to a bunch of air-ducts and electric-conduits. Come on."

Channa examined the hatch in the ceiling and smiled wryly. 'Just like in a holovid," she murmured.

Joat grinned. "Yeah, only a lot smaller." She looked anxiously at Channa's lean length. "You may find it a squeeze. Had to leave the others back a ways. Do you nurdly when you're cramped?"

"Is there a choice?" Channa said.

"Then you don't. Push yourself along with your hands and toes. Don't try to use your knees or you'll eventually black out from the pain."

"Do you speak as one who knows?"

"Uh-huh, I've seen it happen. Give me a boost?"

Channa braced, cupped her hands, lifted Joat towards the ceiling hatch.

"Ready." Joat's voice came down, sounding a little hollow.

"Stand back." Channa crouched down and sprang upwards, catching the sides of the hole and pulling herself straight up, arms trembling with the strain.

The crawlspace was narrow and cramped and confining. She had to breathe and move in different motions. It was wonderful & CHAplfalTWENTYTWO "Okay," Florian Gusky croaked. "Go." He coughed, his lungs and throat a mass of pain and fire. The air system had _not been designed to be occupied for two-week stays. "Go, you bastards."

Eight tugs and the mining scout In Your Dreams brought up their systems. There had been ten tugs, but Lowbau and Wong hadn't been answering on tightbeam for four days. If something had gone wrong with their life-support, neither of them had made a sound while it happened, accepting death in the silence of their powered-down ships, alone in the dark.

"Comin' home," Gus whispered.

The tugs had drifted with the other debris that cluttered the vicinity of the station. He gave silent thanks

for the fact that Simeon had never been a neat housekeeper. More that Channa hadn't had time to reform him before the trouble struck. Now the energies of their drives painted half of heaven. Acceleration pushed him back into the padding, beyond what the compensators could handle. The screen ahead of him was a holo-driven schematic, with his target and approach vector marked off as a box, and the tug a blip that had to be kept inside it. Easy work for a military craft, but these tugs were designed for hard slow pulls, not whipping around. Nothing else mattered but the vector, and the load of scrap and ore trailing behind him. Through his body the drives hummed, pushed past all prudence and all hope.

His mind found time to note the bright spark that was a tugging up, a pulse from the engine detonation and then the brighter flash of the destabilized powerplant "Well, that ought to let 'em know we're here,**" he muttered. Whiskers rasped against the feeding nozzle and the mike as his head moved for the helmet. He knew his face must look neither sane nor pleasant. The tug surged as he corrected. The feed station filled a sidescreen, and the bristling saucer shape of the Kolnari battle platform docked to its north polar tube, like some monstrous tick swelling with blood.

"You're mme," Gusshouted past cracked lips. '

Simeon stood in the passageway. Rock rumbled around him, the bomb exploded away from a spot above, chips stinging his eyes and going spang off his armor. The long head that battered through was scaled in sapphire and had eyes set all about it, in a bone rill that turned to spikes. The muzzle split four ways, and each segment was lined with fangs. The tongue between was a metal-tipped spear ready to strike.

He struck first, grabbing it in an armored gauntlet and hauling back before the quadruple jaws could slam shut. When they did, it was on their own tongue. A high whine of pain drove needles into Simeon's ears. He kept his grip on the lashing end, whipped it three times around the muzzle and tied a quick slip-knot. Then he stood back and took a double-handed grip on his glowing baseball bat. Thwak. The guardian program shivered, slumped, dissolved into metallic fragments that scurried back and forth disorganized, then decayed instantly into floating bytes.

"Next," he said, walking forward toward the ironstrapped door, which was probably the entrance to the CPU. "Geeze, I've got to patent this AI interface," he said, taking stance again. "It's Boom. Oak splintered, wrought iron bent and shrieked. "fordlin' " Boom.

The commander of the High Clan battle platform Skull Crusher pivoted on one heel. The big circular room was half-empty; the liberty parties were only now returning.

"What?" he barked at the info-systems watch-officer. Not now. He was scheduled to undock and begin transit first, to be there when the transports came in for rendezvous with the rest of the High Clan. Just in case, but the weight of the responsibility was heavy, and this was his first independent command.

"Lord, our system is under attack!"

"The worm program?" Chindik t'Marid was a specialist in those. He had designed the standard Clan attack worm himself. He was also a game designer of note, although that was merely a hobby.

"No," the tech said. His fingers were dancing over his board. "Something's just smashing its way in."

"Aside." Chindik called up a graphic. He whisded silently. Something with enormous computational power was battering at the defenses with tremendous force, trying all the solutions. There was no indication of realspace location. His computers were spending all their capacity just keeping the enemy

out. But since there was only one enemy installation in sight "Cut the cable feeds to the station," he said. "Batde alert to all other vessels.1* "I can't cut the feeds," the tech said. "The retractors won't answer. Neither do the landline comms to the rest of the flotilla."

"Well, then " Chindik began. Another cry stopped him.

"Detection," the sensor operator said. "Multiple detection. Powerplant signatures. Close, lord, dose. Approaching."

"Attack vectors," the tactical computer announced. "Vessel is under attack.*1 "Those aren't warships," Chindjk said in astonished dismay as he read the screen. His head whipped back and forth, reflex in a creature attacked from all sides. Then he straightened, strode back to the commander's station, and sank into the couch.

"Combat alert," he said. The chimes began to sound, wild and sweet. "Battlestarions. Deploy short-range energy weapons. Fire on any of those... gnats as the weapons bear. Gantry?"

"Lord?" The dockside guards were looking away from the pickup. "Lord, we hear "

"Silence! Send parties through the sidelock and blow the feeds connecting us to the scumvermin hulk."

"Lord?"

"Obey!"

The guards scattered like mercury struck with a hammer.

"Blast-broadcast," Chindik said. "Five-minute signal, all crew rally to the Crusher. Then undock."

"Lord, I've been trying to activate the decoupling procedure." The bridge was filling as the standby crew ran in and slid into their stations. "My telltales say it is working, but the visual scanner shows no activity."

"Send a party from engineering to dog it manually. Engines, prepare to maneuver."

"Lord, we're still physically linked."

"I know. We'll rip loose, and take the damage. Estimate."

"Six minutes to readiness, lord."

The weapons team were working in a blur of trained unison. "Enemy dosing. Velocities follow. Preparing to engage... Lord, we need maneuvering room! They are too close for interceptor missiles."

"Make it three minutes, Engines." He turned back to the communications console. "Get me the commander "Down two decks, use the emergency shaft. Down two decks, use the emergency shaft."

Simeon's voice rang through the corridor. All up and down it, the doors of the residential apartments were opening. Stationers came out, First singly, then in groups, in scores. They ran past the working party at the corridor junction, grabbed whatever shapes were thrust into their hands: needlers, industrial torches, bundles of blasting explosive with fuses cobbled together out of calculators, handlights and spare consumer-goods chips. Their faces were set and tight, or grinning, or snarling wordlessly.

Simeon broke off another fragment of attention as Amos came up.

"Channa?" the Bethelite asked. Then, as she moved into sight from behind Joseph, he cried in relief. "Channar They had time for a single swift hug.

His eye widened slightly as he saw Joseph's body splashed with drying blood from knees to neck.

"Mostly not my own, Brother," Joseph said grinning.

"You are hurt."

"Cracked rib. It is nothing."

Amos nodded briskly. "So for, they are surprised," he said to Channa. "But that will not last." The fabric of the station quivered beneath their feet.

Belazir t'Marid stepped back from the door. The frame of the chair was bent in his hands, but only gouges showed on the surface. He dropped the shattered mass and looked around, his eyes narrowed. Fool, he thought, and suppressed anger. There would be time for recriminations later. Perhaps... He retrieved his equipment belt and extracted the universal microtool. There had to be a connecting line somewhere around the entranceway. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the titanium pillar that had been beneath the tapestries.

"You will pay for this, my friend," he said. "For a very longtime." æ.

"Eat shit and die, Master and God," Simeon replied. God, that felt good. I've been waiting to say that. "You screwed the pooch. You did the doo-doo, big. Ifou've got a place in the next edition ofFrom the Jaws of Victory* Belazir turned away with a smile and a shrug, going to work on the exterior access panel.

"Can you feel pain?" he said as he began slicing it open with the short-range cutting laser in the tool "I hope so. Very much." He deployed die hair-thin probe.

And I was playing below my level on the war games," Simeon added.

"Barricade at the next junction, lord."

The groundfighter's voice sounded in her headphones. Pol t'Veng filed it with the other voices filling her helmet, squeezing at them with the force of her will until they began to assume some pattern.

Takiz," she said to her second. He looked around from the six power-armored figures at the junction. Just ahead the corridor had been wrecked by a satchel-charge; the tangle of walls, tubing and die remains of the floating gun was still white-hoL Two of the suited Koinari forced their way into the narrow place and began to straighten. Metal screamed as it was deformed again. Hot gases pooled around them and the remains of die gun-crew.

