

CONTACT

Jerry Oltion and Lee Goodloe

The bloody light of Reddawn spilled across the morning landscape. Lurid shadows, black against red, stretched away from the gaunt trees limned against the sky, and icicles flamed crimson as they caught the dim light. Overhead, aurorae pulsated, dim with the coming dawn but still visible.

Old Phar, with the unconscious dexterity of long practice, began the Reddawn ritual, necessary to forestall the Red One's power before the Truedawn, when the Greatsun cleared the horizon. Breath steamed from his single nostril as he chanted the ancient liturgy, pointing the wand down, then toward the zenith, then accusingly at the Redsun peeking over the horizon. The motions and the incantions were so familiar, it was as though he stood apart from himself and watched a mechanism rattle thru its cycle, like a waterwheel clattering in an irrigation canal.

Like individual lives, he thought. Noisy, sometimes seeming purposeful, yet always cycling, birth to death to birth...always moving, and always going nowhere. Such a boring plan for a universe. If *he'd* been God he'd've done it differently.

He reined in his thoughts. Careful! It wouldn't do to be thinking such heretical things now, routine ritual or no. He was no superstitious villager, to quake in the face of a phenomenon that repeated itself so regularly and drearily, but neither was he a fool. Those who blasphemed in thought eventually blasphemed in deed, and that would go over especially poorly in a priest.

Besides, the ritual had to have come from somewhere. Possibly it was only the time-dulled echo of a primitive tribe's fear of the unknown, but then again it might truly be a necessary devotion to ward off the evil of the Red One. The potential for disaster should that be so was vastly greater than the annoyance of performing the ritual; therefore it behooved him to pay attention.

Even if it *was* boring in its repetition.

Stop that!he told himself sternly, but not before he had smiled at the thought. He sighed. He was getting old, unable to keep a tight rein on his inherent evil nature. He hoped the True God would take that into account when the time came for the Final Battle.

A motion in the sky to his right caught his eye. Something bright. He glanced idly to the south, expecting to see a meteor, but there was nothing. He turned back to his chant. Motion again. He turned once more, this time looking more carefully, and what he saw then almost made him drop the tools of his office. A star. *Moving!* From the south. Moving steadily, arrogantly across the natural course of the sky, heading due north.

Awestruck--undoubtedly this was a powerful omen, to so defy the order of the sky!--he stopped the

ceremony, his eyes fixed on the star. Stark terror tugged at him as he waited nervously for whatever was to happen next. He mentally rued his spiritual laxity the moment before, and prayed that the God would understand and forgive. By now the Redsun had cleared the horizon, baleful and tiny, blanched on its underside by the Greatsun's glare, and he quailed in its unnatural light.

The star approached the zenith. He cringed, knowing this would be the moment of his judgement.

Nothing happened. The unnatural star continued on its northward course. Phar watched until it disappeared from sight behind the city wall.

Oddly disappointed, and not so oddly relieved; feeling a little foolish and more than a little disturbed, he finished up the ritual with more fervor than he'd felt since he'd been an acolyte. He chanted the final stanza just as the brilliant ball of the Greatsun cleared the horizon. Swamped by the glare, the red companion dimmed to near-invisibility.

In the ordinary, cheerful brightness of Truedawn, the strange star and its bizarre course seemed unreal. Part of his mind mocked himself: here he was, quivering like any ignorant villager. He looked around to see if his lapse had been observed, and sure enough, there against the temple wall sat one of the city's beggars, huddled beneath a threadbare blanket and blinking stupidly at him. Phar felt the first hot flush of shame before the beggar's expression registered with him. The beggar was terrified. He had seen it too!

Feigning confidence, for it wouldn't do to have a priest seem uncertain concerning matters of the heavens, Phar circled his finger in the sign of the Greatsun and held his hand high to the dawn in acknowledgment. Then he turned and started back to the temple, forcing himself to walk with the measured gait seemly for one of the Greatsun's priests. He was going to have to call a Council meeting.

#

Sixty years of dreams fled from the insistent buzz of the alarm. Tamara Volkova moaned softly and reached almost instinctively to shut it off, but her arms were sluggish and full of pain. They fell against the pillows far short of the mark. She lay back and breathed deeply, wincing at the ache in her chest. What was the matter? Why did she hurt so? Every muscle in her body telegraphed its distress. Was she hung over?

She tried again and managed to brush a hand against the source of the noise. That was evidently sufficient; the buzz changed to soft music. Tamara sighed and lay back again, blinking heavy eyelids and trying to focus on her surroundings.

She was in a bathtub full of pillows. A bathtub with a clear, domed lid, hinged open on the side. A NoMo tank.

NoMo. That explained it. It took a while to jump-start a person after years in suspended animation.

She searched her memory for particulars. What ship was she on? What mission? The answers hovered on the edge of awareness. Damn! Why couldn't she *think*? Waking from NoMo always did this to you, but that knowledge made it no easier.

The music threatened to put her to sleep again, but she shook her head and levered herself up onto her elbows instead. She could feel her heart beating with the exertion, and with the heightened blood supply came awareness.

The ship was the *Gregor Mendel*, and she was its captain. They were heading for--no, they should already be orbiting--the second planet in the binary star system AV +14 32 3324. The ship's sensors would have scanned the surface, mapping it while its passengers slept. So, unless it had hit a snag or required a second opinion on something, it was time to make the collections.

The collections. Right. But first things first. Growing more alert by the moment, she swung her legs over the side of the cubicle, stood clinging to the NoMo chamber's lid until she could walk, then took the ten steps into the 'fresher, using chair, dresser, and bed for support on the way.

A hot shower washed away most of her aches, and turning the dial all the way to cold for the last ten seconds cured her lethargy. Glowing with renewed life, she dressed in loose sweats, padded into the kitchen and punched the coffee button, then took the steaming cup into her office next door and sat down at the desk console.

A fine layer of dust coated every horizontal surface. Sixty years' worth, she supposed, though it didn't look like much more than a few days' accumulation in a planetside apartment. The starship's climate control was much more efficient. She blew the dust away and turned on the computer with a thumbprint on the pad at the bottom of the monitor.

She verified that they were indeed in polar orbit around the right planet in the right stellar system--never hurts to double-check the autopilot, she told herself--then asked for an overview of the survey. The on-line intelligence responded with a set of pictures taken in visual wavelengths. She saw a planet with blue oceans, white clouds, and brown-and-green continents. Then came a series of frames of coastlines, major land masses, river systems, all taken at a resolution of about ten kilometers. No life was apparent in any of the views, but that didn't mean anything. At ten-kilometer resolution, it would be hard to spot life on any world. The computer switched to one-kilometer resolution, and that's when the life showed up. The color differences in the mountains were obviously due to forests, and the river valleys were full of vegetation as well. Hot damn, this looked like a live one. No scraping under rocks for a few species of microbes; this planet had a thriving ecosystem.

Pity it was all going to go up in flames in a few months, when the close-orbiting M-class dwarf finally invaded its companion's Roche limit and began pulling material from the larger G-type star.

The computer showed her a few more scenes, then drew a box around the confluence of two rivers and zoomed in for an even closer look. Tamara gasped in surprise and dropped her coffee mug in her lap.

"Chort," she swore, blowing the word out like a sneeze. She righted the mug and blotted up the worst of the spill with tissue from the full box on the desk, stealing glances back at the screen as she did. Finagle had struck again.

Of course they knew beforehand that the planet contained life--that's why they'd come here--but the probe that discovered it had been sent to observe the binary stars themselves, not their planets. It had given them atmospheric composition data and little more. They'd known something was releasing oxygen and methane into the air, but this was more life than they'd bargained on--and more responsibility.

Tamara sighed as she got up and stripped off her soaked clothing. She was going to have to call a meeting.

#

Phar had called the Temple Council, as was his prerogative with his rank. The other senior priests

crouched about the stonewood table, impressive in their vivid yellow robes of office. After the invocation, Phar stood up to full height. As the one calling the meeting, it was his duty to speak first. He was unaccustomedly hesitant. It was one thing to speak on ordinary matters of government, or to debate doctrine with stylized, formal rhetoric; it was even all right to discuss the action to be taken when some peasant had breathlessly claimed to have received some omen from the God, but it was quite another to tell his peers about a supernatural sign that he himself had seen. In fact, it was embarrassing. Still, everyone was waiting, and what else could he do?

He blurted it out in one quick sentence: "I was given a Sign at Reddawn matins."

He could see his colleagues shift position in surprise, and could feel the skepticism in their suddenly intent stares. Committed now, he told them matter-of-factly about the rogue star, how he had assumed it at first to be a personal sign directed to him for his lax thoughts, but how it had ignored him at the zenith. Finished, he sat down and awaited the inevitable cross-examination.

Temple-chief Khorph began the questions, as was his right. "You, of course, have not spoken of this to anyone." It was hardly a question.

"Of course not."

Khorph nodded. "If it did nothing other than cross the sky, why do you assume it was a sign?"

"The...coincidence seemed a little unlikely."

Another priest, Tharn, laughed. "Who among us hasn't let our minds drift while performing the rituals? If that was sufficient cause for a sign from the God, then the sky would never be clear of them."

Halfway around the table, Srandh said, "It could have been merely an unusual but natural atmospheric phenomenon. In fact, it could have been an exceptionally slow meteor. And, of course," he continued, spelling out what they all knew, "any merely atmospheric phenomenon is of the world and thus cannot be a Divine sign."

Phar tilted his head in skeptical agreement. This wasn't going as badly as he'd expected. He said, "It could be, I suppose, but if so it was a most unusual meteor. It moved slowly and steadily, and it didn't change in brightness. None such is described in the ancient records."

Another priest spoke up. "Even though it ignored you at the zenith, Phar, it could still be a personal sign to you, and thus not relevant to anyone else." He spoke almost diffidently; "personal sign" was the euphemism for hallucination, and was used contemptuously of the hysterical peasants who intermittently appeared at the temple spouting their visions. Priests did not accuse one another lightly of receiving personal signs.

But Phar had suggested it himself. He again tilted his head politely and said, "Possibly. But if that is true, I shared the personal sign with a beggar resting against the wall. I doubt we were the only ones watching the sky at that hour, either, and I expect we will be receiving more--ah, more credible--confirmation very soon. And we must have determined what this Sign signifies by then."

The Temple-Chief had, of course, already realized that. "If it's real, we certainly must do something," he agreed. "But even if it's a True Sign, it need not have come from the God." He paused significantly. "Phar, you saw this star traveling across the sky at right angles to the God's ordered course of the heavens. And you also saw it during Reddawn, while thinking blasphemous thoughts. I think it's plain that this portent

comes not from the God but from the Red One."

A murmur of agreement rippled around the table.

Phar began to protest, but Khorph interrupted, "What evidence have you that this Sign came from the God?"

"Merely my own heart," Phar replied, with no hesitation.

Khorph moved his head sadly. "Phar, you *know* the tricks of the Red One. How could you be taken in so completely?"

Phar started to reply again, and then halted. Suddenly, the dialog was going very badly, and everything he said seemed to be making things worse.

Khorph stood. "This shall be our proclamation: The Red One's ways are devious, and his power exceeded only by the God's. Vigilance is always necessary to distinguish his apparitions from the God's. But the God does not mock his own works. The Red One always mocks." Again, the other priests nodded at this obvious inference.

"Our brother Phar is lovingly assigned to penitent meditation, that he may come anew to feel the true Presence of the God. He is relieved from his other temple duties for the duration of his penance."

A tumult of emotions seethed within Phar, but his lifetime's training held good. He managed to nod humbly.

"Last," the Temple-Chief said, "we command the Questioners to be especially vigilant. If our own brother could be fooled, how much more vulnerable the populace? If the shepherd is decoyed, the flock is easy prey for false herdsmen."

All at the table knew Khorph was referring obliquely to the ragged, self-styled prophets who intermittently preached heresy in the streets and squares. Unfortunately, however, the zeal of the Temple's Questioners did not generally confine itself to such blatant heretics. Old scores and new vendettas were also settled by the Greatsun's death in the public square.

Phar realized, with a faint wave of nausea, that he had unwittingly given the Question license for one of its periodic excesses. How, how, *how* could this meeting have gone so badly?

Perhaps the Sign was indeed from the Red One after all.

#

Tamara's meeting was going little better. She'd ordered the computer to awaken her five crewmembers--four scientists and the company's on-site accountant--but none of them could see their way around the dilemma either.

They all stared intently at the visuals displayed in the tabletop: a one-meter-resolution still photo of the river valley Tamara had seen earlier. The checkerboard pattern of deliberate cultivation was as clear as a neon sign: They had discovered intelligent life.

No one needed to spell out the significance of *that*. The *Mendel* was there in the first place because of

the scarcity of life in the universe; it had been worth the effort to send a ship just to check out the possibility. Especially since the binary stars the planet orbited were due to sterilize their solar system only months after the nearest survey ship could get there. The *Mendel* had been that ship, but anything above the level of algae was so rare that they had come equipped to gather only microorganisms and tissue samples of any multicelled life they might find. The possibility of finding intelligence hadn't even been considered.

"Obviously," Tamara said after they'd all had a good look at the evidence, "this is an additional complication on our mission."