"Takiz, when we're through here, take four and make another attempt at Lord Belazir's last location. Maximum effort."

That translated as "Bring him or don't come back."

"I hear and obey, Lord Pol."

"Lord Pol, we have a cleared line to the main axial corridor."

"Good," she said. Good news, the first since this started. "Reports."

"Fighting on all the docking levels, Lord. Data follows."

It did; also pickup views. One for only a second; the view from a powersuit as its wearer backed into the open port of a Clan transport. Stationers were firing from behind barricades of machinery and crates in the open space beyond. The lights were out and the view had the glassy look of light-enhancement. Softsuited crewfolk ran past the groundfighter. His plasma rifle snapped again and a makeshift breastwork exploded along with the bodies of the scumvermin behind it. Then all the telltales that ran below the visual flashed red. Not good news for the occupant of that suit, since the internal temperature was now over two hundred degrees. The scene began to fog just as she could make out a bundle of plastic bricks wired together arcing toward the airlock. Then it cut out abruptly.

Bad. That was one vessel that would be undocking with extreme difficulty. She projected a schematic on the corridor wall and studied it as the information flowed in. More bad news, but at least she had a picture.

"General transmission," she said. "Lord Pol t'Veng, assuming command in the absence of Lord Belazir. Crews, report to nearest vessel. Those near the exterior, blow your way out of the pressure hull and EVA to the nearest vessel."

Many of them would be suited, and emergency dingmasks films that protected the face somewhat, with a miniaturized recycler were standard issue. For that matter, Koinari could endure about four minutes of vacuum if trained and prepared.

"We retreat?" someone asked, shocked.

"No, fool!" she said. The speaker was an officer with an intact company ranged behind him. It was worth the time to answer as she might herself fall, in which AnneMcCaffny&SJU. Stirling case he would need the information. "Look!" She downloaded her appraisal. "They fight to keep us here. We fight for fighting room. We have completed our mission."

"I hear and obey, lord." & "You had better," she muttered to herself. Now that the blockage had been cleared, more Koinari were gathering in the cross-corridors.

"We fight our way through to the axial corridor," she said. "You, Dittrek. Is that barricade still holding?"

"Yes, lord. I do not have enough men to rush it again."

"Blow through the access walls to either side of your position," she said. "Then blow through the connecting partitions and flank them. Quickly."

"Lord."

She turned to the others. "To the docks follow me!"

"Now!" Gus muttered to himself. The computer did the actual release. The tug released its grapnel field and applied lateral thrust, just enough to swing him wide of the station itself.

He removed his hands from the controls and slapped the main power switch; the safest thing to do, now. There were a lot of high-velocity debris around... including the wrecks of the other tugs. He felt a curious peace, almost as if he could sleep.

"Lord, we boost," the engine comm of Heart Crusher said. At the same moment, the weapons console gave a cry of fury.

"Kinetic slugs inbound. Prepare for impact. Inner defense batteries on auto."

"Full maneuver power. Boosting."

Chindik t'Marid prayed silently to the platform joss, making reckless promises. The big vessel lurched and rending sounds echoed through the fabric of its hull as the jammed connectors tore out, like roots parting in the earth. The most effective weapons were on the underside, and that was still pointed towards the SSS-900-C. There was nothing he could do, anyone could do, except the AI systems handling the close-in defense something beyond even Kolnari reflexes.

Sprays of trajectory crossed on the screens. Absently he noted the second to last attacking vessel taking a beam. An irrelevancy now, after the huge scatter of high-velocity projectiles had been loosed against his command. The slew of dots diminished, as the beams swept, more and more with each second as the stubby disk turned its teeth toward the sky.

Tinnnggggg. Timtggggg. He waited, tense. No more contact. The rest of the incoming flotsam had been stopped, or missed, or struck the station instead.

"Damage control!"

A few lights were strobing from green to amber to red. The engines screen came on.

"Lord... the exciter coils for the FTL were hit"

"How long?"

"A week, lord. It is a dockyard job." The Roman on the bridge exchanged looks. They had just heard news of their deaths.

"You," Chindik snapped to a backup crewman. "Take that " he indicated the joss " and space it"

"We have Lord Pol, lord."

The doors hissed open. Belazir jumped back with a yell as the plasma rifle leveled.

"Lord!" The man seemed ready to weep with relief. Belazir ignored him, diving for the empty suit that followed behind the warrior. For a wonder, it was his own, "Where is Serig?" Belazir barked. He had expected him to be here, or taking command. Matters should not have got so far out of hand.

With the door open, the smells and sounds of combat were obvious: deep toning sounds as explosions tore at the fabric of the station, far offchuddering of beam weapons, the stink of hot metal and ozone.

Belazir folded the suit around him, leaving the catheters for later. If I have to piss down my leg, so be it. It came alive with a jerk, and he flexed the servo-powered limbs and gauntlets with exultation.

"Lord Serig is dead, Great Ijord. Lord Pol commands. We have a link.** The news staggered Belazir for a moment. Serig dead? Then he damped the helmet. "Lord Pol?"

"Here! Report follows."-Mosdy disaster. "They came at us out of the walls, must have been hiding there since the occupation began." Belazir nodded jerkily.

"We hold the ships," Pol said crisply. "Except for one transport that has, incredibly, been overrun. They attack the docks and encircle pockets of our troops."

"Continue consolidating the pockets and punch through to the ships," he said. "Status?"

"Heart Crusher is free but her FTL is down," Pol said. "My Shark is also disengaged and I am not bringing her back. Half the transports are moving, but some with heavy damage. Dreadful Bride has nearly full crew, plus personnel from others, and is in control of her docking area and ready to boost." "Age of Darkness?"

"Still not even answering her comm," Pol said, her voice taking on emotion for the first time. "My youngest daughter against a used wiperag. Her outer info was penetrated and they did not even," she spat the word, "notice."

"No wager," Belazir said. He reached back over his shoulder and swung the punchgun rack down. It clicked into its rest along his right arm. The aiming bars lit on his faceplate as he turned and cycled for sonic and IR scan on the pillar that held the brain. Ahhh, yes. There is the interior structure, and the access hatchway. "You may assume tactical command from the Age of Darkness, Lord Pol, once you reach it. I will follow to the Bride. There is a matter to attend to here."

"Through there," Amos said. He pointed to two broken access door* across the circular open space. Most of it had been covered with kiosks, stores, restaurants and other structures until an hour ago. Now those were smoldering ruins, scattered among that were the bodies and the wreckage of the servomechs the stationers had used as their first wave. "They are back from the entrance on the second to the right*1 "We'll go through subaxial E-9 and punch across," Keri Holen replied. "That's one of the hidden sections."

She turned to her squad, a mix of station repair people with their working tools and ordinary civilians armed with whatever.

"C'mon, scumvermin," she said. "Let's go show the lords what we think of em. Follow me."

"How are we doing?" Channa said beside Amos, bobbing up and losing a burst with her needier. Covering fire from all the stationers lashed out at the exit shafts as the assault team dodged forward. The barricade ahead of them was corytium, brought in by the handler servos, and plasma rounds had splashed off the front, or welded the ingots together and made the barrier stronger. They still had to expose themselves to shoot, if only in a crevice between two ingots.

Amos ducked down with her as another series of bolts hit the metal. They could feel the barricade shudder and tone. The inner layer was barely warm, but the temperature above flash-heated enough to make their skins tingle. The stink of hot corycium made them cough, and Channa thought how worried she would have been in ordinary times; the fumes were not healthy. Then the whole station shuddered,

and the gravity fluxed sufficiently to be noticeable.

Nothing like a plasma bolt to give you a sense of perspective, she thought.

"Not doing too well, my darling," Amos said absently. A team from the Perimeter Restaurant was crawling from person to person with bags of sandwiches and juice. More of the restaurant's people were back two junctions, running a triage station under the direction of one of Chaundra's meditechs. "They are using the battle platform and the warship for fire support from outside, and we cannot stop them uniting their scattered groups. The groups that survived, that's." He sighed and smiled at her through the black smudges of powdered metal. "I cannot think of finer company than yours to travel to God with, Channa Hap," he said.

"I'm glad, too," she said. "Sorry it was this way, but glad." He reached out to touch her shoulder. Then her face went glared. For a moment he feared she had been hit, before he recognized the expression. She was communing with Simeon. Her throat worked. "Amos!" she burst out "They're taking Simeon out of his column!"

The Bethelite paled. Without their all-seeing commander and chief of general staff, the station was doomed, and quickly. Channa turned and began to leopard-crawl backward. He grabbed for her ankle. "There is nothing you can do," he hissed "I'm his brawn! I have to!" she cried, and kicked free. Amos looked after her and cursed.