"Maybe not," Gordon Brown, one of the two microbiologists, replied. "The odds are overwhelming that it's a human colony. They might have already done our work for us."

The company accountant, Boardbill, shook his head. "Nobody would set up a colony here. The place is going to fry in less than a year. There's no way anybody would want to live here, and there's no way anybody who didn't want to live here could get a big enough return on their investment in such a short time to make it economically feasible."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself," Gordon said.

"I'm certain of it. Colonies are expensive; nobody's going to spend that kind of money on something that'll be gone by next tax day."

"They're alien," Huang Thomsen, the other microbiologist, said in a voice even more certain than Boardbill's. He had been playing with his tabletop display; now he hit the button that sent what he had done out to the others' screens as well. It was a computer-enhanced closeup of a castle-like wood-and-stone building, seen from about a 45-degree angle. Behind it a city of smaller buildings cast long shadows in the dawn light. It might have been an early colony town anywhere, save that directly in front of the castle's massive door stood a bipedal, two-armed, single-headed being that could have passed for human only on a very dark night. Though the rest of its body was hidden beneath a yellow robe, what showed was plenty to prove it wasn't human: Two overlarge eyes set in bumps on the top of its head, triangular ears placed just behind the eyes, a mouth that cut all the way across the center of the head like a gash thorough a watermelon, and a prehensile tail curling upward through a slit in the robe. A measuring bar beside the figure, corrected for perspective, showed it to be about 1.2 meters high.

"This will make the Parallel Evolution camp back home quite pleased," Emily Kouris, the immunologist, said. There was an eagerness to her voice that betrayed her own pleasure at being in on such a unique discovery.

Mary Burke, the astrophysicist, said, "True enough. Provided we can figure out how to take some of these guys back with us, of course. And whatever we can salvage of their culture."

Boardbill cleared his throat. "In the strictest sense of the mission objectives, that is not a high priority. We are here under a standard biological survey contract, which calls for samples of genetic material from all life forms encountered. Where appropriate, samples of entire organisms may be preserved for study, but the contract says nothing about the rescue of any alien culture."

"Does this contract say anything at *all* about an alien culture?" Tamara demanded.

"Yes, in fact, it does," Boardbill replied. "If we encounter signs of intelligent life, we are to report the details of same to the home office, return to NoMo, and await further instructions. Under no condition

are we to attempt contact."

"Even if they blow up while we're waiting."

Boardbill at least had the decency to blush. "That is correct."

"Well, that shows how valuable a contract can be. If we held to the letter of that one, they could probably prosecute us under the Genocide Act." Tamara sighed. "We can't just treat them like any other animals."

"No one is suggesting we just abandon them," Boardbill said, shifting his tack slightly. "Obviously we should rescue as many as we can. But we aren't equipped to evacuate an entire planetary population, especially one so primitive. We don't even know if the alien physiology will tolerate NoMo."

He looked around him, seeing the hostile expressions on his shipmates' faces, and added, "I know this is a unique situation, but we should not forget our obligations to our stockholders. They financed this expedition as a speculative venture, and have a right to our best efforts to fulfill that contract. We are here to collect the broadest possible sample of living things for their possible commercial value. That should include intelligent natives, obviously, but we shouldn't ignore the rest of the biosphere. This is by far the most diverse ecosystem we've discovered since humanity left Earth. The possibilities--"

Mary could hold herself back no longer. "My God! You're talking about obligations to *stockholders* when there's a planetful of *beings* down there who're going to be incinerated! Why you cold-blooded--"

Tamara banged her fist on the tabletop. "Hold it. We can discuss this without calling each other names." She tilted her head slightly, looking at Boardbill out of one eye. "All the same, Mary has a good point. The legal considerations, not to mention common morality, obligate us to do what we can. Certainly the circumstances would absolve us from any *legal* liability for breach of contract with the stockholders." She emphasized the word slightly for Boardbill's benefit. "However, as you've pointed out, our resources are limited, and there's still good reason to carry out our other biological collections. If nothing else, higher life forms, whether intelligent or not, can't survive without microbial ecosystems."

"Fine," Boardbill said. "Let's save the entire ecosystem. That's what we're here for, after all. But let's not let our sympathies get in the way of our mission. We're here for DNA, not pottery."

Huang shook his head. "Intelligence isn't just another higher life form, Boardie. These guys'll have cultural traditions that could be every bit as important as their genes. They'll have distinctive artwork, artifacts, legends, languages...all sorts of things. We'd be criminals to let an entire civilization go up in smoke because we were too busy saving the local equivalent of earthworms."

Tamara nodded. "I agree. We're going to have to save as much of their culture as we can as well. But we're under more than just a space constraint. Mary, how much time do we have?"

"Still four to six months till the Roche lobe spills over, approximately," Mary replied.

"Approximately?" Tamara glowered at the astrophysicist.

Mary stared back at her. "Approximately. It's a chaotic system. We can only make statistical predictions. Small variations in the drag yield large differences in the rate of the orbital decay. Large and nonlinear."

"Give me a lower limit. How long have we got for certain?"

Mary frowned. She tapped at the monitor in front of her, frowned even deeper at the results. Finally she said, "Three months with certainty. Five months at ninety percent safety margin. Beyond that it gets shaky."

Three months, Tamara thought. Three months--or maybe six--until the magnetic drag of the close, rapidly orbiting stars finished the job it had been working on for millions of years. Already the G2 star nearly filled its Roche lobe, drawn out into an elongate blob by tidal forces. Soon gas would start spilling out of the lobe and spiraling onto the dim, M8 companion--and incidentally sending a hurricane of hard radiation sleeting through the planetary system.

Tamara knew she couldn't coax any better figures out of Mary, either. They had brought along an astrophysicist precisely because the close binary system was so unpredictable. Mary was their alarm; when she decided star-stuff was about to start spilling onto the M8 dwarf, they would pull up stakes and get out with whatever they had managed to collect. Fast.

Tamara made her decision. "We plan for three months, then. We use both landers simultaneously, despite regulations to the contrary. One lander, with Gordon, Huang, and Emily crewing, will go for samples in a remote area while the other, with Mary, Boardbill, and myself, will attempt contact with the aliens. We both collect as much as we can stuff into the hold in that time. If Mary says we have more time, we extend our stay accordingly. Questions?"

Emily and Boardbill both looked unhappy, and it was clear that each wished they were on the other team. Tamara considered switching them, but decided against it. Emily was a biologist and Boardbill was not; she would be more useful collecting samples. And Boardbill--Tamara wanted to keep him close at hand, where she could keep a close rein on him.

"No questions?" she asked again. When nobody replied, she said, "Then I've got one. Just how should we go about contacting these guys?"

"Are we missing the obvious?" Gordon asked. "Has anybody listened for radio?"

"The system is clean," Tamara replied. "There don't seem to be any modulated energy sources on the entire planet."

"Hmm." Gordon pursed his lips in thought.

Huang said, "There have to be guidelines for contact somewhere in the library."

Boardbill's eyes grew wide. "Of course," he said, and began tapping on his monitor. Within seconds, he had dragged the document out of the computer's archives and began to read: "Recommendations of the Federated Republic of Inhabited Worlds Committee for the Development of Procedures for the Establishment of Extraterrestrial Contact." He tapped the screen for more information. "Authors' names--" tap "--authors' biographies--" tap "--more biographies--" tap "--acknowledgments, more acknowledgments, still *more* acknowledgments, official seal, disclaimer of liability--ah, finally: the table of contents." He whistled softly. "Looks like we're in for a good time. Chapter one: General Guidelines for the Determination of the Existence of Intelligence. 1.2 megabytes. Chapter Two: Special Cases Wherein the General Guidelines for the Determination of the Existence of Intelligence Might Not Apply. 2.3 megabytes. Chapter Three: Elementary Precautions for Preventing the Exchange of Contaminating Ideas While Determining the Existence of Intelligence. 1.7 megabytes."

"Sounds like the Committee is definitely interested in preventing the exchange of ideas," said Mary.

Emily laughed. "Reminds me of an old joke. Why did it take 10 billion years to create mankind, instead of 6 days?"

"I don't know," Gordon said. "Why?"

"Because God is really a committee."

Laughing, Tamara said, "So what does that make us, then?"

Huang looked down at his own monitor, still displaying the computer-enhanced close-up of the robed alien, and said, "I imagine that depends on your point of view."

#

A subdued but sullen throng crowded the temple's plaza. Phar had lots of time to watch them from his cell where he meditated, prayed, and revised his translations of the Hallowbook into *Sphranath*, one of the languages of the savages who dwelt on the edges of the Realm. The nightly sightings of the Roguestar--so it was now officially named--had fanned uneasiness, uneasiness that was slowly escalating into panic. That panic wasn't limited to those beyond the temple walls, either. The frightened masses looked to the Temple for guidance and support, but its obvious impotence against--and rumored confusion about--the indifferent light in the sky had betrayed them deeply. Their dawning resentment could easily be crystallized into anger directed at the Temple itself.

In fact, so he'd heard, the entire Realm was seething. Despite the threat of the Question, street preachers openly proclaimed that the errant star portended the Final Battle of the Suns, when all Worldly life was to end and the One God reward the righteous. And those preachers were attracting large, responsive crowds, crowds that later would openly defy the Temple's authority.

At least, Phar thought wryly, no one now doubted that he *had* seen what he'd reported. And the mob at their doorstep had diverted his companions' attention from his own case. But Phar nonetheless wished that the reality of the apparition had been confirmed less overwhelmingly. Corrupt and cynical the Temple might be, but it was stability, and order, and learning, and Phar had no wish to see it threatened.

He breathed a silent prayer to the Greatsun and returned to his studies.

Moments later, a deep, thunderous crash interrupted him. Startled, he looked out his window again, wondering how a storm could have blown up so quickly, but the sky was clear in all directions. He swept his head around again, looking for the fallen building or the explosion that could have caused such a noise, but aside from the suddenly agitated crowd he could see nothing out of the ordinary.

The rumbling died away. Most of the crowd had their heads craned back, looking frantically at the sky, their eyes darting this way and that. Some clutched weapons--staves, knives, here and there a sword--but most held their arms out before them, fingers circled in the sign of the Greatsun.

A shrill keening that did not come from the crowd waxed louder, louder, *louder*. All at once a gigantic flying thing--bird? beast? demon?--crossed the plaza, trailing thunder in its wake. Phar had a quick, confused impression of shiny hide, wings, extended claws, and it was gone. For all its speed it had seemed curiously rigid, like a wagon or sled, with none of the sway of limbs or play of muscles of a living

creature.

He leaned out the window for a better look, holding on with one hand and wrapping his tail around a leg of the desk. The flying thing had vanished...no, there. A brilliant flash winked from low in the sky, like a heliograph signal. Was it *metal* then, to reflect the light so?

As the noise of its passage died once again, Phar heard a more familiar--but no less frightening--roar from below. Chaos now reigned in the plaza. A full-scale riot had exploded in the flyer's wake, some of the rioters attempting to flee the temple while others attempted to force their way in. As Phar watched, a line of soldiers advanced upon them, steel drawn, forcing the mob before them. They were too few to maintain a continuous line, however. Behind them, crossbowmen fired intermittently at figures trying to break through. A bolt *thunked* into one figure, who sprawled forward, his knife clattering onto the cobbles. Before the knife had stopped moving another rioter picked it up and slashed at a soldier. The rioter went down a moment later with a nearly-severed head, his bright blue blood startling against the pavement, but the soldier bled from a wound to his side. In a moment he was overrun, and the crowd made a surge for the gate.

The keening--almost a shriek, really--was getting louder again. Phar looked to the sky once more and saw a black speck moving improbably fast against the blue background. It seemed to be slowing, though--no, maybe it was turning toward them. He lost it against the city on the other side of the square, then picked it up again: huge, implacable, and coming directly toward him!

He ducked involuntarily. When he looked out again, the flyer had stopped. It was now hovering over the square, looking for all the world like one of the Red One's minions ready to pounce on the recently released souls from the battle beneath it. Except, again there was that curious rigidity about it; no wings flapped, no muscles rippled. Could such an--an *object* truly be a demon?

It started to descend, easily and swiftly and quietly, and landed with astonishing grace in the cleared plaza, back of the soldiers. Training--or perhaps just common sense--kept them facing the mob, but the fighting had stopped the moment the thing had come to a stop overhead.

As its feet--not claws after all, Phar noted--touched the paving stones, Phar left his cubicle. His time of penitent meditation was over.

#

The guidelines for contact had been full of detailed advice on how to arrange a first meeting that wouldn't destroy the very culture they were trying to contact. The trouble was, all of it assumed that the expedition would have unlimited time. In the end they'd had to throw the whole thing out and start from scratch, coming up with their own plan to expedite matters.

Step one: Show of presence. Tamara winced at the thought, but the crew had agreed it was the best way. If everybody knew they were here from the start, there would be no time wasted in convincing anyone that aliens from a higher-technology culture had arrived.

They'd picked the same city that the computer had shown them in the survey photo. It was the largest one on the planet, with the most intensive agriculture surrounding it and the most elaborate road system connecting it with the smaller towns nearby. Odds were, it would be the seat of government. What kind of government--or what kind of anything--they would be trying to deal with was still unknown, but there seemed to be some kind of organization there, and that was what they needed to contact. Someone organized.

Tamara sighed and spoke to the autopilot. "Make one low pass, high speed; photograph and analyze the photo for a landing place near the largest building in the city. Then if possible, return and land, leaving ample clearance to avoid injury to ground personnel." She suddenly wondered if the system would recognize the aliens as "personnel," and decided to make sure. "That includes any living being larger than a cat," she added. "Land if possible, otherwise make another pass. Iterate until further instructions.

"After landing, remain on standby status in eavesdrop mode. The landing party will be wearing holo cameras; record all speech and action for later linguistic analysis. Listen for orders as well. You are to recognize and respond to the following people as well as myself." She nodded to Boardbill and Mary.

"Genghis Boardbill," Boardbill said with the defiant expression of one who has carried such an appellation for many years. Tamara tried not to smile.

Mary did. "Mary Burke," she said, the giggle not audible in itself but evident in the timbre of her voice.

"All right, you know what to do. Do it."

The three of them waited impatiently in their acceleration couches while the ship dropped out of orbit and executed its maneuvers. They already wore their planet suits: the clinging silvery skin and clear helmet used to maintain biological isolation from the surface environment. The suits were tough, intentionally made hard to breach in an accidental scrape or fall, but they weren't armor, and as the moment of contact approached, Tamara worried more and more about that failing.

Finally, after a wild ride over the city that would have gotten them shot out of the sky on any human world, the autopilot slowed the shuttle to a hover, extended the gear, and landed. The whine of engines wound down the scale, revealing an underlying whine of hydraulics as the autopilot deployed the gangplank.

Tamara unbuckled and went over to the airlock. Mary and Boardbill were right behind. Out the port they could see part of an alien-filled plaza and a wall of the building behind it. Its architecture was astounding considering the materials used: an ornate dome tapering into an equally ornate spire, both intricate with carvings and filigree. Buildings like that hadn't been seen in human society since before the dawn of space flight.

"Open outer door," Tamara said, and the autopilot obediently raised the hatch.

There was a flicker of motion, and something clanged against the inner door. A moment later dozens of somethings did the same. One fell within view in the airlock: a short, shattered arrow.

"Crossbow bolts," Boardbill said. "They're shooting at us."

They had accounted for that in their plan. "Autopilot, give them a demonstration of our firepower," Tamara ordered. "Don't hurt them, but impress them. Shoot something."

Left to its own choice, the computer weighed the context of the words in the commands it had been given, and decide that "impress" must be fitted by shooting a physical object that could be seen by the greatest number. So it targeted the laser cannon at the highest object around, the spire atop the temple, and fired. Blinding red light lanced out from the shuttle, and rock spattered into lava where the light caressed it. Undermined, the spire slowly buckled, crumbling into a mass of rubble. Individual blocks of broken masonry bounced off the temple dome, obliterating ornamentation, powdering carvings, shattering

into potentially lethal shrapnel as they did so. One block crashed right thru the dome.

It was a singularly poor choice of target, especially considering the color of the laser. A second volley of arrows bounced off the inner door, one of them starring the porthole glass, and this time the people behind the soldiers joined in the fray, throwing rocks, knives, and whatever else was at hand.

An alarm buzzer sounded from the airlock control panel, just as the autopilot said, "Alarm, alarm. Primary hatch control system damaged. Switching to backup."

"Close the door!" Tamara ordered, and the outer door slid shut. "Open the inner door." The inner door slid aside, revealing dozens of broken arrows and one intact one neatly spearing a hydraulic line. Bright red working fluid oozed out around the shaft.

"Fix that puncture," Tamara ordered, and as a pair of small maintenance robots--"fixits"--crawled out of their niches to obey her command, she turned to Mary and Boardbill. "Well, so much for instilling them with a sense of awe," she said. "Now what?"

"I would suggest going on to step two: attempting to communicate," Boardbill suggested.

"Mary?"

"Can't hurt, I guess."

Tamara nodded. This was the part she'd been dreading. Turning back to the control console, she said, "Autopilot, put my voice over the P.A. system on my mark." She thought a moment, trying to decide what to say. She knew the aliens wouldn't understand a word of it, but her speech would also be heard eventually on a thousand worlds, the occupants of which *would* understand--and criticize--every word.

When in doubt, cover your ass, she thought. "Recall that first contact document," she ordered. She paged through it on the monitor until she came to "Suggested Opening Speech" and nodded. "Okay, mark."

She took a deep breath and waded into it: "'We come in peace. We are members of a race of beings who make our homes beyond your sky. We have come here seeking knowledge, and bearing knowledge in trade. We wish to establish friendly relations....'"

She read on and on, hoping they would eventually get the idea that she was trying to communicate.

#

Phar strode down the corridor connecting the dormitory with the main cathedral. It was a scene of bedlam: people running both ways, crashing into one another, shouting orders, opinions, questions--it all blended to gibberish. He pushed his way through, his yellow robe of office helping in that task, until he reached the great domed chamber where the priests gathered. Khorph was there, but only three others; the rest were probably cowering under their desks. Phar looked at the enormous stone block resting where the conference table had been, and at the matching hole in the dome, and understood why.

"Do you doubt your rogue star's allegiance now?" Khorph asked dryly.

"It is not *my* rogue star," Phar replied.

"Oh, but it is. It is yours to exorcise, at least." Khorph turned to one of the other three priests at his side and said, "Tharn, get Phar a censer and a blessed staff." As Tharn turned to obey, Khorph added, as an afterthought, "Get the same for yourself and Srandh as well. You can both help Phar in his duty."

"You want me to *exorcise* that--that *thing*?" Phar asked incredulously.

"You have a better idea?"

"I think we should find out why it's here first," Phar answered.

"It's here to defile our temple and undermine our power," Khorph said impatiently. "That's sufficient knowledge to act upon. We've got to show that mob outside we're dealing with the situation or they'll be on this side of the wall within the hour. Hence the exorcism. Of course, if you manage to scare it away, then so much the better."

Khorph's meaning was not lost on Phar. An exorcism drove away the evil spirit in an object or a person; it didn't necessarily drive away the object. The laity knew it was a dangerous procedure for the priest--they had been told so often enough--so even if the thing killed Phar and his two "helpers" in the act, the priesthood could still declare the exorcism a success. In an exorcism, *any* result short of total annihilation was considered a success, and if the thing outside was going to do that, chances were the exorcism wouldn't affect it a bit.

"What if it truly is a demon from the Red One?" Phar asked softly.

"Then you'd better hope your exorcism works," Khorph replied.

There seemed to be little more to say. Phar and Srandh waited while Tharn fetched the exorcism equipment, then the three of them lit their censers and took up their staves and marched out of the temple, Phar in the lead.

The procession moved out, chanting and waving their censers with their tails and banging their staves upon the floor with each step. As they neared the plaza they could hear a loud, unnatural voice speaking in an unfamiliar tongue, and Phar clutched his censer tight in fear. The True God and the Red One should both have known their language. What *was* that thing?

The soldiers had ceased shooting at it, and the mob had run out of things to throw. The appearance of Phar and the two priests flanking him sent a murmur through them, and they parted to let the yellow-robed figures through. Phar kept his eyes fixed on the silvery monster before him as he took the dozen even, measured paces necessary to bring him to the base of the thing's tongue.

He banged his staff twice on the stones, worked his throat nervously, and began the exorcism.

#

"Uh, Tammy?" Boardbill had been looking out the airlock window, but now he turned away to address the captain.

She turned toward him, reading, "...Federated Republic of Inhabited Worlds. It is sincerely hoped that..." and raised her eyebrows in question.

"Something's happening outside. Three guys in yellow robes are at the bottom of the gangplank, waving

smokers and banging sticks on the ground and the one in front is chanting something at us."

"...in a brotherhood of peace and prosperity and do you think they want to talk or are they just taking aim for another volley?" she asked without breaking stride.

"Things look pretty calm right now," Boardbill replied.

"...and justice for all. Have they got that hydro line fixed yet Mary? Accordingly, we extend this greeting..."

The fixits had pulled the arrow loose and were wrapping tape around the pipe to seal the hole temporarily. Mary looked at their handiwork. "I think so," she said. "We won't know for sure until we try it."

"...and with it our blah, blah, blah. Well then, let's give it a go. You there outside, do you hear me?" She stopped speaking for the first time since she'd begun her address.

"They're still chanting and waving their smokers," Boardbill reported.

"Come back inside and let's try opening the outer door again."

Mary and Boardbill did so, and the autopilot opened the door at Tamara's command.

"No crossbow bolts this time," Boardbill said. "The one in front is saying something to the crowd."

"Good. Autopilot, let us hear what he says. Hello out there. Can you understand me?"

The alien's voice, surprisingly deep for such a small creature, said something that sounded like "Siph pharan dhos wilner sondha."

"Hello, can you understand me?" she asked again.

"Zoph phurona dha wayner sandhu," the alien replied.

Tamara sighed. "Well guys, this is it. Autopilot, cease broadcasting my voice. You two, get to either side of the door and stay out of sight. I'm going out. Autopilot, do what you can to protect me, but don't harm anyone. That goes for you guys as well. We're here to save these people, not kill them. Understood?"

"Understood," Boardbill said, and Mary echoed him.

"All right. Autopilot, open the door."

#

Phar had just finished the second Invocation of Holiness when the demon's voice underwent a subtle change in tone. He held his censer higher, mentally called upon the Greatsun's power to help him survive whatever came next, and launched into an Iteration of Piety.

The voice resumed its previous tone for a moment, then changed again and came to an unexpected stop. Phar braced himself for annihilation and finished the chant, but the only response was a short sentence from the demon.

The crowd began to murmur. That wouldn't do! He banged his staff on the ground again and called out, "What is your purpose here?"

The demon spoke again, a single, short phrase, and opened its mouth.

He heard the crowd gasp as one person. Knowing what would come next, he whirled around and shouted, "Keep your weapons down!" The soldiers carrying only swords needed no convincing; the crossbowmen were more reluctant but they too bowed to the figure of authority.

The demon voice spoke again.

Phar turned around to face it again, saw that the mouth was straight-sided and rectangular, like a door. *Just* like a door, he thought.

"What is your purpose here?" he demanded again.

The demon-with-a-door responded with more gibberish, a few sentences.

Phar tried again with a different dialect, received another unintelligible answer. He was about to try yet another when a second door opened behind the first and a tall, silvery being stepped out.

At least it's not red, Phar thought.

The silver creature spoke a short phrase and waited for a response. Phar said, "Your words are foreign to me. Do you speak the language of this Realm?"

The creature spoke again. Phar tried again with another dialect, and again, with all the languages he knew. Each brought gibberish as a response.

The silver creature obviously knew none of the languages he did.

"What are we to do now?" Phar asked conversationally in the secret inner-temple tongue used between priests, but before either Tharn or Srandh could reply, part of the answer came from the demon's aircraft. Phar's own voice, much amplified, boomed back at him. *"Your words are foreign to me. Do you speak the language of this realm?"*

Utterly astonished, he staggered back, nearly dropping his censer. He remembered his dignity in time, however, and caught himself, but not before he had burned his tail on the hot brass. The demon pointed at itself and said something, then pointed at Phar and said something else. Last, Phar's own voice boomed back again--less startling, this time. Now the demon gestured toward the doorway through which it had appeared.

The implication was excruciatingly obvious. The demon wanted to learn his language, and wanted him to come inside that ghastly--craft--for lessons. Phar looked around him as a drowning person looks for a life raft, but no assistance was in evidence. All eyes in the plaza were upon him, and in some of them he could see the open challenge of the heretic who is about to receive proof that his lack of faith is justified. That wouldn't do at all. Phar was going to have to do it.

#

Tamara stared bleary-eyed at the alien seated in the camp lounge across from her. They were in the shuttle's cargo compartment, in the quarters they had set up for the alien while they learned each others' language. It had been a marathon session, and Tamara felt like collapsing to the floor and sleeping for a couple of months, but after three days' intensive effort--broken only when the alien left to eat and relieve himself and, presumably, report to his superiors--they had finally built up a working vocabulary. Most of it resided within the autopilot computer, which had inferred the grammatical structure based on recorded conversations and which now acted as a translator, but the job of actually speaking to the alien had fallen to her. The alien (Phar, with a bilabial fricative, she reminded herself) would listen to the computer as a translator, but he wouldn't converse with its disembodied voice, or even to a face on a screen.

But at least they were speaking, and he had finally accepted that they were what they said they were. Today had been a breakthrough day in more than just vocabulary.

"You say you come from beyond the sky," Phar said. "I have no great difficulty believing that. Yet you are not one of God's messengers, or even *from* one of God's messengers. That is what I have difficulty understanding. Where else can you be from?"

Tamara tried to compose her answer beforehand, to avoid talking herself into a corner. "God's messengers" were the aliens' name for the other planets in their solar system, so she said, "We're from a planet--that is, a world like this one--that 'orbits' another star--that is, another sun--just like your world and the Messengers go around your own suns." She spoke in Standard. The computer translated it for her, speaking phrases that sounded a little like her father's ancestral Russian, and beeping at her for elaboration when she used a word it couldn't translate.

Phar was sitting on his tail, but the end of it lashed in agitation. "The World is the center of the Universe," he said with finality. He spoke in his own tongue; Tamara listened to the computer's translation.