'Joseph!' he said. "We have to retake main axial, at least for a moment along the path to the central command. Take "

The final lead connecting Simeon to the station came free. No\ Simeon cried into the darkness. The self-destruct had been left too late. The Navy had not come, and the enemy were breaking free. When they had him on board, the station would die.

He had nothing now, nothing but the single pickup and audio circuit that were part of his inner shell. Life support was on the backups. It would keep his nutrient feeds going for days... but a single hand could switch him into total darkness, utter isolation. Madness, death without the mercy of oblivion. No!

Belazir was still visible, leaning over the shell. He lifted off his helmet with both hands, looming over the pickup to smile whitely. The shell surged as the powersuited warriors bent carefully and lifted, the huge weight coming up slowly as their armor whined in protest. There was a slight klinking sound as the helmet rested on the upper face of the shell itself.

"So that you should have my face for your last sight," the Kolnari chieftain said, reaching for the keypad on the shell exterior. "When you see again, you will call me Master and God... and you will mom it." He touched a finger to the control. "Beg, Simeon."

"Eat shit and far The Kolnari chuckled. "Not good enough," he said, and pressed the stud.

The doors to Channa's room slapped open. Channa stepped through, needier at the ready. Belazir could feel the aimpoint on his forehead.

"You wanted me again, Belazir?" she said. "Better late than never. Here I am." A slight movement waggled the muzzle. "This is set on spray. It's quite fetal. Now, away from the shell, please."

Belazir smiled at her. What a woman! he thought. / will beat her, but not too badly. "There are three of

us," he said, shifting slightly. Although unfortunately I have my helmet off and these two are immobilized by the load they carry, he added to himself. "We are in armor. You can scarcely expect to frighten us with that toy alone."

Patsy Sue Coburn followed her friend out of the quarters, leveling her arc pistol. A red burn-mark welted one cheek, bleeding knees and elbows showed through the holes worn in her coverall, but there was real pleasure in her smile.

"Life's full a' surprises, ain't it?" she said as Belazir snarled silently. "Real bitch sometimes, too."

Channa tossed her head in a vain attempt to get the sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes.

"Yes," she said evenly, "I do expect to frighten you. Now, replace the shell in the main column cradle and reconnect it. Then, all of you, throw your helmets aside and move over there." She gestured towards the door to Amos' quarters. "I expect your pirates will trade a good deal for you."

"And keep your hands up," snapped a voice from above.

Kolnari heads turned to the opening in the ceiling. A head and arms protruded, far too small for an adult of their bigboned race, but the muzzle of the plasma rifle was held steadily in those slight arms. The weapon looked absurdly large for the person who controlled it, but it was braced against the interior wall and the lip of the hole, and he could see the aimpoint, a red dot that wavered over the three pirates.

"Up," the child repeated, lifting the muzzle of the weapon for emphasis.

Belazir's mind computed the angles. Good. My left hand is not irisable, he thought "You leave us little choice," he said aloud. Which was true; honor aside, he had no choice at all. Pol t'Veng or any other Kolnari noble would cheerfully let Father Chalku or their own sires be flayed alive rather than disgrace them by paying ransom, much less do so for him. He would rather be flayed than live on those terms himself "Move the shell," he said to the two troopers. "It's only three paces."

He raised his gauntleted hands, dosing his eyes and flagging positions. The deck boomed like a drum as the pirate groundfighters moved a pace in lockstep unison, the ton weights of their suits added to triple that of titanium and machinery... and the few kilos of a body that had never seen the light of day.

Three, he counted and dropped the flash grenade. Before it hit the shell, hft was leaping backwards, and so were the two other Clan warriors. He squeezed his eyes tight and willed his pupils shut, but even so the flash was dazzling. He hit the doorframe going out, went flat, scabbled the helmet he had snatched onto his head. The plasma rifle had crashed simultaneous with the grenade. A brief scream and the smell from inside told him it had still been on target.

He blinked open his eyes as the locking ring of the helmet clicked. The combat medsystem sprayed a mist into his eyes, but his vision was severely degraded in any case. He activated the sonic sensor, to cheep the location of things at him.

"Takiz!" he called.

"Fully functional, lord," the warrior answered. "Kintirisdead." / will beat her very severely, Belazir amended. Even with the dazzles before his eyes, he could see several arc-pistol shots snap out through the doorway, and his machine-augmented hearing picked up the telltale click of an arming plasma rifle. The walls were reinforced here, as well. It would be tricky, and he had not much time. Now he did not

put it past these extraordinary scumvermin to blow the station themselves.

The comm chimed and Baila's face filled one of the chinscreens, a vague dark blur. Her voice was scratchy with interference but audible. "Great Lord," she said calmly. "Ships detected, incoming."

No! he shouted inwardly. No, "Lord," another voice spoke. The senior groundfighter officer. "We're holding a counterattack on the main axial, but I cannot guarantee your withdrawal Not for any period beyond now."

For perhaps ten seconds Belazir panted sharply.

"I will be there in five minutes, or not at all," he said. "Out. Takiz, follow me. We head for the docks." Thank the joss, he thought with savage irony, the northpolar doting tube is so close to here. fm blind, Channa thought. Her skin crinkled, waiting for the clamp of powered gauntlets. Beside her Patsy was shooting.

"Careful, Pats," Channa gasped. The blackness was starred with red, now, and she felt needles of pain in her forehead. Her free hand felt upward, touched her eyes. Wetness... tears, only tears. The eyes felt normal to her fingertips. For a long moment, she had feared it was something like that horrible popper Joat had made.

"I'm careful, all rant," Patsy said. "Got my shootin' iron right on the doorway. They cain't move quiet in those tin suits."

'Joat?'

"I'm all right," the girl's voice said. Her voice had a saw-edged note that denied the words. "Hurts and I can't see, though. I'm coming down."

"Don't get between me and the door!" Patsy said sharply.

Channa dropped to her knees and shuffled forward, hand outstretched. That touched something hot, which brought a sharp gasp of pain; next a warm wetness. She wiped her hand on the carpet and tried again. The smooth titanium-matrix surface of the shell was like a benediction. When she moved to the keypad, a smaller hand touched hers. They gripped for a moment, then pressed the key.

"Nnoooooooooooooo " The scream was piercing, but Simeon's backup speakers on his inner shell had limited volume. He stuttered, babbled, then organized his voice.

"Thhh... ank you," he said. "Channa? Joat?" Patsy came into the field of his vision. "What's happened?"

"He dropped something," Channa said. "There was a white light and we can't see."

"Flash grenade," Silicon answered. "Don't worry! It isn't permanent!" "

Channa gave a sobbing sigh of relief and heard it echoed. "How long?"

"Well... how close were you?"

"Two meters to six, and looking right at it."

"Oh." A pause. "About a day, with medication, I'm afraid," he said. At least for the person who was six meters away. About the others I'm worried. Long-term reaction was variable.

"Oh, great. They may come back in the door "

"No, they won't. I can hear their armor moving away toward the docking tube. Lots of fighting. Look, it's the answer to my prayers to have three beautiful women hugging my shell, but could you get me reconnected? Please? It's important."

"We can't lift you back, that's for sure," Joat said.

He frowned inwardly at the shakiness in her tone, but he had no instant remedy for her.

"There's plenty of spare play in the cables," Channa said. "How did they?" Her voice trailed off tactfully.

Simeon felt himself cringing again.

"No, it's all right." Sure it is. "They cut the cable guards and then just pulled the jacks," he said. Cutting away my strength, my sight, my feeling, cutting away me. "Problem is... they're color-coded. And the receptors may be damaged."

"I'll get them sorted out," she said as she moved out of his severely limited range of vision.

How do softshells stand only one pair of vision sensors? he wondered. Even for a few minutes, his control had been strained to the breaking point.

She returned with the cables, a double armful even with ultra-high-data-density opticals. The jacks for the leads were like a spray of fine hairs.

"Oh, oh," Simeon said.

"What do you mean, 'oh-oh,'" Channa replied.

"Everyone knows what 'oh-oh' means," Simeon said. "It means, 'I screwed the pooch.' Your hands... *
"... are too big," she answered. "Damn."

"I can do it,**" Joat said.

"You can't see, Joat"

"Neither can Channa. I've worked in the dark lots of times. Had to. Got that toolbelt with the micros from Engineering, too."

"They gave you one?" Simeon said, momentarily startled.

"No."

"Don't tell me," he said. "All right Someone should stand guard. I can hear if anyone's coining and give you a bearing. Patsy?"

"Surely will," Patsy said. She felt her way to the doorframe.

"You keep the slack on the cables, Channa."

"I've wanted to yank your cord for a long time anyway, Simeon," she said with an attempt at a gafiow's humor. Simeon felt his heart turn over as she smiled down at him.

"Okay, feel your way up the face of the shell, Jack-of-All-Trades and master of some." Her small hands slid upward over the smooth surface to the rounded top. "Stop," he said to prevent her fingers from tangling the hair fine wires protruding from the receptor couplings.