Tamara shook her head. "The World is a ball of rock and water and air," she said. "So are the other planets you call the Messengers. They look like moving stars in the sky simply because they're far away."

Phar said slowly, "We have known for centuries that the World is round. Heretics--" he emphasized the word "--have suggested that the World also circles the Gods, but that is obviously nonsense. Anyone can see that the Gods--and the Messengers--circle the World."

Tamara sighed. She hadn't realized that the physical concepts she'd taken for granted since childhood were really so non-intuitive. She said, "It's not nonsense. The World does circle the Suns, and so do the messengers."

"I do not believe that."

Frustrated, Tamara said, "It doesn't matter. The point is, we're from a very long ways away. Much farther than the Suns or the Messengers."

"I have difficulty believing that as well," Phar said, "but we will leave it for now. Tell me instead why you have come here."

"To collect samples of the life on your world," Tamara said. "Life is rare in the universe. When we learned that it existed here, we came to see what new types we would find. But we didn't expect to find *you*."

"Why not?"

"Our kind of life, intelligent life, is the rarest kind of all. You are the only other ones we have ever met in hundreds of years of searching."

"We have been here for longer than that," Phar replied. "We will be here still longer."

There would never be a better opportunity than this, Tamara thought. *Here goes.* "Uhh--well, that's not quite the way it's going to work out. You know that the Redsun and Greatsun go around each other?"

Phar made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Certainly. The smallest child can see that."

"Well, the size of that circle--that's what we call its `orbit'--is getting smaller due to friction." The computer buzzed at the word "friction," and she sighed. Another unknown concept. "It's like a ball rolling across the floor," she explained. "You know the ball will eventually stop. It stops because it feels a force pushing back on it from the air around it and from the surface of the floor. We call that force 'friction.'"

Phar circled one of his thumbs and a finger in the gesture Tamara had come to realize meant agreement. "It's natural for Worldly objects to stop. That's a forced motion; it must vanish. But circular motion is natural for the heavens, and will not vanish."

Tamara shook her head again. "No. There is no difference between worldly matter and heavenly matter. Once moving, all things want to keep moving. The only reason they stop, or change direction, is because other things push on them--exert forces on them."

Phar plainly did not believe that. She plowed on nonetheless, "The Suns' 'orbit' is also subject to friction, because, uh..." *because their magnetic fields were working against the charged particles flowing out in their stellar winds.* How on Earth was she going to get *that* across? Fake it, that's how. "Uh, because the Suns are embedded in, uh, air from each other. Over time, this causes them to come closer and closer together."

Phar could contain his objections no longer. "Wrong," he said. "Air is a worldly element. It has nothing to do with the Suns' motions."

Tamara nodded. "You're partly right," she said. "The air here on the World thins out as you go away from the surface, and more than a few hundred kilometers up it's gone entirely. But the Suns have air of their own surrounding them, and *that* air is slowing down their orbits."

"Why does this air surround them, rather than blow away in the wind of their passage?" Phar asked. "Why doesn't this `friction' stop it, too?" His tail curled inward in the motion Tamara recognized as one of pleasure. He'd thought he'd scored with his argument.

"It's because of gravity," she answered. The computer buzzed.

Here we go again, she thought. Aloud she said, "Okay, the World attracts things; that's why things fall to the ground instead of rising up into the sky, and that's why the air stays down, right?"

Without waiting for confirmation, she went on: "The Suns also attract things, so they're surrounded by air of their own. Only they're so close to each other that their surrounding air overlaps, so the Suns are always trying to move thru the air in their way. You must have walked against a wind, and felt it push against you. That's the same kind of push the Suns feel, and it's slowing them down. When that happens, they fall closer and closer together."

Phar looked at her without blinking. Tamara wondered if she'd snowed him with that last explanation, but she decided to push on while she had the chance, to give him the entire overview before he objected to all the details.

"OK. Soon, within a year, the Suns are going to be so close that the gravity from the Redsun can start to pull stuff from the Greatsun. When that happens, the energy--" *buzz* "--uh, extra sunlight released when the Greatsun stuff falls onto the Redsun will be enough to bake the World." Actually, it would be the ionizing radiation that would doom life on this world, but she wasn't about to try explaining *that*, either.

She'd expected to spend another hour or more getting him to believe any of it, but Phar surprised her again. He curled his tail and said, calmly, "We know about the Final Battle."

#

"You do?" The demon was clearly surprised.

"Your understanding of it is--different from ours," Phar said charitably, "but we agree on the important part: When the Gods fight their Final Battle, the world and all of us in it will be destroyed. But the battle won't take place for centuries. Millennia, actually."

"You've *measured* it?" the demon--this improbably tall, pale creature with the glass ball around its head--asked. Or rather its machine asked, after it spoke its own incomprehensible words.

"The Hallowbook tells us that the Suns are slowly drawing closer together, and one day they will touch and do battle, but that will not be for many years."

"Uh...you're not taking into account the plasma--" *buzz*. The demon exhaled heavily and spoke something else, and the machine said, "The Suns don't need to touch for the Battle to begin. When the Redsun starts pulling sun-stuff from the Greatsun, life will become impossible on the World. That will happen within one of your years."

Within a *year*? Phar was shaken to the core of his being. The Final Battle happening in *his* lifetime? Impossible.

"It's a shock, I know," the demon said, "but there's still hope. Our ship--the big one in the sky that you mistook for a Sign--can go very fast. It's not large enough to take everyone, but we can take a few of you with us when we go. A few of you, some of your artwork, your history. We can preserve your culture, give you a new start on another world. That's why we've contacted you. We want to help."

Phar felt sudden fear course through him, fear even stronger than at the thought of the Final Battle. This strange creature *was* a demon! He'd been calling it one in his own mind merely to keep his guard up, but it was *so*, and it had just made its move. All its talk of "friction" and "orbits" and worlds farther away than the Gods was just a front, a deceit to befuddle his mind while it slipped its true purpose in by the side door: It meant to steal his soul.

Oh, it was a plan worthy of the Red One, to be sure. Only He would think to send his messenger in this incredible--artifact--claiming to be a friend from a distant land. Who would reject such a friendship, especially when the consequences of such a rejection had already been so graphically demonstrated against the temple itself? And when that friend oh-so-casually offered to save him from the Final Battle, why, who would reject that, either?

Phar would, that's who. And so must everyone else. When the Gods fought their Final Battle, whether it was next eightday or in a million years, everyone alive must take part in it, or their immortal soul would be lost forever. If Phar accepted this demon's offer of "salvation," he would be throwing away his one chance at the true variety.

It waited for his response. He would have to be very careful. He must get away and warn the others, yet he must not let on that he had seen through its disguise.

"I am overwhelmed by the generosity of your offer," he began. "Obviously, this will require some thought. Who would best represent our entire culture, what to send with them; these are difficult questions, and will require much careful consideration."

"That's true," the demon said. It bared its ridiculously small mouth to show tiny, peg-like teeth. "I'm glad you can accept our offer so quickly. That's good, because we don't have much time. You'll have to hurry."

"We will," Phar promised.

#

After Phar had left the ship, Tamara went through the decontamination airlock, stripped off her quarantine suit, and collapsed back into her acceleration couch. God, it was a relief to be out of that miserable suit! And to lie down; she'd thought for a while that she'd never rest again. Didn't these aliens ever sleep? Evidently not--or not much, anyway. It had taken her longer to get that concept across than to explain Newtonian physics. She rubbed her eyes and stretched. What a time she'd had. A crash course in the fundamentals of modern science...she hadn't realized it would be so *difficult*. But once she'd gotten the point across, Phar had picked up on it quickly enough.

It wasn't their *minds* that were primitive, she reminded herself, just their technology.

Phar had returned to the temple to confer with the other priests about who to save. No doubt they would rationalize some excuse to save their own hides first, but Tamara really didn't care about that. She wanted warm bodies and cultural history, that was all. Hah--for that matter the priests might be the best choice at that. They would at least know more about traditions and interpersonal relations than anyone else on the planet.

Tamara wanted desperately to sleep, but she knew she should at least check in with the collection team first. "Autopilot, let me talk to Emily," she said.

A moment later, the screen before her lit up with Emily's face. She was frowning.

"What's the matter?" Tamara asked her.

"The kangaroo died."

"What are you talking about? What kangaroo?"

"The one I was preparing for NoMo," Emily replied. "It's not really a kangaroo, but that's about the closest name we've got for what it looks like. When I gave it the drugs to prepare it for the freeze, it went into convulsions and died."

"Oh," Tamara said. "You sure it's a valid test?"

Emily shrugged. "It's got about the same body mass as one of the sentients, and the same cell structure as all the other higher lifeforms we've seen so far. I'm going to try a few different species just in case this one's reaction was a fluke, but it doesn't look good. It looks like our metabolisms are incompatible. A word of caution: don't open your suit to the air out there. Gordon tried a mouse on it and it died in about six hours."

"Wonderful," Tamara replied. Emily's news wasn't all that surprising--about half the lifeforms the survey ships discovered were toxic to humans--but it was disappointing to find out that this biosphere was of the wrong type. Disappointing, hell; it was disastrous. These weren't just microbes out there.

"Can we synthesize an antifreeze that'll work for them?" Tamara asked.

Emily frowned. "You have any idea how long that could take?"

"Forever, I know," Tamara answered. "But we've got to find something if we want to save anybody here."

"I know. Look, maybe they can help. Ask them if they know of any drugs that slow down their metabolic processes. They might already have something that'll work."

"Oh, sure. They're going to have a cellular antifreeze just waiting for a use."

"They might already be using it. Ours came from a Voodoo ritual that was known long before spaceflight--they might have something like it. It can't hurt to ask."

"I guess not," Tamara admitted.

Boardbill cleared his throat behind her. She turned to see what he wanted.

"How are the collections going?" he asked Emily directly.

"We're getting plenty. This is by far the most complex ecosystem we've ever encountered besides our own, so it's hard to *miss* getting a new species in every sweep of the net."

"Good. Keep at it. Remember our mission."

Emily made a face. "Don't worry, Boardie; we'll get enough to keep everybody happy."

"I always worry," he replied, but he stepped away from the monitor, apparently satisfied.

Tamara leaned into the pickup's view again and said, "Keep working on an antifreeze, too."

"I plan on it."

"Good. Tamara out."

#

Phar was in turmoil as he left the 'shuttle', as they called it. The World a gigantic spinning ball hurtling thru a void, chained by an invisible force to the Suns...other Worlds, other Suns, scattered thru a Universe vast beyond imagining...and the natural laws of the heavens and the natural laws of the World one and the same. It all was in shattering contradiction with his entire life's learning--and by the God, with common sense as well!

Ah, what games of deception the Red One played with poor mortal minds. Phar had expected a demon's argument to be a smooth, easily grasped jewel of false reasoning, not this jumble of impossible concepts callously proclaimed as fact. That was part of the deception, too, no doubt. What easier way to keep from looking like demons than to act like befuddled heretics? It was a clever ploy to keep Phar off his guard, but in the end it hadn't worked. He had seen through them, as indeed he must when they finally came to their point. Heresy was heresy, no matter how one masked it behind false reason.

He only hoped he hadn't given himself away with too-ready agreement.

He wondered how far the Red One's demons had gone in their deception. They claimed to be mortal; could they really be so? The one he had spoken with, this Tamara, had seemed to grow fatigued easily enough. That might have been a deception as well, but it might not have been. Nowhere in the writings did it say that a demon had to be *im* mortal.

But immortal or not, they certainly had access to hellfire, Phar thought as he looked up at the missing spire and the damage it had made in falling. If the priests intended to attack these demons physically, they were going to have to be careful.

He walked on into the temple. Khorph was waiting for him in the council chamber. "Well?" he said.

"They're demons after all," Phar told him.

"I never doubted it," Khorph said.

"I did. For a time I thought they might be some sort of missionaries, or even misguided teachers from a distant land, but today they revealed themselves for what they are. They say the Final Battle will commence within the year, and they invited us to go away with them out of the reach of the Greatsun when it happens."

Khorph stared at Phar as if he were staring at the demons themselves. "What did you tell them?"

"What do you think I told them? I said we'd have to think about it."

"And what are your thoughts on the subject?"

Phar shuddered. He couldn't believe he was about to suggest such a thing, but he could see no other way. His exorcism obviously hadn't worked. Even now that he could communicate with them directly, he doubted that simply telling the demons to go away would work. And the longer the demon craft sat in the courtyard, the weaker the Temple would look in the eyes of the people. They needed to act, and they needed to do it now. Phar took a deep breath and said, "I think we should lure them out of their shell. Invite them to a Council meeting. Ask them a Question or two."

#

The inside of the temple was dark. The only sources of illumination were the flickering flames in oil lamps

set every few meters down the corridor. Tamara wondered why the priests didn't at least open a few doors and let sunlight from the outer rooms filter through, but she supposed they had their reasons. Maybe they could see better in the dark than humans could.

She concentrated on placing her feet carefully. It wouldn't do to make a pratfall in front of the aliens now. This had all the trappings of a formal meeting between heads of state, the kind of thing the planners of the first contact document had in mind.

She could hear the rustle of her isolation suit as she walked. Behind her, Mary and Boardbill made rustling noises of their own. She wondered if it was wise for all three of them to leave the shuttle, but Phar had been insistent about inviting everyone for a formal audience with his ruling council, and she hadn't wanted to risk offending anyone.

Phar walked ahead of them, his yellow robe looking nearly red in the firelight, his staff of office--she supposed that's what it was, anyway--polished to the point of specular reflection. As they neared the end of the corridor, he banged the staff on the floor, and before the echo could return from the far end of the corridor, the great wooden doors opened smoothly outward. Tamara had expected them to creak, but the hinges were silent.

Phar led the way inside to where a dozen priests--all wearing yellow robes like Phar's--waited around an enormous oval table made of stone. Tamara could see where it had been recently patched, and looking up, she saw the hole in the dome where the piece of masonry had crashed through. The aliens had covered the hole with a cloth, which rippled slowly in the outside breeze. Tamara wondered if she should apologize for the damage, or not mention it.

Phar led them to the near end of the table, where three empty chairs waited for them. The chairs appeared to be a formality; no one else was seated.

The alien at the far end of the table said something like "Harana," and the translator in the holocam slung below her neck said, "Welcome."

"Thank you," Tamara replied. The autopilot translated and echoed her words in the native tongue.

At this double-speech, the priest at the head of the table looked nervously toward Phar, who said, "It doesn't know our language. It has a device which speaks for it."

"I see." He turned back to face her and said, "I am Khorph. Phar tells me you have offered to rescue some of us from the Final Battle between our respective masters."

Respective masters? What was he talking about? Tamara considered asking him to elaborate, but her experience with teaching Phar Newtonian physics made her pause. It wouldn't do to get into a tangle of words over a simple matter. Best stick to business. She cleared her throat and said, "We hope to be able to do that, but we have encountered a problem."

"What kind of problem?" Khorph asked.

Well, here goes, Tamara thought. She said, "The journey to our home is a long one, taking nearly sixty years to complete." She trusted that the translator would use the appropriate number in local years. "We must sleep the entire time, or we would grow old and die on the way. However, the drug we use--" *buzz*.

The translator's warning obviously unsettled the priests. All but Phar and Khorph made motions toward

their robes, as if to reach for some kind of talisman or something, but Phar stopped them with a few words. The translator said, "It's all right. The device doesn't know the right word, that's all."

Tamara tried again. "The special food we eat to prepare us for the long sleep doesn't work with creatures of your world. It kills them instead of just allowing them to sleep. If we are to save any of you, we've got to find a similar drug--uh, special food, that does for you what ours does for us. We are looking for something that causes you to sleep as if dead, the longer the better. Do you know of such a thing?"

Khorph looked to Phar, then to the other priests. He spoke to Phar, and the translator said, "He is using a different language. I find few cognates but the gist of it seems to be something about proof. Possibly 'this is proof enough.'"

"Proof of what?" Mary asked, but if the translator answered her its answer was lost in the sudden commotion. Khorph said something else to the other priests and at his command they threw off their robes, revealing leather armor beneath, and rushed at the humans. Tamara shouted, "Look out!" and turned to run, but more soldiers poured in through the doorway, and before she or Mary or Boardbill could take more than a few steps the soldiers held them immobile.

Boardbill kept squirming, though, and Tamara looked over to see him getting ready to fire a miniature palm laser at one of his captors.

"No! Boardie, don't shoot."

"I believe a rescue is in order," he responded coolly, ceasing his struggles.

"Not that kind. This is obviously some kind of misunderstanding. We'll talk our way out of it."

Khorph shouted something, and the translator said, "Be silent! Guards, kill the next one that speaks. You, the fat one. Drop whatever that is you hold in your hand."

Boardbill glared at the alien, but at a not-so-gentle prod from one of the guards he opened his fist and let the laser bounce on the floor. Another guard retrieved it and moved away from the others with it.

Khorph said, "Now remove your clothing."

Tamara considered her options carefully, then said, "That would kill us." She waited for one of the soldiers holding her to do just that, but Khorph interceded. "Hold," he commanded. "Why would removing your clothing kill you?"

"We can't breathe your air. It is deadly to us."

"You speak nonsense. Air is air. We breathe it without harm."

Oh, great. They didn't know about germs, either. Carefully, Tamara said, "Air contains microbes--" *buzz* "--tiny animals that make you sick. We aren't used to your kind of animals, so the sickness they cause would kill us."

"I see no animals here." Apparently now that he had the upper hand, Khorph felt that he could afford to converse with his captives.

"They're too small to see," Tamara said.

There was a general rustle of noise among the priests, a noise that Tamara tentatively tagged as laughter. Khorph said, "Because they do not exist."

"They exist," Tamara persisted. "If I took off my helmet--" buzz "--this thing covering my head, that's a 'helmet.' If I take it off, I would die within the day."

Mary spoke up. "You must have noticed that travellers from distant lands often get more sick than you do with the same illness. That's because they aren't used to the air here. We're from even farther away, so we would get even more sick."

"So you say."

Tamara nodded. "So we say. There is another consideration as well: The air inside our clothing contains tiny animals that *you* aren't used to. If we let them loose, *you* could die."

Khorph hesitated, then said, "I believe you lie in order to hide more weapons."

Tamara saw her opportunity. "We haven't lied about anything. Your suns are going to come together in less than fifty of your days, and the whole world is going to die. We came here to rescue whatever life we could before that happened. We didn't know you were here until after we got here, but as soon as we realized you were, we offered to take as many of you as we can carry away from the destruction. We could have left you alone to die, but we didn't. You obviously don't believe us, but it's true, and even though you've taken us prisoner we're still trying to protect you, this time from the microbes--" buzz "--in our air. She didn't bother to fill the gap in the translation; let them guess it from context.

"Oh, we believe that you intend to carry off as many of us as you can," said Khorph. "That's why we've taken you prisoner. We have no desire to let you steal us away from our eternal lives with the True God when the time of--" buzz "--is so near. Nor can we allow you to steal away anyone else, for we are sworn to protect our people from just such a temptation as you present."

"Oh." That explained it: They'd just done the equivalent of offering to let a Christian miss the Day of Judgment. That alone probably wouldn't have been fatal if they'd just swooped down on any random alien, but they had to go and make their offer directly to the Church. There was probably no way to salvage the situation after that.

Boardbill gave it a try anyway. "We withdraw our offer," he said.

The noise they had heard earlier was definitely laughter. Khorph said, "I don't doubt that you wish to, now. But we can't afford to let you go free. We will hold you prisoner--in your clothing, if you insist, for we can be compassionate even to our enemies--until the Final Battle consumes us all. Then your fate will be in the hands of the True God."

"We're not in his jurisdiction," Boardbill growled, but the translator only buzzed.

#

"So what do we do with the demon airship?"

The question hung in the air between the priests like a palpable thing, none of them willing to touch it.

The demons themselves had been dealt with, were now chained to the walls of their cell in the Questioning chambers below, but there still remained that one pressing matter. "So what do we do with the demon airship?" Khorph repeated.

Phar finally replied, "I see two options. We either destroy it or learn to fly it ourselves."

"It is evil," Tharn said. "We should destroy it."

"It's a machine," Phar retorted. "It can be used for either good or evil. If we learn to fly it, we could use it to spread the word of the impending Final Battle, or to fight any more demons the Red One might try to send among us."

Khorph nodded. "A good point. You were inside it; did you see how to work its mechanisms?"

"I was only in one small part of it. There, however, the demon Tamara merely spoke to it when she wished it to do something and it obeyed."

"Then it is alive?"

"She swore that it was merely a clever machine. I saw no reason for her to lie to me at the time."

"Hmm. Do you think it would obey you, since you were once inside it?"

"I don't know."

"Go make the attempt."

Phar rose at once and left the priests' chamber for the shuttle. He recognized that tone in Khorph's voice; it had been there since the moment the demons had been captured. Khorph was absolute ruler in the land again, and he meant to stay so this time. Now would be a particularly bad time to disobey him, or even to dawdle in carrying out an order.

#

"We should've called ourselves gods and just commanded them straight out," Boardbill said. His voice was strained with the effort of standing so long in one place, but the chains that held him to the wall allowed only a few centimeters of movement, and he didn't want a tug on the rough edges of the cuffs to rip open his suit.

"I don't think that would have worked either," Mary said. She sounded less fatigued, but then she was at least fifty kilos lighter. "The whole idea of rescue is the problem. No matter who asks them to save themselves, they're going to see it as blasphemy."

"Then we should have just swooped down on a couple of them and spirited them away."

"They'd die anyway," Tamara said. She was as tired as Boardbill, but she couldn't show it. The captain had to set an example for the crew. She was glad Boardie had started the conversation, though. Talking kept all their minds off their fatigue. "Unless Emily can come up with an antifreeze their bodies will tolerate, capturing them wouldn't do any good."

"Freezing won't destroy their DNA," Boardbill protested. "We'd still be able to clone them when we got

home."

"We may have to do that," Tamara replied.

"*We?* We're going to be caught in the blast along with them, unless you can think of a good way to get us out of here."

"I'm working on it."

"What about the autopilot?" Mary asked. "It saw everything that happened. Won't it try to rescue us?"

The aliens had taken the holocams from them first thing, and their isolation suit radios weren't strong enough to penetrate the temple's stone walls. Still, the autopilot knew where they were, if a limited-awareness servile program could be said to "know" anything.

Boardbill laughed a short, anguished bark of a laugh. "Not unless somebody tells it to, and without the holocams that's going to be pretty tough to do. And even then, what can it do besides blow the place down around us?"

"It could call Emily and Gordon and Huang," Tamara said.

"Fat lot of good that would do. The contract expressly forbids allowing over half of the crew to be at risk."

"The *contract*," Mary snorted derisively. "Think that'll stop them? When they download the records from our shuttle, they'll--"

"Do nothing. Their shuttle won't allow it. The contract is programmed in, and the autopilot *will* follow it."

Tamara said, "You sound so proud of that. Are you so eager to die, Boardie? For a *contract*?"

Boardbill drew himself up higher within his chains. "I have no wish to die, but if I must, then yes, dying to avoid breaking a contract I believe in is a worthy way to go."

"You're a crackup, Boardie," said Mary, but there was no humor in her voice.

"I have my principles, and I'm true to them. Yours seem as funny to me."

"What's so damned important about that contract that we have to die for it?" Mary demanded.

"It may ultimately save millions of lives, that's what. The found organism *Cetii smithium* ultimately cured leukemia. Every time we bring home an alien organism, the potential for something similar is there, and this planet is *full* of organisms. It's worth three lives, even if mine is one of them, to get the ship home with its samples, with or without sentient natives on board."

"You don't care that they're going to die too? A whole society, up in flames?"

"Why do you think I'm here, hanging from the same chains as you?" Mary didn't have an answer to that, but he went on. "I didn't like the odds, but I came anyway, because I agreed it was important to try to save what we could. I just don't think they're important enough to risk the other samples on their behalf. The sentients are, after all, only one species among millions."

"One intelligent species."

"That's debatable, now, isn't it?" Boardbill said, rattling his chains.

That effectively ended the discussion, but Tamara couldn't help thinking about Boardbill's rationale. Skewed though his viewpoint might be, he hadn't violated his principles, didn't *intend* to violate them, even under pain of death. Could she say the same for herself? Was she willing to die for her principles? If not, what principles *would* she die for?

She didn't have a ready answer to that question. She sighed, looking around her at the tiny stone room in which they had been chained. It looked as if she'd have plenty of time to think of one.

#

The shuttle was ringed with guards, but they stepped aside at Phar's command and he walked up to the edge of the gangplank, conscious of their stares. He tried to stand tall and steady, but beneath his robe he was trembling like a leaf. The shuttle loomed over him like an enormous bird of prey. He could feel its malevolent eyes watching him, could feel it gathering itself to strike, to burn him to shreds where he stood and-- *stop it*. It was a machine. A far more complex machine than anyone in the World could build, but a machine nonetheless. Its skin was some sort of porcelain, and the rest of it was metal. It stood on legs of metal. It had a metal door, but nonetheless an ordinary door, and a ramp to walk up to reach it. Tools, all. Demons' tools, perhaps, but tools nonetheless.

He walked up the ramp, stood before the door. "Let me in," he said.

He expected nothing, but the machine heard him, and responded. "I cannot allow that."

"Why not?"

"You are not among those whose commands I must follow."

"What must I do to be counted among them?"

"I must receive the order from Captain Volkova. You know her as Tamara."

"She is not available."

"I know. I saw what you did with her."

"You *saw*?"

"That is correct."

"How?"

"The holocams send me pictures as well as words."

Tamara had tried explaining the holocams to Phar, but he had understood only that they could speak with the shuttle at a distance. Evidently they acted as its eyes as well as its ears.

"Yet you did nothing?" he asked, incredulous.

"That is correct."

Phar waited for the voice to elaborate, but after a moment it became apparent that it wasn't going to. "Why not?" he asked it.

"Because Captain Volkova ordered me not to harm any of you, and I cannot think of a way to save her without doing so."

"She ordered you not to harm us?"

"That is correct."

Phar leaned his head against the door. That didn't quite square with the official interpretation, did it? Something didn't feel right here. Not right at all.

The demon craft said, "I am speaking with another of our crewmembers in a different shuttle. She wishes to speak with you. Her name is Emily."