"You be my hands, kid, I'll be your eyes, *kay?"

She took a deep breath. "Okay, what do I do?"

"Walk the fingers of your right hand two paces forward, one pace to the left. Feel that wire?"

"Yeah."

"Follow it to the lead. Now, with your left hand..."

A minute later Simeon yelled again, this time a long high screech that sounded something like Patsy as she had at game-time rooting for the home team.

"Sorry, I'm sorry Simeon, I didn't mean to hurtcha, honest!"

"You didn't." A bugle fanfare blew through the lounge, and segued into a Sou/a march, then the Ganymede Harp Variations.

"You've bolixed his oxygen feeds," Channa said frantically, groping forwards.

"It's thecavaby! Ta-ta-tata-tara tat-teraaaa!"

"Simeon!"

"Has he gon' an* lost it?"

Aragiz t'Varak lolled, half-dreaming. A very pleasant daydream. He was back on homeworld, a territorial lord like the old recordings, and somehow Belazir t'Marid was there. Aragiz had just defeated him the old way, spectacular battles amid spouting radioactive geysers. Blasting into the stronghold with primitive fission weapons, hand-shaped plutonium triggered by black powder. Belazir groveled, begging mercy for his line, but they were led out and slaughtered before his eyes. Aragiz was just getting into the interesting post-victory part when the communications officer interrupted him.

"Detection... Outer ring satellites. Ship signatures, inbound."

The bridge of the Age of Darkness came alert. Everyone had been waiting, nothing more to do until they undocked next cycle and escorted the transports back to rendezvous. He had brought everyone in, ready for departure. Now "Another pullet for the plucking," Aragiz said lazily. He felt tired. Perhaps from that scumvermin boy, what was his name, Juke. A nice active squealer, not like that unpleasant one who'd gone into fits after a single kiss, back in the corridors. He'd kicked that one aside with a shudder. Not for a moment did he think that he would catch any disease, but it had been an unpleasant sight "Action

stations." The soft chimes rang, eerie and ironic in their gentle harmony. "Give me a reading, and relay to flotilla command and station-side."

The sensor officer consulted the machine. "Very large mass, Great Lord. Seventy to eighty kilotons."

"Probably an ore carrier," the captain said. "Useful, if not dramatic." The Clan could always use "Link is down," Communications said.

"Again?" Aragiz barked. He couldn't decouple from the station without clearance. That Bad Seed chugrut Belazir had been fairly dear about that. Also, running an intercept on an incoming freighter could be tricky. And his head hurt, as if he'd been knocked unconscious and recovered...

"Check climate control," he said. It was hoi. He was sweating, and he rarely did, even in combat practice at Kolnar-noon temperature.

"Yes, Great wehavelostcommwthfstationsidevxitch.* "Wto?" Aragizsatboltupright. "When?"

"Some time ago. We have been getting repeats of the last routine bailings."

TTiat made his stomach lurch, and suddenly he bent over the arm and spewed.

"Fool!" he screamed. "Alarm." He choked on bile. What is happening tome? He tried to rise, fell back, thrashed, and slipped over the arm of the commander's couch into the spilled vomit. Shouts of alarm rose from the crew. The groundlink screens flickered. One cleared to show a Kolnari face being pounded against the pickup.

The executive officer looked down at the jerking form of the captain, and took command.

"Remaining crew, prepare for boarding action. Suit up and "

"Cancel that," a gravelly voice said.

The officer blinked, and almost shouted in gratitude. Pol t'Veng trotted in, her combat armor scored and still smoking in places, like that of the others behind her. Still, she was t'Veng. "Lord Captain," he began. There was a careful protocol about subclan ship territories.

She cut him off. "Uprising. Couldn't make the Shark. stationer electronics scrambled, hostile-controlled. Emergency. Dump your system and call up the backup."

Pol glared at him, sparing the time until he submitted and saluted. Then she sank into the command couch. Inwardly, she sighed. Every time the joss seemed to throw the Clan a little luck, they were knocked back to a handful of homeless fugitives again. Every system on the ship dipped, then firmed, as the duplicate backup computers came on-line. A glance at the captain's readouts gave her the situation.

"Monitor the incoming," she said.

"Lord captain, it is a freighter. Should we not be assisting in getting the station back in the fist?"

"Shut up. You assumed it was a freighter. Check that reading again. Now!" Her voice was a bellow, its natural volume increased by the suit's system to an ear shattering volume.

"Reading... Anomalous readings, lord."

"Let me see." He keyed over to her the feeds, unfiltered data. "Youngfool, that's notanomalous that's Fleet!"

She paused a second to free a sidearm and pump a pulse of energy into Aragiz's thrashing body. His squealing was distracting.

"Emergency decouple," she said. Besides, she had wanted to kill him for years. This one should have been culled before he walked.

"We are loading fuel!"

"Move."

He did. His hand swept the controls, and the Age of Darkness shuddered as explosive charges blasted it loose from the SSS-900-C's north docking tube. Fire blossomed out of the dockway after them, along with steam and pieces of cargo and humans. Kolnari as well as scumvermin, she supposed. "Broadcast, override, High Clan seek Refuge, High Clan seek Refuge," she snapped. "Put it on loop, open Clan frequency."

The officer's eyes flared wide. That was die command to break, run and scatter, to approach the preset rendezvous points only years later and with maximum caution. Those points were in no file, no hedron, only in living brains and only a few of those. The final desperation measure to protect the Divine Seed, that it might grow again.

"Heart Crusher. Chindik t'Marid."

"Put it through."

"Lord Pol, you are receiving what I do?"

"Yes."

"Data coming in," the sensor chief said.

Pol t'Veng looked down again. The Fleet warships were coming up out of subspace like tungior broaching in the seas of Kolnar; huge masses, neutrino signatures of enormous powerplants, ripping through into the fabric of reality.

"Command frequency broadcast! Identifying following," she said. "Fleet units emerging coordinates follow, probables: destroyers, six correction, six destroyers plus three light, one heavy cruiser and possible... Confirmed, three assault carriers. All Clan ships, report status. Lord t'Marid, report status."

"We coordinate?" Chindick asked.

"No. You have not the insystem boost. Use the station for cover as long as you can. They will not endanger it."

"Repeat?"

"Scumvermin psychology. Go. Lord t'Marid, status."

T Marid here," the familiar voice said, harsher than she could remember. "Bride decoupling. We can cover."

"No, with respect Yours is the more valuable Seed." Especially since this skip has t'Varak's sweepings as crew. "Bride, Shark and Strangier should cover the transports."

A pause. "Agreed. Y\fciiit for us with the Ancestors, Pol t'Veng." t "Guard our Seed and Clan, Belazir I'Marid," she replied.

Then her attention went back to the work at hand. A Central Worlds Space Navy medium attack group bore down on them, with a dozen times the firepower the High Clan had available here and now, given the general pathetic botchup. About equal to the whole current Clan armada, give or take a dozen factors. Pol had fought the Fleet before and had a healthy respect for their capabilities. They were dangerous scumvermin.

"Helm," she went on. "Set course. Coordinates follow." She had plugged the suit's leads into the couch. "Maximum boost"

"Lord Captain," the executive officer said. "That is a course/or the enemy fleet. What are we to do there?" With one undercrewed frigate, went without saying.

"Do?" Pol t'Veng roared out a single bark of laughter. "We die, fool!"

The commander's couch reclined, locking into combat position. "We will attempt to break through to the transports," she said. "The warships will maneuver to protect them. We fight for maximum delay. Any questions?"

"Command us, lord!"

"Prepare to engage."

"They are smashing us like eggs," Joseph said.

Amos nodded. Without Simeon, the stationers lost their advantage of superior coordination. Against professionals, he had been the only one they had had, once the Kolnari recovered their balance.

Anne McCtfrey & SM. Stirling "Simeon was a... a brave man," Amos said. And if he were really a man, a dangerous rival, he added to himself "And very skillful. I honor his memory." Joseph nodded; they clasped hand to forearm. "Farewell, my brother."

"Fardlin* touching, really," a voirffc said in his ear.

Amos leaped upright, then ducked again frantically as a bolt splattered metal near his face.

"Simeon?" he gasped.

"No, the Ghost of Christmas Past," the brain replied. "I'm back. So," he went on, glee bubbling through his voice, "are some other people.*1 A holo formed behind the barricade: a figure in green power armor of a chunkier, more compact design than the Kolnari suits Amos was used to. In the background was the

bridge of a large vessel, battle-clad figures moving about. A woman, with a man in like equipment but different insignia beside her.

"Admiral Questar-Benn," the Woman said. Remarkably, she appeared to be in late middle age but undeniably healthy and close-knit. "Commodore Tellin-Makie, of the batdecruiser Santayana."

"Oh, God is great, God is Merciful, God is One," Amos murmured through numb lips. "Bethel?"

"Don't worry. It's a big navy. We hit them as they were getting ready to leave. Reports show not much damage to the planet since you left, if you're Benisur Ben Sierra Nueva."

"Keep firing!" Joseph barked to the others at the barricade. "You can die just as dead winning as losing."

The commodore laughed shortly. "Profoundly true," he said. "Simeon, Ms. Hap, all of you, you've done a very good job. Heroic, in fact We didn't expect to find anything but bodies and wreckage."

"It was a close-run thing," Simeon said feelingly. "A damned close-run thing." Both the officers seemed to find that amusing.

"Here's my record of the whole thing, start to finish," said Channa and the Navy officers' eyes turned. Evidently they had video of her. Amos hissed a low complaint, and three more holos joined the image of the Santayana's deck.

"We've still got a lot of the pirates in station," Channa said. "Should we back off?" She swallowed. "A lot of our people have been hurt"

"Negative," the admiral said, shaking her head. "Give them time to think, and sure as death and fate, one of them will find a way to blow the station. I've got a Marine regimental combat team in the transports. We'll forcedock as soon as I swat the Kolnari warships. That battle platform could be tricky."

The commodore leaned out of the sight picture and spoke to someone else. "Well, then, get the destroyers to engage it, then!"

"It's not over until it's over," Questar-Benn said.

"Er... not the Questar-Benn?" Simeon asked, awed.

"Not if you mean Micaya," she said dryly. "I'm the dull sister, the straight-leg." She glanced down at the data flowing in from SSS-900-C. "Bastards. Murdering sub-human mutant swine. Maybe now the inbred penny-pinching High Families incompetent corruptionists back at Central will get their thumbs out of their backsides and let us do something about Kolnar and all its little offshoots."

"Ma'am," Tellin-Makie said warningly.

"I'm not bucking for another star, Eddin," she said. "I can afford to tell the truth without a bucket of syrup on it" She looked up and out at the stationers. "Here's what we want you to do," she went on crisply.

God, Amos thought. Thank you. For victory, and for someone else to tell him what to do for a change. Leadership could get very tiring. He suspected Fate was going to send more of it his way. The prospect did not seem as attractive as it once had.

"I never understood what he meant before," Simeon said, looking out at the huge docking chamber which held only the dead, now in covered silent rows. "I thought I did, but I didn't."

The medics and their patients were gone, to station sickbays or to the trauma stations of the warships. Equally silent were the motionless Marine sentries who stood with weapons reversed by the Navy dead. The squad at the docking airlock snapped to attention as each shrouded body went by. The civilians looking among the stationer dead were nearly as quiet, only a few sobbing faintly.

"Understood what who meant?" Channa said, blinking behind the dark glasses that hid her bandages. She appeared detached, almost aloof, just like the two Navy commanders who stood with her and the little group of stationers.

"Wellington," Simeon said. "I don't know what it is, but certainly nothing can be more painful than to grieve with the loss of so many friends.' He said that after Waterloo."

The admiral nodded. "I remember when I found that out," she said very softly. "If you've got a grain of sense, you never forget it."

"Ain't that the truth!" Patsy Sue Coburn said. Beside her, Florian Gusky put his synth-splinted arm companionably around her shoulders. She stiffened, then forced herself to put up a hand and pat it gently. "You don't forget anything. But you learn to live with it. C'mon, Gus. I do believe you owe me a drink."

Channa turned her head toward their footsteps. "Yes," she said, with a bitter smile. "We learn to live with it. If this is heroism, why do I feel like such crap?"

"Because you're here," Questar-Benn said. "Heroism is something somebody else does somewhere far away. In person, it's tragedy." Her voice sharpened. "And it could be worse, much worse, and would have been but for you. We did win. You are here. And," she went on more lightly, "you're heroes in the media, at least. Which means, by the way, you can write your own rickets."

"Tickets?" Simeon asked.

"You always wanted a warship posting, didn't you?" she said. "With this on your record..."

Simeon hesitated. Joat had been standing by Channa's side, quiet and drawn. Now the old coldness settled over her face, and she began to edge away.

Everyone's always left her, or cheated her, or hurt her, he thought "I'm not so sure," he said aloud, "that I want a military career any more."

Admiral Questar-Benn nodded vigorously. "That makes you more qualified. They shovel glory hounds out of the Academy by the job-lot and we have to spend years breaking them of such fatuous nonsense."

"Besides, I have a daughter," and his instant and totally gratifying reward was the dawning of hope on Joat's face. "Thanks, though. Maybe, someday." Some dreams don't transfer well into reality, he told himself. He could see Joat's chest lifting with the deeper breaths of self-confidence and she didn't look about to disappear on him.

"And have you soured on Senalgal?" the commodore said, turning to Channa.

"It's still a beautiful world," she said, shaking her head slowly. "But it's not my home." She reached

down to Joat beside her and, touching the girl's face with her fingertips, Amu McQffiey & 5M. Stirling felt the slightest of resistance to such fondling. Learning to trust, and to be a human being, was not something that came quickly or easily. But you had to begin somewhere or you never arrived. "Besides, Joat's my daughter, too. And I've friends here, the best there areœ Questar-Benn threw up her hands. "Simeon, you're going to be around a very long time. The offer still stands, I'll leave it on record."

"Hey, Pops," Joat said, her voice a little unsteady despite the cocky tone. "I meanww, Simeon."

"Great Ghu! Canjunt, of all people, not think a more suitable title than 'Pops' to call me?" Simeon demanded in a semi-indignant tone, but he would have settled for anything of a familial nature from Joat.

"Sure, but I don't think you'd like to know 'em!" She smiled her urchin grin in his image. "Any rate, I'm gonna be sixteen standard in a few years. Enlistment age. And I don't want you blaming me for screwing up your career plans. I... I'd sort of Uke to keep this from happening to somebody else, you know?" She turned to the admiral. "Think these brass-a... um, generaltype people might have a use for me?"

Questar-Benn shuddered. "I'm probably perpetrating horrors on some unsuspecting commander left to deal with you in the future, young lady, but yes. I'd be very surprised if we couldn't find a use for all of you." She swept the present company with her piercing gaze.

"Then we may take you up on that offer," Simeon said. Although he was too enervated to enjoy thoughts of revenge, no amount of emotional exhaustion could remove the need to do something about the Kolnari: next week, maybe. "But right now, I'd rather call in the gratitude as a favor, if you don't mind, Admiral," Simeon said.

"Favor? For who?"

"A friend," he said. A holo grew, of a boy about Joat's age.

Joat started violently. **Seld! They wouldn't let me see ya, said you were sick!"

The figure nodded. "You knew that. You know I've been sick a long while, Joat," he said with the incredible batience of the chronic in valid. "Only it went off the screen. I can see this," ancfn looked down at his frail, fimp body, strapped in an upright position on the bed, *1ut I can'tfeelanything or move it, ordoanything, really."

"Oh, damn!" Joat moved a hand through the holo as if she could reverse the damage somehow.

"The navy medicos have got me hooked up to a nervesplice monitor, to keep my heart going and stuff. Simeon himself," and now he managed a proud grin, "is hacking into it"

Joat blinked. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "I shouldn't've called you a wuss. I heaved my cookies afterwards, too. I guess it's my fault, hey? Expecting you to do more'n you could, should!"

"Nah," Seld on the holo said. "I was stupid, you know. You could do all those things I couldn't, and I was... hell, Joat, I was gonna end up like this anyway, sooner'r later. Grudly, but I knew it. Dad knew it, but he sort of didn't at the same time. I've had a lot of time to think about it."

Joat nodded, then narrowed her eyes. "Those caps were the final push, weren't they? Why'd you use one?" "'Cause I was so scared of seeing you get killed, Joat. You're my best friend. Besides," he went on, "that Kolnari Lord'd just belted me real hard. Then... I tell you, the ultimo grudly," and Seld rolled his

eyes in disgust, "when he tesorfine.solwantedsoeofmyownback."

"Yeah," and Joat nodded in approval, "you would at that!"

"That's when I had a fit. Would have happened eventually, really it would, Jo. Dad says another ten years, max."

Joat looked around at the Navy officers. "I don't Aim* McQffivy fe? SM.. Stirling think that's good enough. Can't you guys better the odds for 'm? Doesn't he deserve more than ten years?" Her hard voice cracked a little.

Questar-Benn winced and the commodore focused his eyes on something else. "I never get used to this," the commodore under his breath. "What's the favor, Simeop?"