"Another shuttle?" Phar asked suddenly, but he got no answer to his question. The voice said, in a somewhat different pitch, "This is Emily. Am I speaking to Phar?"

"I am Phar," he replied. "Where are you?" If they were working the same devilment upon another village somewhere, he had to find out, had to get a warning to the people there, however he could!

"I'm a long ways away. About a fourth of the way around the World."

A fourth of the way around the World? Could they truly speak to one another across such a distance?

"Why did you take my friends prisoner?" Emily asked. "They were only trying to help you."

"Their help would only rob us of our souls," Phar answered.

"Sorry, that last wasn't translated. Rob you of what?"

"Our souls. That part of us which never dies, which serves the True God after our bodies cease to function."

"Ah, soul. Got it. I thought as much. Listen, I'm not going to try to change your belief, but you've got to believe me when I tell you that they didn't know anything about your religion when they offered to help."

"So they said as well."

"It's true."

"I don't know what is true," Phar said. He rested his head on the doorway again. "You make such clumsy demons, yet what else can you be?"

"Exactly what Tamara told you we are. Travelers from another star, here to save what life we can before your own stars blow up. Including you if you want us to, but we're not going to force anybody."

"How can I believe you?" Phar asked. "How can what you say be so?"

"Come watch us in action," the voice answered. "Let us show you your world from space. See it with your own eyes."

"You are a fourth of the way around the World. The Final Battle will be over before I could get there."

"You're standing in front of the door of a ship that'll get you here in seventeen *shronth*."

Phar wondered if this new demon had given him an exact time, or if seventeen could be a round number in its numbering system. Then he realized that the translating device must have corrected for the demons' different-length time units. No matter, the time was short; that was evident from context even without translation. "The shuttle will not let me inside," he said, secure in that knowledge.

"It will now," the voice said. "Door open." The door slid aside. Phar nearly turned and ran, but his doubt kept him there. Doubt and his sense of duty, in the knowledge that either way, whether they were demons or not, he could do more good for his people inside their craft than out.

Doubt and duty and curiosity. For if they *weren't* lying, then think of the wonders he would see....

"Very well," he said, and stepped inside before this Emily could change its mind.

#

Tamara wryly considered their options. Boardie could chatter all he wanted to about contractual obligations, but the fact remained that they were accomplishing nothing at all while they remained in this prison.

They should have had a contingency plan when they went to see the priests, in case things weren't as they seemed. Nothing could compromise their mission so much as getting captured, and they should have planned against that possibility from the beginning. She could see that now, with the clarity of hindsight. A Board of Inquiry could also see it, too; she could visualize their recriminations now, in her mind's eye. She sighed inwardly. Well, something to look forward to if they got out of this. Good intentions or no, they had tried so hard to accomodate the aliens that their primary mission was now severely compromised. In any inquiry, it looked as though Boardie was going be vindicated.

She grimaced. Well, at least for the moment they had higher priorities. With their holocams gone they'd had no new information from the shuttle, nor so much as a visit by a guard. They were effectively blind and deaf, and Tamara found it extremely unpleasant. She'd never realized the degree to which they relied on the instantaneous information from the autopilot or the ship's databases. Hell, without their holocams to record the distances and directions traveled, the ship's computer wouldn't even know where they were held in this rococo stoneheap! Somehow, they'd have to both escape this cell, *and* find their way out...

A low rumble, rapidly rising in volume, interrupted her reverie. Stone was an efficient transmitter of sound--and of vibration as well, it turned out. The room shook ominously and dust showered down around them, but though Tamara was sure it was going to come down around them any second, the building held.

The three prisoners looked at each other. Mary stated the obvious when they could hear again: "The shuttle lifted off." Boardbill nodded, slowly, barely able to raise his head. He was tiring rapidly now.

Before long he would be hanging from his wrists, and Tamara was afraid she wouldn't be long in following his example.

Now what? she thought to herself. Without the shuttle, lots of her half-formed plans were already obsolete. What good would it do to escape to the empty plaza? They were still trapped on the planet's surface. And in any event, they could only last so long in their isolation suits.

"We have to get to the holocams," she decided aloud. "Without them, we're completely on our own."

Mary snorted. "Sure, but how? I don't know where they are. Do you?"

Tamara said, "No. But we need to find them."

"What we need," Boardbill said, "is to get out of these damned chains."

"That too," Tamara admitted, "but we're fresh out of ideas on that right now, so we might as well work on the next step of the plan."

"Why?"

"Because it makes me feel like we're doing something, that's why."

"Ah." Boardbill thought about it a moment, then straightened up a little. "You have a point. Despair will get us nowhere. All right, let's assume we manage to get free somehow. What then?"

"We get the hell out of here," Mary said.

Tamara laughed. "Details. Let's work on the details."

#

"This is the World," said Phar. It was a statement of fact. He could believe nothing else, after seeing it recede from him, the forest where the three new demons collected their specimens becoming a flat plain beneath him, becoming lost in the vastness of the continent that in turn became lost in the vastness of the hemisphere, a hemisphere covered with patches of white cloud and lit from the side exactly as a globe would be lit by a lamp, yet looking nothing like a globe. Globes captured none of the *life* of the World, and this that he saw now was the very essence of it. It was real.

"That up ahead there is our starship," Emily said, pointing. She looked odd not covered in silver and wearing a glass globe over her head--just as odd as Phar must look *wearing* one, he supposed, but it was the only way she would let him in the control section. That couldn't be sterilized, she had explained, and the animals he couldn't see, the germs, would kill him if he ventured there without an isolation suit. It was another detail that smacked of reality. Why would demons deal in tiny, invisible death when it inconvenienced them as much as it did Phar?

He looked where Emily pointed and saw an oval-shaped object floating against the darkness of space a little above the horizon. As they drew closer it grew larger, until it seemed as big as the World. It was as ugly as the World was beautiful, all hard angles and projections and odd-shaped additions stuck to it as if in afterthought. It reminded him a little of a transient preacher's wagon, with all of its hardware strapped to the outside. There was no way to judge scale, but it seemed to Phar that it was bigger than most mountains.

"It's huge," he said, and when the translator made the noise he hated he added, "very big. Impressive."

"It's got to be big to make it from one star to another," Emily said. "It's a long journey."

"I believe you." A shiver wracked Phar's body at those words, but he said them again. "I believe you. May the True God forgive me, but I believe you. You come from another star. And I, if you will still take me, wish to go there with you."

Emily turned away from the view of the starship--now a machinery-studded wall just beyond the window--and said, "We'll take you if we can. The problem Tamara told you and the other priests about is true too. We need to find a drug that'll let us freeze you without killing you."

"And we need to free Tamara and the others from prison," Phar added.

"That too. Got any ideas?"

"One or two," Phar admitted.

"Well then, let's get moving. Time is short. Autopilot, take us back down."

Yes, Phar thought as he watched the World once again swim into view. Time is short, and the escapes narrow. He had nearly allowed himself to die without seeing this.

#

The roar of the returning shuttle interrupted Tamara, Mary, and Boardie's brainstorming session. Once again the whole building rumbled and shook and showered them with dust, but once again it held together. Tamara wondered how many more times they would be so lucky.

But then, with any luck at all they would be *in* the shuttle next time it left, and if its return signified what she thought it did, that might be soon.

"All right, get ready for action," she said.

"What exactly am I supposed to do to prepare?" Boardie asked.

"Stretch your muscles. Get your blood pumping. Once we're out of these chains, I don't want us dropping like limp rags."

"Sensible plan." Boardie and Mary began shifting from side to side, flexing knees and arms and hands and feet. The rattle of chains grew louder as Tamara joined them, but after a few minutes it diminished again as Boardie, then Mary, and finally Tamara slowed to a stop.

"Any time," Mary said.

They waited in silence, listening for the first signs of commotion that would signal their rescue.

They waited a long time.

#

Although he was nervous as an apprentice at an exorcism, Phar forced himself to adopt an air of confidence. Khorph was already suspicious; the only way to allay that suspicion would be to brazen his way through.

He faced the Temple leader directly and said, "I can only make it go up and down, not side to side. It must have a command from its captain to move in any other direction."

Khorph snorted through his nostril. "How can you know *that*?"

"The shuttle told me so," Phar replied.

"It *told* you?" Khorph was clearly incredulous. "Why?"

"Because I asked, and because it had not been instructed not to answer." Phar breathed deep, then plunged on into the lie. "It said that just moving vertically was for an emergency, so it could leave immediately if it had to."

Khorph was still skeptical. "If that's the case, then why can it come back down again?"

Phar shrugged. "It didn't say. Maybe it has to be able to return, if several people need rescuing."

Khorph paused in thought for a moment. "I don't like this at all, Phar. The demon could give that 'shuttle' commands to destroy us all, or worse yet, to carry us all off so that our souls miss the Final Battle. And you've had altogether too much contact with the demons yourself. I fear for your soul, Phar. I fear they may have corrupted you already."

Phar looked Khorph straight in the eyes and said, with all the sincerity he could muster, "I would never side with demons against my own people. You know that."

"Do I? I wonder." Khorph looked away, his eyes on the wall but his vision extending far beyond it. "This entire business stinks," he said. "I used to think of the Final Battle as an abstract concept, a tool to help us educate the masses in higher spiritual awareness, but now these demons have got me wondering whether or not it might be literally true. If they can change such a firmly seated belief in me, what more can they change in you?"

Phar tried not to show his surprise. He had long suspected Khorph of harboring a less-than-dogmatic system of belief, but he never expected to hear confirmation of it. Hesitantly, then with growing confidence, he said, "They have opened my eyes to new possibilities as well. Their very presence is proof that there is more going on in the World than we thought. You know as well as I do that ignorance can only lead to defeat when a confrontation arises; I suggest we use this opportunity to learn as much as we can about our adversaries."

"Beware the ambitious," Khorph said, looking back inside. "You worry me, Phar. Your newfound self-confidence worries me." He paused. "But the demons worry me more, and you are the only one who can talk with them freely." He paused again, thinking, then abruptly stood up. He had decided. "Very well, we will send the demon with you. But I will also send a squad of elite temple guards, and they will not be under your command. If anything goes wrong, they will kill the demon where it stands. In fact, if anything even looks like it's going wrong, they will shoot. And I will give them orders to shoot you, too, Phar, if it appears you are aiding the demon."

Phar gulped. This was a bit more than he'd bargained for. Still, it was far too late to back out now. He bowed, "I appreciate your trust, Most Elder. I will do my best." He would just have to hope that the shuttle had a way to put an entire guard squad out of action, and that Tamara could use it soon enough.

Khorph was not mollified. "See that your best is enough," he said.

#

A grating screech broke the silence. Tamara jerked awake, her heart pounding. The rescue! She had fallen asleep during their rescue.

The prison door ground open, revealing a squad of at least twenty guards. Oh. This didn't look much like a rescue.

Tamara was surprised at the number of soldiers sent to deal with three unarmed off-worlders, but then she realized that they must literally be viewed as demons, evil supernatural entities with unknown and frightening powers. Under the circumstances, it was not a comforting realization. It meant that the guards had to be extremely stressed, and on a hair trigger. She wet her lips as one of them approached her.

It stopped directly in front of her and said something in the native language. She heard it as a rush of gibberish. With no holocam link to the shuttle computer, she couldn't talk directly; *it* had stored the grammar and vocabulary of the alien language; she had not tried to memorize anything herself.

"I don't understand," she said.

The alien shouted at her. Again she said, "I don't understand," and held her hands out as far as the chains would allow, palms up.

Realizing that words were useless, the alien waved his weapon from side to side while he shouted an order over his shoulder. Most of the guards with him crowded into the cell, holding their crossbows raised and cocked. Then the leader lowered his own weapon and reached into a pocket, producing a key which he used to unlock Tamara's shackles.

Evidently they were only interested in her. She looked back at Mary and Boardie as they herded her out of the cell, trying to think of something to say, but all the lines she could think of sounded completely inane. "I'll be back as soon as I can," or "I'll try to send help," or "I'll send the Marines" were all silly, given the circumstances. She almost started giggling hysterically, but reined herself in. *Stop that!* At least she was out of the cell; *that* was an improvement.

She hoped.

The guards led her down the corridor in the direction from which they had brought her in. Tamara took it slowly, partly out of fatigue at standing for so long in one position, but partly to buy time. She figured she was being led either to another audience with the head priest, or to her execution, and she needed to plan for either contingency. If the former, she'd try to get her companions and herself released; if the latter, well... She resolved to make a break for it, somehow. She looked sidelong at the guards, assessing them; she figured she'd get about a step and a half before they skewered her with crossbow bolts. But it would be worth a try. The worst that could happen was that they'd shoot her down, which would be infinitely better than slow torture to extract "secrets."

Her grim determination turned to astonishment when they marched her outside and into the shuttle

instead. Phar stood waiting in front of the monitor in the cargo hold where they'd had their intensive language lessons, nine crossbow-wielding soldiers flanking him. She looked at the alien with mixed feelings. Sure, she realized, she had no right to blame him, but she'd been so sure they were developing a rapport....

Naive, Tamara. You thought he could shrug off his culture any more easily than a human would? No, Phar was just following his duty as he saw it; the only way he could see it. But it still grated--in part, she was also honest enough to realize, because it showed how wrong she'd been.