Channa's head came up sharply. "Simeon? You've a suggestion?" "I do," Simeon said in such a positive, you-should have known I would tone of voice that he commanded everyone's attention. "I've been checking around and the AtexHypatia-1033 told me about new tricks that Dr. Kennet Uhua-Sorg*s been working on. No one yet is able to regenerate the spinal nerve sheaths. Kenny Sorg developed a prosthesis for himself, incidently, but it'll suitSeld'sparticularrequirements,too. Kid, you're too old to be a shellperson: you'd never psychologically adjust Kenny Soig's condition is about the same as yours and he gets around just fine," and Simeon projected a holo of a man, moving down a corridor but too smoothly to be "walking." He "walked" upright, true, but his body was framed by an slender exo-skeleton which held him erect, with his feet on a platform, similar but much thicker than the station float disks. The base ingeniously held the power supply and monitoring equipment. "I'm told, Seld, that you'll have use of your arms and the base is sophisticated enough to do as much for your body as my shell does for me. Long as you don't try slipping dirough ventilation ducts or falting headfirst out of services hatches, you should last as long as most softshells, skeleton man!"

In this instance, Simeon's rewards were many: Joat jumping up and down, gurgling with laughter while tears streamed down her face, as well as Channa's, and Seld crowed like he'd turned rooster. There were expressions of intense relief on the faces of admiral and the commodore.

"I do like to see alternative solutions," Questar-Benn said, "and we'll put a naval courier B & B ship at the disposal of Seld and his father for transfer to the Central Worlds Medstation where Dr. Sorg is currendy practicing. Is that the f\$vor you wanted, Simeon?"

"The very one," fhe station replied.

"Frabjus, Skelly Seld," Joat was saying to Seld, "I'll be right down and we can celebrate together," and she waved a jaunty farewell behind her as she left.

Exhausted as much by this unexpectedly felicitous outcome as the weight of problems still to be resolved, Channa sank back into her float chair.

"One more on the up side," she murmured to reassure herself. "Simeon, I'm sort of tired. Could you... ?"

The others murmured apologies and moved aside while Simeon guided her chair away.

"A moment then, Amos ben Sierra Nuevo," Questar Benn. Amos turned in surprise, shot one anxious look at Channa's disappearing figure but had no choice but to give the Admiral his attention. "If you'd be good enough to accompany the Commodore and me to our quarters..."

He was as glad as they appeared to be to leave the sad ambience of the cargo bay, though only one more of his shrinking band of Bethelites lay there.

The Admiral and Commodore noted his interest in the interior of their flagship and explained as they walked through the maze, absently accepting salutes or nods as they passed details of men and women hurrying about their tasks.

None of the Central Worlds' ships had taken much damage though the battle with the desperate Kolnari warships had been fierce, if brief. The guided tour was enough to make Amos wonder anew how Guiyon had managed to get the old Exodus anywhere, much less reach SSS-900-C.

He was sighing in semi-despair for all the problems he now faced in giving his poor plundered planet even a semblance of the efficiency and expertise Central Worlds took for granted.

"Ah, yes, here we are, Benisur..." the commodore said and Amos with suitable humility corrected him to "a simple Amos, sir." "We've been Aceiving updates of aflairs on Bethel and have need of your assistance."

Five men and women were seated about the lounge, the two youngest a man and a women in their early twenties, jumping to their feet at the entrance of Admiral, Commodore and their guest "Here he is, gentlefolk'Questar-Benn, "Benisur ben Sierra Nuevos, aka Simeon-Amos and the putative leader of the Bethelites."

"No, no," Amos said, shaking head and hand to deny that title. He didn't want that mantle laid on his shoulders. Not now.

"As you will, young man," Questar-Benn said curtly, "but you were the leader of the dissidents as well as the defender of Bethel and we need your input." Then while Amos continued to demur, she overrode him by introducing the group. "Senior Counsellor Agrum of SPRIM, Representative Fusto of MM, Observer Nilsdotter, PAs Ferryman for SPRIM and Losh Lentel for MM. Simeon, are you here?"

"I am," Simeonsaid, his voice issuing from the comuniL He might have warned me, Amos thought sourly. BtU perhaps swiftly done is best done. He gave them a dignified greeting, hand to heart and mind. The young woman, the Observer, was both startled and charmed.

Suddenly he was seated and stewards were passing among the group with drinks and finger foods.

Perhaps, I'm merely light-headed with hunger, Amos thought, feeling the better after a sip of a sustaining hot drink and a sample from the plate of delicacies offered.

"Quite simply, ben Sierra Nuevo... all right then, Amos," the senior counsellor began with no more to-do, "we need your help to reassure those elements of your people who managed to hide away from the Kolnari. They are terrified and not about to take the word of any strangers even when we holo-ed every surface with 'casts of the Navy taking Kolnari prisoners."

"And making them sinload all die loot they'd stored," said die beetlebrowed Representative Fusto. He looked as if he had personally overseen that operation and enjoyed it. He had a narrow face and close-set eyes in a narrow head set on shoulders much too muscular in contrast "Some of my people survived?" Amos tried not to wince for this only reinforced the inevitability of his return.

"Specific figures number the survivors as 15,000...."

The population the former population of this station, he thought, unable to suppress a groan.

The Observer misinterpreted it with a smile of great sadness and understanding. "Your people have been very brave and suffered terribly. We of SPRIM and MM," and she pointed to the other four, "are empowered to assist die reconstruction of your world...."

Amos groaned again. So much to be done. And his people would resent the intrusion of infidels, no matter how well intentioned.

"We cannot, of course, interfere with the government of any planet," Agrum said, clearing his throat and giving the woman an admonishing glance, "but humanitarian aid certainly falls in our jurisdiction and we are able to provide whatever supplies and materials are needed on an interim basis."

Beetle-brows Fusto gave his opposite number in SPRIM a dark look. "MM requires you to survive on your own efforts but we prevent exploitation of minority groups for any reason whatever. We prefer to establish contact with a senior government official, preferably elected by the minority in question, but you qualify according to Simeon as the logical and most accessible representative." for this I thank you, Simeon, Amos said, hoping that no one, especially the Observer, would hear him grind his teeth.

"Your planet got pretty well razed to subsoil," the commodore said. "'S going to take hetpto restart," and he, in turn, gave the MM official a quelling look, smiling at Amos as if to say "they mean well but they're heavy-handed." "We had to put up a transmitter," and he shrugged as if such a facility was a mere notibing, "and die engineers put up a temp at the space field which is littered with a lot of hulls, some of which could've well be refitted for whatever lunar mining would put you back on-line mere."

A transmitter and space facility? Re-usable hulls for the craft the Kolnari had fused. Amos began to feel less despondent, though half of him resisted.

"Humanitarian aid will be sufficient to see your people through the on-coming winter," Agrum went on, "using whatever shelters your culture prefers..."

"We cannot land alter-culturalals on Bethel, of course," Fusto half-interrupted, "but orbital staff is not considered by Central Worlds Authority to compromise indigenous integrity..."

"If you wish, you may request additional colonials of your own persuasion..." from Nilspotter.

Amos turned from one speaker to the other, half dazed.

"Give the kid a break," Simeon said suddenly. "Why don't you let him read the reports so he knows what you're talking about, huh?"

"Of course," said SPRIM.

"Our intention, I assure you, Station Simeon," MM said defensively.

"Then let it be so," Admiral Questar-Benn said, smiling encouragingly at Amos as she handed him several disk files and led him to another room where he could digest the information in private.

"Not over until it's over," the Admiral remarked to the commodore as they watched the sometimes

contentious delegation leave their quarters.

"And it's never over," Tellin-Makie replied, pouring them both snifters of brandy in the flag quarters. "I didn't have the heart to remind them that those aren't the only bunch of Kolnari running around loose."

"And if you leave a pair, they breed up again," she said wearily. "They know that. Which is the reason I suspect we'll have Simeon and the others on die rolls in a couple of years. The Kolnari will be a menace as long as two of them are left alive."

"The Psych people swear they can be rehabilitated."

"Rehabilitated to E equals M and C squared," she said, taking a sip. "Dam" cockroaches." Another sigh. "Maybe this little atrocity will get us some resources."

"For a while, until the general public become inured to these particular atrocities," Tellin-Makie said, "then we can go back to peeing on bonfires. It's not as if they were the only serious problem, either."

"Would that it were so. Would that it were so, my friend."

She looked at the screen, which showed an exterior view of SSS-900-C. Repair servos and suited figures were already working on some of the more urgent damage, though it would be a generation before the devastation was fully repaired. She made a mental note to have Engineering help out while the task force was on station here.

"All in all, though, I'm glad we don't have their problems, poor heroic sods," she said.

"Amen."

"Yes, yes," Joseph said eagerly when Amos finished telling him of the help promised by PRIM and MM, up to and including a Brain Planetary manager to replace Guiyon.

"Wemustreturnasquicklyaspossible."

"Yes, you and Rachel must"

"Rachel and I?" Joseph repeated, staring in sudden alarm at Amos.

ArmeMcCajfiq& SJtf. Stirling "Yes, because there is much to organize on the ground before we may accept the beneficence..."

"But it is you, Amos ben Sierra Nuevo, who must return!" Joseph's face was stricken. "It is your duty. Our world is but a lake of mourning. They need you. They need a hero and their Prophet"

Amos paced, hands behind his back, clenching and unclenching, up and down the floor of his room in Simeon's quarters.

"They need a hero, granted, Joseph," he said, stopping in front of his friend, "but if I am a hero, then so are you!"

"Me?" Joseph laughed. "I am your henchman. Your right hand, and proud to be so. Your friend, and prouder still of that But you are the prophet, the hero, the one the people follow."

Amos took him by the shoulders. "You are my brother, as truly as if the same mother bore us."

Joseph blinked as Amos drew him into the double cheek-touch of close kin to emphasize his words. "And it is you who will return while I deal with these infidels and make certain that what charity they would foist on us will not weaken our people but allow them to become strong in such ways that no other scavenger can ever catch us unawares." Who saves the saved from the savior* he thought "And I... I wonder," Amos went on aloud. I wonder if it is good, that the new leader is of the old Prophet's line may God smile on him! Too many generations have the people followed the old families." He winced. "And followed them to ruin."

"You would lead us to greatness!" Joseph said forcefully. The more so if you doubted yourself less, he added to himself. "You have shown your strengths as a selfthinker, a defender of his planet, a guileful strategist..."

"History does not show many battle-leaders who had the same talent for being peace-leaders!"

"But you are of a peaceful nature until roused to defend what you hold dear," Joseph said, "even as you have seen your duty now to protect us against those who wish to protect us!" Joseph turned sternly grim now. "It is the blind face of Channa d*t hides your way."

Amos looked so fiercely at him that Joseph turned his face away, his shoulders sagging in acknowledgement.

"I also cannot abandon these here to whom we, for our very lives, owe a debt of gratitude. If, in this one instance, duty and honor are both served, let me serve it." Amos sighed deeply, torn between love and duty. "Are Simeon, Joat and Channa to be merely a chapter of my life because fourteen generations ago the Prophet fathered my many-times great grandfather? We saw on Bethel what comes of that"

"Yes, Amos, in all truth we did. And you are right to wish to be indebted to all," and Joseph laid a subtle emphasis on the word, "the stationers even though the need for your special role is now over."

"Yes, that is over. In its place, I must assume several roles and do each well in all honor." Then he gave the younger man a sudden smile, the sort that had always drawn the required response from any recipient "And I give Rachel the chance to restore honor to her name."

Joseph gave him a sudden stare as fierce as the one Amos had given him. "What do you mean?"

"She was, after all, trained as an infosystems administrator. It is her duty to assist you in calling our people from their hiding places, to organize the reports that I must receive to know what is most needed. With you two side by side that is what you wish, is it not, Joseph? Rachel by your side?"

The younger man laughed and blushed, which seemed to embarrass him more.

"You know it is what I wish but, Amos, do not blame her for what she did."

"I do not," Amos lied stoutly, "but she will need to redeem herself in her own eyes!"

"Ah, yes," said Joseph with a sigh. "She is anxious to do that. She talks to me about it," he went on in a softer voice. "She talks of you but she aldb talks of you to me."

"Then go to her, Joseph my brother, my friend. If you insist on making me wear the mantel of a leader,

then I have issued an order to you. But think also of what I have told you, brother hero. You return to Bethel as my brother and my equal, not my retainer not even first among my retainers. The time for those petty protocols is past"

"I go," Joseph said. He turned on the threshold. "And you, too, have earned a little happiness, I think. God willing, may you find it!"

Channa had insisted on returning to her brawn's quarters, pointing out that there was nothing else Chaundra or his staff could do for her in sickbay.

"I'll be much better off there," she told him, "because I know my way around. Simeon can remind me where I put things so I can find what I need. Only time will make a difference now."

Once Simeon had angled the chair float beside her satin-draped bed, she lay down, not seeing, not speaking, absorbing the most recent events. Not that she wasn't overwhelmingly relieved that Seld had been granted a reprieve. But there were so many decisions to be made, hanging in the air, over her head, where she could feel them, even if she couldn't see them. She could feel a trickle down her cheek and, with a gesture she hoped masked the real reason, she blotted the cheek on the gray satin cover.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Because Simeon had picked exactly the appropriate light tone, she gave him a wan smile though she wondered how he had noticed such a small thing as a tear "I've none to sell," she said, "just bits and pieces float- jug around. Like, Happy endings suck the galactic muffin. It's enough to give you a headache." "D'you have one?" Instant concern colored his voice. "No, no," she said, shaking her head on the pillow. "Look, Channa, you'll be all right," he said in the firm tone one uses when one is hoping against hope one's statement is correct.

She nodded once sharply, minding her temper and her manners. "Yes, I'm sure I will." Her voice was tight "I've scanned every report I could find on this kind of temporary blindness, Channa," he went, infusing his voice with confidence. "I'd give anything to be able to hold you in arms and comfort you but all I've got is voice contact. Talk to me, Channa. "Worse scenario and you'll still see through my sensors. Remember that, Channa. And I see real good and wherever I need to!"

She had stiffened and cut through his opening words in a rather shrill voice. "Simeon, spare me the... Could you do that for me?"

"Sure," he said, both surprised and testy. "But surely you knew that You've been using my senses for the last two weeks!"

Her jaw dropped and then a tremulous smile crossed her lips. "So I have, haven't I?" she said in a broken voice. After a moment's silence, she added in a contrite voice, "I owe you, and everyone else an apology, for acting like a self-pitying wuss!"

"Well, after all, you've had quite an adjustment to make."

"But I didn't have to snarl at you."

"Oh, that? I wouldn't know how to answer smartly if you didn't Don't break that habit, Charma-mine."

Her smile was stronger. "Then I certainly won't"

"Because you like the challenge, don't you? And, by and large, I'm good company."

"And so modest"

"So witty and intelligent," he reminded her.

"And so handsome."

"Do you really think so?"

"Oh yes," she said, "I especially like your dueling scar, that's a nice touch."

"Thank you," he said, gratified. "'Sfeu're the first person who's ever mentioned it I've been waiting for years for someone to ask about it. Sometimes people think it's dirt on the projector lens."

She grinned. "It goes well with the baseball cap."

He paused a moment, unsure, "Um..."

"No, really," she assured him, "That projection's a perfect portrait of your personality. It's not based on a chromosomal extrapolation, is it?"

"Naw," he said, putting a grin in his voice. "It's me as I want to be. I'd have hated it if an extrap of me came out with a receding chin and a big nose, so I never tried to find out. I'm Simeon, the self-created!"

"Wise," she agreed, "very wise."

The door opened and Amos stood on the threshold. "Channa!" he cried out in a passionate voice.

She sat bolt upright on the bed, her lips parted in surprise. "I thought you'd left."

He rushed to her side and drew her into his arms. "How can I leave you like this?" he said, stroking her hair.

Simeon cursed under his breath. Leave it to Amos to undo all his hard work. Just when fve got her cheered up and back to something near hernffnud forher frame of mmd.

Channa put up a hand, found Amos' face and leaned forward to kiss him, smiling because she had caught the corner of his mouth and was working her way into a position that satisfied her.

When the long kiss ended, Amos said with a sigh, "You want me!"

No, you ass! She wants a double malt and a ticket to "Death in the Twenty-First." Would that I had hands, Oh Amos ben Sierra Nueva, to clout you up alongside the head with.

Channa didn't answer but held her head as though looking at Amos through her bandages. Amos smiled at her, the smile of a man who believes he can accomplish anything, a smile that proclaimed the bear to be the recipient of a miracle. "I came to ask you to come with me," he said, laughing. "You did?" she said ina dreamy tone. They kissed again, more deeply, Channa burrowed deeper into his embrace, sighing like someone relieved of a pain they did not know they suffered. "I love you, Channa," he said. "I

love you, Simeon," she murmured. Amos stiffened. Channa raised her blind face to his and whispered huskily again. "I love you."

He released her and moved back. She hesitated and turned her head from side to side. "Amos? What is it? Is someone here?"

"Yes," he said stiffly, "someone who comes between us," Puzzled, Channa reached out blindly with one hand, the other resting on Amos's chest. "There's no one here but us. What are you talking about?"

"Simeon," he said the name with a hiss. "For whom you have just declared your love."

Her face altered abruptly from joy to chagrin. "I... I..." she began in confusion.

"A gentleman of the Sierra Nueva does not intrude. I am in the way," Amos said, flinging off her hands and jumping to his feet. "I will leave you alone together." And he was gone.

Channa swung her legs from the bed and lunged after him. She moved with unexpected speed and before Simeon could warn her, she crashed into the wall, just beside the door. Weeping, she stepped to the right point and the door opened for her.

"Amos! Wait!" she shouted and this time Simeon opened the outside door but she paused on the threshold to get her bearings and heard, all too dearly, the elevator's dosing.