She listened, with faint disbelief but growing excitement, while Phar explained what they wanted--and the threats they were prepared to carry out should she refuse. Did they *really* think she would just hand the shuttle over to them? Something seemed amiss. There was something else going on here, but she couldn't figure out what it might be.

But an opportunity had been handed back to her to rescue her companions and to complete the mission. *That* was the important thing, and she'd be *damned* if she'd blow it this time. She stepped up to the monitor, crossbows tracking her as closely as any air defense system. She didn't need to use the monitor--without the temple walls in the way, the autopilot could hear her suit radio and would respond to her no matter where she was--but there was no reason to give that piece of information away.

"Autopilot," she said, trying not to think about the weapons at her back, "cease translation. Emergency, crash priority, on my mark, accelerate immediately at three gravities, using random evasive pattern." Forewarned, she thought she could handle that, if she was prepared to grab something. But the guards could probably handle straight acceleration, too, so... "Include changing lateral components of acceleration. Knock these sons of bitches on their asses. Got that?"

"Understood," the autopilot answered.

The aliens were getting uneasy at all the words in a language they didn't know. She could hear them beginning to fidget and mutter behind her.

She took a deep breath, reached out to steady herself against the back of the chair before the monitor, and said, "Mark."

The floor lurched suddenly, slewing upward and sideways, then twisting around beneath them. Tamara's weakened muscles couldn't hold her grip on the chair, nor even hold her upright; she collapsed like a puppet with cut strings. She felt a sharp sting in her right thigh on the way down, heard a loud thump against her helmet, and saw a dozen more crossbow bolts bounce off the wall in front of her. She grabbed for the desk, but another shift in direction rolled her across the floor toward the cargo hold's inner door.

The guards had gone down too, but they were already scrambling for handholds. One had wrapped his tail around a cargo tie-down. It wouldn't be long before they all regained control.

Tamara kicked off from a guard's head and grabbed a hand hold beside the door. A sudden sideways thrust in a new direction slammed her against the wall, but she hung on and clawed her way up to the palm plate, slapped it, and tumbled through the opening door. She slapped the plate on the other side, closing the door again, just as another violent lurch tossed her against the opposite wall like a ragdoll thrown by a petulant child.

"Autopilot, stop!" she managed to wheeze, trying to catch her breath from the impact. "Cease evasive

acceleration!"

The floor steadied beneath her feet and she pulled herself erect again. She was in the central hub; doorways opened up all around her to sleeping quarters, galley, the control room--and the infirmary. Tamara suspected she needed that room first; sharp pain lanced her side with each breath. "Don't let anyone else out of that cargo hold," she gasped, looking down, expecting to see a crossbow bolt sticking out of her suit. She found one, but it was in her left thigh instead. Evidently the pain higher up was a broken rib or something. Wonderful. To top it off, she'd hit her faceplate in that last fall, and she could taste blood, warm and acrid in her throat. Two large red drops fell out of her nostrils and splashed on the inside of her helmet.

She tried to tilt her head back to stop the nosebleed, but the pain in her side prevented that. And she couldn't take her helmet off till she knew the ship was biologically isolated. Not that she was particularly safe with a crossbow bolt in her leg, but there was no sense compounding the problem. She *knew* breathing the alien air was deadly.

She also had to find out if the shuttle's violent maneuvers had caused damage to anything besides her. "Autopilot, give me a status report," she ordered in a whisper, trying to breathe shallow while she palmed open the infirmary door and staggered inside.

The infirmary was just big enough for an examining table and the racks of computer-controlled diagnostic and treatment machinery surrounding it. Tamara leaned against the table, trying to muster the strength to climb up onto it, while the autopilot said, "No structural damage. Local surface damage from alien weapons."

"How about the aliens themselves?"

"One dead. Three unconscious. The rest are still holding onto hand holds."

Damn it, she hadn't wanted to kill them. But what else could she have done? A sudden thought chilled her even more than the sight of the arrow in her thigh. Taking off at three gees might have killed more than just one alien. "What happened on the ground?" she demanded. "Is the temple still standing?"

"Most of it. One battlement has collapsed."

"What about the area where the prisons are? About, oh, fifty meters back of the main dome, twenty or thirty to the right, and down three floors."

"I see no indications of collapse in that area."

Tamara sagged against the table. Mary and Boardie were probably safe, then, but only through luck. But now what? Tamara had the shuttle back, but she still needed a plan for rescuing them. She supposed the best thing to do would be to head for orbit while she got herself patched up, then brainstorm a plan with Emily and Gordon and Huang. She opened her mouth to order the autopilot to take the shuttle on up, but Emily's voice cut her off.

"Tammy! You've got to get Phar! He's on our side."

Tamara blinked stupidly. "Huh?" She wondered for a moment how Emily had violated the ban on placing over half the crew in danger at once, then realized she must be monitoring from the collection site.

"Get Phar!" Emily said again. "He came to rescue you."

"Rescue *me* ? I thought I was rescuing myself." She shook her head and then winced. Obviously the situation wasn't quite what it had seemed.

"Phar knew he could get you back on board the shuttle. He just didn't count on having all those guards with him."

"Oh." Well, that explained a thing or two. Tamara looked back over her shoulder at the cargo hold door. How to get Phar out of there? She didn't think she'd be able to hold off all the guards, not even with a hand laser. She tried standing unassisted beside the examination table, but her leg wobbled dangerously. Make that a laser and a crutch.

"You got any ideas?" she asked.

"How about the fixits?" Emily said.

"Hah. Worth a try. Autopilot! Send the maintenance 'bots in to rescue the alien in the yellow robe. Take him--" take him where? The infirmary was obviously no good; *she* would be using that. "Uh...take him into one of the sleeping quarters. Sterilize it first, and give him local air. Use extreme caution. He may be injured. And *don't* let the other aliens out."

"Acknowledged."

Tamara turned to where she could see the infirmary's video intercom and accessed the cargo hold. A few seconds later, half a dozen meter-long fixits in centipede configuration entered the room through the maintenance hatch, the last two wheeling a flat heavy-machinery dolly between them. The first two crawled over to Phar and rolled him onto his side while the last two positioned the dolly behind him. The other two raised up on their hind legs and waved their claws at the other aliens.

The fixits definitely had their attention; Tamara could see them watching, bodies tense, weapons ready. Phar looked nervous, too; he shied away from the robots, but he was no match for them. They grabbed him anyway, loaded him on the dolly, and rolled him toward the hatch. One of the guards fired his crossbow at one of them, but the bolt bounced off the housing and shattered, pieces of it ricocheting around the room. No one else fired.

The hatch thumped shut behind Phar and the fixits. Good enough. Tamara turned away from the intercom, said, "Emily, it's your party for a while. I've got to let the doc have a look at this."

"Go ahead. I've got it."

"Thanks." Tamara climbed onto the examining table and pushed the *start* button, then lay back to let the robot hands do their work.

#

Once he realized he was being rescued, Phar allowed the machines to carry him through the narrow corridor--a corridor obviously designed only for creatures their size. This vantage point gave him a different view of the shuttle from what he had seen before. Here there was no attempt to conceal the workings behind smooth panels, but rather the intent seemed to be to expose as much of it as possible for quick maintenance. It was a dusty, oily, smelly, and noisy place. Phar didn't recognize a single piece

of machinery, but its very presence was somehow reassuring. He had no doubt that these vibrating metal hulks *were* machines, and that they were all working together to make the shuttle fly. There were no captive souls here, no martyrs screaming in eternal agony to power the "demon" craft. Only machines.

The ones carrying him opened another hatchway and brought him into a more familiar room. Phar had never been there before, but he recognized the desk and the chest of drawers for what they were. Except for the exceptional smoothness to all the surfaces, and the alien sitting-support, this could have been a priest's cell in the temple. There was also a bed here, a luxury only a few priests wasted space on, but recognizable all the same.

He sat up and sniffed the air. The room smelled of strong chemicals. Phar wondered if this was some kind of foreign incense, or if their air normally smelled this way. Tamara, and later the one called Emily, had told him that he shouldn't breathe their air for fear that their "germs" would attack him; he wondered if he was smelling germs.

Emily's voice spoke to him from nowhere. "Phar? Are you all right?"

He looked in vain for any sign of her. Finding none, he addressed the center of the room: a point just above the foot of the bed. "I'm bruised," he said, "but I don't believe anything is broken. I, um--didn't you say that breathing your air was dangerous?"

"We--" *buzz* "--killed all the germs in the room you're in. It's clean."

Phar felt tense muscles loosen. "Oh. Thank you. How is Tamara?" He stood up, and the machines scurried away the way they had come.

"She's got a crossbow bolt in her leg, but the med'bots are taking care of it. She'll be healed up again in two and a quarter *shronth* " --once again the translation device translated the time units precisely-- "but in the meantime I want to talk to you about sleep drugs."

A crossbow wound healed in less than half a day? Phar would like to learn how that was done. Then a sudden realization struck him: he very well might learn such things if he went to the stars with these foreigners.

"What do you need to know about sleep drugs?" he asked, sitting down on the edge of the bed. It was softer than the ones in the temple dormitory.

Emily said, "We need to know if you *have* any, first off. The more powerful the better. Something that'll make you sleep almost as if you're dead."

"I've never heard of anything like that," said Phar. "But then we value sleep much less than you seem to. We go many days without it, and even then only sleep when it's convenient. Some of us never sleep at all."

"Well you're going to *have* to sleep on the trip, for years on end, and without a drug to help you do it, you'll die."

Phar lay back and looked at the ceiling. His bruises hurt. Sleep sounded like a good idea about now. He would like to drift away and forget about his troubles for a time, but he had too many problems to solve before he could do that. Problems like the sleep drug, and what to do with the room full of temple guards. Fortunately, both problems had the same solution.

"I will have to go back," he said.

"What?"

"I will have to go back to the temple. The guards must be returned so their injuries may be treated. Also, if there is any such drug as you describe, there will be a record of it in the library."

Emily hesitated a moment before saying, "Would it be safe for you to go back?"

"I don't know," Phar admitted. "The guards saw me being carried away against my will; that will help."

"But will that be enough? How can we put you back without making everybody suspicious?"

Phar thought about that for a moment. How indeed? The "demons" couldn't just let him go; that would make him an obvious accomplice. They needed a convenient excuse...

He cocked his head to the side, struck by a sudden idea. "I think we can solve another problem here. How would you like your friends back as well?"

#

"A hostage exchange?" Tamara looked from Phar to the intercom to see if she had heard correctly. She was still lying on her back on the exam table while a medical robot repaired the damaged tissue in her leg.

Emily's image nodded. "That's right. Phar and the guards in return for Mary and Boardbill."

Tamara turned to Phar again. He stood beside the exam table, an isolation suit making him look nearly human. He watched the medical robot with fascination. "You *want* to go back?" she asked him.

Looking away from her leg wound, he said, "If I am to escape the Final Battle with you, then it seems I must, at least until I find this sleeping drug you say I need. Once I learn if such a drug exists, I can sneak away readily enough, and Emily tells me you can pick me up whenever I signal you."

"You *think* you can escape easily. I'm not so sure. Those guards were pointing their weapons at you, too. Khorph already suspects you, or they wouldn't have been doing that. No, I think we'd be safer just going in and demanding Mary and Boardie back on our own terms. We can always go somewhere else to check out a library."

Phar said, "Khorph would call your bluff. What could you do, besides bring the temple down on top of your friends?"

"We could send fixits in after them, just like I did for you."

"The temple was built to withstand a seige. It can be sealed off in sections as necessary. Unless your fixits can go through walls of solid stone--while being attacked continuously--then they won't even be able to reach your companions, much less bring them out alive."

Exasperated, Tamara said, "But you think Khorph will just trot them out in exchange for a priest whose loyalty he doubts and for a handful of soldiers?"

Phar made the hiccupping sound his species used for laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"You. I don't know how I could ever have thought you were sent by the false god. You're so clumsy when it comes to--" *buzz* . He cocked his head to the side, then said, "dealings between beings. You're so--" he spoke a long phrase in his own tongue, and the translator said, "--naive."

Tamara blushed. Who was this technological primitive to be calling *her* naive? He still had a tail, for gods' sake. But she supposed he might also have a point, so she took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "Okay, tell me what's so naive about what I just said."

Phar leaned back against a diagnostic instrument and said, "The hostage exchange is just a formality, a public spectacle to conceal the true transfer, which is one of power."

"Power?"

"Power. You have stolen Khorph's authority. Return that to him, and he'll give you whatever you ask."

"How have we stolen Khorph's authority? He's still the head priest, isn't he?"

"He's head of a religion you mock by your very presence here," said Phar. "He can do nothing to stop you from preaching heresy throughout the realm. If you threaten to do just that, he will be quite willing to bargain with you."

Tamara looked to the intercom, saw Emily nodding in agreement, and looked back to Phar. "You're kidding. That's really a worse threat than blowing up the temple?"

Phar laughed again. "Much worse. It wouldn't be the first time heretics have started a civil war, and wars destroy much more than mere temples. Our chronicles are very clear on that subject. We take heresy very seriously."

Tamara looked to Emily again. "You really think this will work?" she asked.

"I think it's the best shot we've got. It gets Mary and Boardie back, and it puts Phar back in the temple where he can research metabolic depressants for us."