"Amos! Don't go!" she cried, and heard it engage. She stood leaning her head against the metal, sobbing gently, tears soaking the adhesive synthetic of her bandages.

Inside the descending lift, Jateios leaned his head against the wall, Channa's desperate voice echoing in his mind. Almost, but not quite louder than her whisper "I love you, Simeon."

"Where do think you're going?" Simeon asked him. He straightened and gritted his teeth. "To the docks," he said crisply. "I must return to Bethel!"

Simeon gave a dramatic sigh. "And who's to go between Bethel and SPRIM and MM? Who saves the saved from the savior?"

Amos was aghast at hearing his own thoughts come back at him from Simeon.

"Someone has to handle them," Simeon continued. "Rachel can. She's a trained infosystems spe..."

"Rachel!" Simeon roared in surprise. "She wouldn't know how to handle them. They'd twist her up into little knots. Not that she isn't twisted right now." "They say they cannot interfere..." "They say, they say," Simeon chanted back at him. "Use your wits, Amos, and don't suggest Joseph. He's the guy you need on the planet, coaxing your people out of whatever lairs they've hidden in. No, you're the only one who can be johnny-on-the-spot here!"

"What I do now is my business," Amos said in a snarling tone. "You have no right to interfere either..." Only then did Amos notice that the elevator had stopped moving. He crossed his arms. "So, do you mean to hold me prisoner here until Joseph, Rachel and the others have left?"

"Emotionally you've been a prisoner since you got here. Why do think I went to so much trouble to get SPRIM and MM involved with Bethel?"

"You did. But the Admiral and the Commodore..."

"Listened to what I had to tell them, which is more than you ever do. You've got to be here..."

Outrage, indignation, disgust and fury raced unchecked across Amos' face. "So? You admit it?" "Huh?"
* "You admit that you only wish to make of me a sex toy," Amos cried passionately, "a surrogate for yourself with Channa!"

"I what?" Simeon's voice reverberated in the confines of the small chamber. "You are bughouse! Which is probably why it's such an interesting idea," he added in a reasonable, half-amused tone, "but you said it, I didn't. However, it's not on my behalf you've got to be here. It's Channa's. She really is in love with you, Amos. Can't you get that through your arrogant to-the-manor-born head?"

"Loves me? Loves me? Then why does she embrace me and say, I love you, Simeon?"

"And, of course, she hasn't been calling you Simeon Amos for the past intense two weeks, has she?"

"Banchut Amos smacked his forehead with the flat of his palm, his expression one of utter dismay.

"It sure wasn't me, or my holo, or even the shell of me she was kissing just now! Cut her a little slack. She's been blinded, dammit! She's scared, she's exhausted, she's under pressure. Don't cut the heart out of her for a slip of the lip!"

"A slip?"

"A slip! You ego-centric rag-head selfish bastard!"

"But you love her, too!" Amos brandished his fist, glaring about him to find a target for his frustration and wrath.

"Yes, I love her. Just as much as you do. No, probably a lot more. And yes, she's in love with me a little, and I treasure that. But I can't touch her, Amos. I can't hold her no matter how much I would like to. What are you worrying about?" "That she dreams of you and wonders what it would be like to be in your arms." In the confines of the elevator Amos heard the sound of his angry jealous words echo back at him. "I think that she would like to close her eyes and hear your voice whisper to her as I make love to her. I will not be that fantasy for her, no for you."

"Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think that you are a dirty-minded, fat-headed, parochial, small-minded, jealous hunk of pig fat. Just let me give you a taste of what she's going through and you stalking off and leaving her alone with it."

Simeon turned off the lights in the elevator. Amos was plunged into pitch blackness; just long enough to reach the stage of imagining lights and colors to console himself. The human eye is not meant for complete darkness. Even on an overcast night with eyes closed there is some ambient light. The darkness and motion were disorienting.

And frightening, the Bethelite admitted to himself.

"Stop it" Amos said calmly, but firmly. Simeon didn't answer. "Stop it, I said," a trace of unease creeping into his voice. An accident, who would doubt his word?

Simeon brought the elevator to a halt "It's unpleasant, isn't it?" Simeon asked quietly.

"Yes," Amos said shordy, sullenly. "Please, would you turn on the lights?"

"Channa can't," Simeon observed. "It's possible they won't come back on and she'll have to get a prostheses, one of those devices they set into your face. Yup, things could look like this to her forever."

"What do you want me to do?" Amos demanded. "I would give her my sight if I could."

"That's a safe offer," Simeon observed contemptuously, "she wouldn't accept such a sacrifice even if it was needed."

"Then what would you have me do?" Amos was nearly shouting now, flapping his arms hard against his sides.

"Something a lot easier. Hold her. Just put your arms around her and hold her close. You softshells need that. I never had it so I don't miss it"

Amos shifted position, silent "{ would hock my shelif I could physically comfort her B ut I can't. I can make sure she gets what she needs from the one person she'll accept it from. And let me tell you something, lordling, even to comfort Channa, I wouldn't want to stay a softshell. You're cripples next to usl You realize that? We have senses, abilities, that you can't even begin to imagine. But yes, in this one area, I am jealous of you. Despite that, I arranged... yes, noble being that / am... arranged for you to have to stay on this station to handle all the detaik the Bethelite leader will have. So that you could also comfort the woman we both love. There I've said it aloud!

"I've done all I can, Amos," and now Simeon's voice was tinged with a helpless note. "I've been with her since she was brought to the hospital I haven't left her. When she wakes up, I wish her good morning and mine is the last voice she hears at night I'm die one who guides her safely across a room. I'm the one who tells her that what she's looking for is a litde to the right I'm the one who makes sure she gets her meals. I've put up with her bouts of temper and self-pity and I've talked her through her moments of panic I'm with her constandy. But you walk into the room at long last I might add and it's like I've never existed. Did you see her? She lit up like a star going nova. Andyou have the gall to walk out on her!"

Simeon turned the lights back on and Amos squinted briefly as his vision adjusted.

The door opened and Channa raised her head, halfdisbelieving she heard the sound of his step, the eagerness with which he approached her.

"Oh, Amos!" She reached out her arms tentatively toward him.

"Ah, Channa," and Amos took her hands and pulled her into the circle of his arms. This only I may do, he thought possessively, proudly and yet, because of that brief darkness, sadly, too, because Simeon would never have this. I'm sorry. Forgive me," he whispered, stroking her hair.

Channa sobbed once and tried to apologize, the words stumbling over his, but he stopped her with a kiss.

Simeon watched them enter the lounge, but decided not to follow them. This is going to be tough enough, he thought, / think I'U work up to it gradually. But wasn't it a great game I played ?

"Before... I came to tell you that I must stay longer on the station than we had thought," Amos said.
"When I must return to Bethel..."

"Stay?" and the gladness in her face and voice reassured Amos as no argument from Simeon ever would, how much Channa did indeed love him.

"Stay... for now," he said, trailing caressing fingers around her lovely face. This, too, I may do that he cannot.

"For now?" Then a return of her deep and genuine fear caught at his heart.

"I must return to Bethel," he said slowly. "I have obligations there."

"I have them here. I can't leave Simeon or Joat," Channa said piteously.

And Amos knew that she also meant these quarters which she knew even in her blindness, and this station which was surely now as much her heart's home as Bethel was his.

"Neither can I leave my people, my planet Nor do I ask such sacrifice of you," he said, using the force of his personality to reassure her. He smiled down at her, thumbs caressing the velvety skin of her temples. She searched his face with her fingertips and smiled in response.

"But several times in every year, I must return to this station on the business of my people and my world," he went on. "That, I may in all conscience do." A wry shrug. "If my people cannot do without their prophet now and then, then I will not have taught them well. Perhaps the day will come when they need no man to stand between them and God, and I will be free to raise my horses and roses in peace."

Her face lit. "And I could visit sometimes, couldn't I?" she murmured.

"With Joat," Amos said, and then in a far more persuasive and loving tone, "although it is not well for a child to be alone, without brothers and sisters..."

"Yes," she laughed as she sensed the change in his stance, falling formally to one knee but before he would speak. She held him upright with her hands.

"In a matter such as this, I should ask permission of your father," Amos said, rising and drawing her close. "But Simeon will do."

She fisted him lightly under the short ribs. "I'll speak to Simeon on my own behalf."

"We will then both address Simeon the Father. But," Amos said in her ear, after a time. "There is one condition."

"What?"

"You must never call me Simeon again." She drew her head back and nodded solemnly. He touched her chin gently. "You may, however," he went on, wishing for once that Simeon was listening, "call me Persephone."

EPILOGUE

The chills were less now, and the survivors recovering, although a quarter of the crew had died of the fever and more gone mad.

Belazir t'Marid clenched his rattling teeth against a paroxysm as he lay in the darkened bridge, while the Dreadful Bride fled outward all alone.

"Someday," he whispered

THE END

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