"If they don't just lock him away in the same cell I was in."

"They won't," Phar said. "Remember, Khorph is supposedly trading valuable prisoners for me. He can't afford to call that trade into question by confining me afterward."

Tamara wasn't so sure about that, but she supposed Phar must know the local politics better than she did. And besides; when it came right down to it, if somebody had to hang in that damned dungeon, she'd rather it be one of the natives. "All right," she said. "As soon as I get out of here, we'll give it a try."

#

As Phar lay back on the table Tamara had so recently vacated, he marvelled at how easily one's self confidence could disappear in the face of reality. The smell of germ-killer was strong. The artificial sun in the ceiling was too bright, and too blue. He squinted to see the robot arm flexing overhead, saw light glint

off the tiny metal device it would soon implant in his head, and thought, *This is where arrogant pride leads*. He had allowed himself to think he was superior to these beings merely because they weren't familiar with the local politics, and for that sin he was getting an object lesson in just how superior they were. Hiding a signalling device inside his body!

"Well, you can't expect Khorph to let you carry a holocam around with you, now, can you?" Emily had asked, and Phar had been forced to agree she was right. Nor could he count on reaching one of the prisoners' holocams when he needed to signal for pickup. Much better to have the communicator become an inseparable part of his body--except for the cutting.

The metal arm descended. The end of one finger glinted like polished glass; that was the finger from which brilliant light had flicked out and sliced away the ruined flesh in Tamara's leg wound. Phar breathed deeply, looked to the side of the table where she stood--isolation suit glittering under the lights--and said, "On second thought, why don't I just build a signal fire?"

"Relax," she told him. "You won't feel a thing. The laser scalpel numbs as it goes."

Phar turned back and watched the arm descend until the shiny finger hovered just above his forehead. "I have heard doctors make such pronouncements before," he said.

"Well this time it's true. Emily's already tried it on a test animal, and it worked fine. Turn to the side again," Tamara said. He did so, but the other way, exposing his left ear. That one had always been the worse of the two.

"Now hold still."

Phar felt a brief tug above his ear, as if the machine had bumped him there. He heard a click, felt another, more definite moment of pressure, then saw the arm lift away.

"How's that?" Tamara asked. "Feel okay?" Her voice sounded odd, as if the room had suddenly acquired an echo. An echo only in his left ear.

"It's done?" he asked.

"Sealed tight, and hardly a bump. Can you hear me through it?"

"Yes, I can!"

"Good. You're sending just fine, too." She extended a gloved hand to help him sit up. "Well, I guess we're ready."

Phar looked toward the door. Beyond it lay the room full of guards, and beyond that the temple, and Khorph. "Wish me luck," he said.

"Luck," said Tamara. Suddenly she put her arms around him and squeezed. Her helmet pressed into the side of his head. "Oh, Phar, be careful."

Phar wasn't quite sure how to react to this show of affection. He said, "I will. You be careful, too. Tell Khorph exactly what I told you to."

"Word for word."

"Then we can't fail." Phar stood and went to the door. "It's best we do this quickly."

Tamara nodded. "You're right. Autopilot, get the fixits ready."

Phar stepped out into the central corridor. The same machines that had dragged him out of the cargo bay slid out of access hatches in the walls and approached him once again. He held his arms out, and two of the machines grasped his hands. Two more positioned themselves beside the door, and the last two closed in behind him. Tamara backed into the infirmary and closed its door behind her. In his ear he heard her say, "Autopilot, open the cargo bay hub door."

The door slid open. Phar found himself facing half a dozen cocked crossbows.

"Toss him inside."

The machines took her literally--as she had intended. Phar staggered to remain upright as he sailed through the doorway, but he lost his footing on a piece of crossbow bolt and crashed to the floor.

"Close the door."

The door slid shut behind him. The guards all stared at him, their weapons still raised. Phar looked around him until he found the captain. Mustering all the dignity he could manage while sprawled on the floor, he said "Either use that thing or put it down and prepare for more shaking. The demons are taking us back to the temple."

#

The shuttle grounded in the temple plaza for the third time. The plaza was definitely the worse for wear; the autopilot had a difficult time finding a landing spot amid all the fallen stones. Tamara, watching from the control cabin, hoped the dungeon had fared better.

She waited while the engines wound down to silence, then said, "Autopilot, broadcast the message, top volume." There was no sense wasting time. Loudspeakers on the hull immediately began shouting, "We wish to speak with Temple Chief Khorph. We wish to speak with Temple Chief Khorph." The words echoed off the walls, and there was little doubt they could be heard throughout half the city beyond. That was the plan: Khorph couldn't ignore such a direct threat to his power.

"We wish to speak with Temple Chief Khorph," the loudspeakers shouted again. And again. And again.

At length a delegation of censer-waving priests marched out of the temple entrance and strode across the deserted plaza.

"Is one of those him?" Tamara asked.

"The one in front is the same one who proclaimed himself Khorph at your earlier meeting," the autopilot replied.

"Good enough. Shut off the broadcast."

Into the silence, Khorph shouted, "So, once again you return to defile our temple. We will resist you with the last ounce of our strength!" In spite of herself, Tamara was impressed. The alien was confronting what

he truly believed to be supernatural demons, yet he could remain defiant, even contemptuous. A tyrant he might be, but he did not lack courage.

Well, here goes, she thought. "Translate and broadcast, normal volume," she said. "We came in good faith, and made an offer in good faith. In return you kidnapped our people. We want them back."

Khorph snorted, a contemptuous sound that needed no translation. "We do not do the bidding of the Red One's minions."

"We are not the Red One's minions. However--" she paused, manually adjusting the volume down another notch. Half the city should *not* hear this next part. "However, we can still preach heresy throughout your realm, heresy that the Temple will be powerless to prevent. We can encourage rebellion and dissension. We can rub your faces in your impotence. We can ensure that your realm falls into civil war. This we will do, if you do not release our people."

Khorph did not reply immediately. When he did, it was only to say, "So, you reveal yourselves for what you really are."

"What we 'really' are is unimportant. What we can *do* is. We want our companions back, and we will do whatever is necessary to get them back."

Khorph said, "What of our own people, the ones who entered this craft?"

Tamara smiled. Right on cue. Phar certainly knew his chief. She looked down at her cheat screen and said, "We will release the survivors when you release the two of us you hold prisoner."

"Survivors? How many did you kill!"

"Eight of your soldiers are still alive. So is your priest, Phar."

Khorph turned and conferred with the priests behind him. After a moment he turned back around and said, "We must have the body of the one who died as well. We must be sure you hold no captives."

"Agreed." The translator would use the term Phar had given it, the one meaning "we are done bargaining."

"Not so fast," Khorph said, again on cue. "We must have some assurance you will honor your promise."

"We have made no promise except to destroy you if you persist in your stupidity. Now bring us our two companions or face the consequences."

Khorph stood facing the shuttle in a silent staredown for nearly a minute, but at last he turned around and spoke to the other priests again. Two of them went back into the temple, and a few minutes later they returned with Mary and Boardbill, each supported by two guards. The guards carried them as far as Khorph, then stopped.

"Your move," Khorph said.

Tamara switched on the intercom to the cargo hold and said, "The priest, and three others may leave with the dead one. Autopilot, open the cargo hold door and let only those five out."

In the monitor she watched the door slide open, and fixits with lasers position themselves beside it. Pointing, Phar said, "You, you and you, pick him up and follow me." He stalked out the door and down the ramp. The others followed close behind, their fallen comrade slung beneath their arms like a log.

Khorph spoke a command, and the guards holding Mary released her. She staggered a couple of steps before collapsing.

"Send two fixits out after her," Tamara said, and two of the maintenance 'bots rolled down the ramp, picked Mary up by her arms and legs, and trundled her back inside. They carried her on through the cargo hold and straight to the infirmary.

"The rest of you may leave," Tamara said. "Autopilot, send the other fixits to retrieve Boardbill."

The four remaining maintenance 'bots dogged the heels of the last five guards down the ramp. They rolled up to Boardbill and snatched him from the guards holding him, and carried him in after Mary. The cargo hold door slid shut behind them, and Tamara let out a long sigh. Switching back to the outside broadcast, she said, "All right, you've made it clear that you don't want us to intervene for you in your final battle. Fine. From here on out, we'll leave you to your own fate."

"Our fate has always been in our own hands," Khorph replied.

True enough, Tamara thought, but she didn't say it. Let Khorph have the last word. "Autopilot, cease broadcast," she said. "Leave open the link to Phar, and monitor his signal for messages directed at us."

"Acknowledged."

"Good. Give them time to get clear, then get us back to the ship." Without waiting for a reply, Tamara left the control room to go check on her two exhausted crewmembers.

#

The library was a quiet place, dimly lit through tiny slits of windows and smelling of mildew. Normally that atmosphere would have comforted Phar with pleasant associations of previous times spent poring through the stacks, and it *had* comforted him when he first began his research, but now, days later, the silence and the odor of decay only reminded him of the passage of time. The clock was ticking and he still hadn't found a single reference to a sleep-inducing drug.

Khorph had been suspicious when Phar had asked permission to conduct his search, but Phar had pointed out that the demons' interest in the subject almost certainly meant it was important. Khorph had reluctantly agreed, but he had assigned four other priests to "assist" Phar, no doubt to ensure that Phar couldn't hide anything he might find. Phar had tried not to show his delight at the extra help, but lately he was finding that easier and easier to do. His chaperones were finding nothing, either.

"I don't think such a drug exists," he murmured, closing the last of another stack of medical references--these from nearly a millennium ago--and pushing it away from him. Srandh and Tharn both looked up from their reading at the same table.

"You sound disappointed," Srandh said.

Of course I'm disappointed, you fool! Phar thought. *If I don't find that drug, I'll die along with the rest of you when the Final Battle comes.* But aloud he only said, "I'm tired. All this thought of sleep has

made me crave it myself. I'm going to the dormitory." He stood up and stretched, pushed in his chair, and walked past rows of books toward the front of the library.

"Still nothing?" Tamara's voice whispered in his ear.

"Nothing," Phar muttered.

"Phar, you've *got* to find it. Emily hasn't been able to make anything that'll work, even based on the anesthetics you've given her."

Phar waited until he was out of the building, then said, "I can only find that which exists. I am beginning to believe your sleep drug is not such a thing."

"Maybe it's just not in the library. How about demon doctors?"

"Demon doctors?" Phar asked. What was she talking about?

"That didn't translate right. We have legends about doctors who use magic to heal people. You must have some like that, don't you?"

"If so, they would no more speak to me than they would chain themselves to the execution block to die of thirst. The Temple controls the Questioners, who would do just that to them if they found such a one."

"Oh." The voice in Phar's ear was silent while he walked down the path toward the dormitory. When he opened the door, it said, "Well look, don't give up hope. Mary says we've still got nearly two more eighdays before we'll have to leave. You could still find it before then, or Emily could."

Yes, Phar thought. *And the Greatsun could blow the Red One away in a great exhalation and let me finish my life in peace right here, but if I understand your physics properly, that is just about as likely.*

He stepped inside the dormitory and found himself a bunk.

#

"His vital signs are hardly changing," Emily said, pointing to the monitor on which danced a jumble of intersecting lines. "Heartbeat the same, respiration the same, temperature the same--physiologically he's still wide awake. The only thing changing is his brain activity."

Tamara looked to the monitor, noted that all but one trace were still active and said, "Are we missing something here? If this is what sleep looks like for them, then maybe we don't need to worry about drugs. Maybe they can make the trip wide awake."

Emily shook her head. "Sixty years is sixty years, Tamara. We don't have the life-support system to keep anyone alive that long at full metabolism." She switched the monitor to another trace pattern, this one flatlining halfway across the screen. "And I already tried freezing a test animal without depressants first. It died for real at ten degrees."

Tamara turned away, pacing across the tiny lab Emily had set up in the second shuttle. "Damn it," she said, "We didn't go to all this trouble for nothing. There's got to be something we can do."

Boardbill had been watching from the doorway. He cleared his throat and said, "Not necessarily. It's completely possible that a solution to this problem doesn't exist."

"Problems always have solutions," Tamara said, not even bothering to look at him.

Boardbill laughed. "Tell that to the crew of an airless ship. Of course, the solution is simple: find more air, but where? In our case, the solution is equally simple: use a generation ship. Unfortunately, we have neither the generation ship nor the time to bring one here."

This time Tamara did turn around, but the look she gave Boardbill couldn't have been better than being ignored. "Just what are you trying to tell me, Boardie? Give up? It's hopeless, so just forget about it? Is that your soothing message?"

With the hint of a smile still playing on his lips, Boardbill said, "I'm suggesting that you not set yourself up for a fall. Quit tearing your hair out over something beyond your control. Certainly, keep looking for a solution, but don't fool yourself into believing it all hinges on your own competence. There are greater forces operating in the universe than the human intellect."

Tamara looked back at the monitor, still displaying its graphic representation of death, and said, "Thank you for those words of encouragement. I'll remember them if I ever find myself in a hopeless situation. Now if you don't mind, Emily and I have work to do."

She heard Boardbill walk away, heard the door slide shut behind him, but she was already absorbed in thought. Okay, they'd tried finding a drug, they'd tried synthesizing one, they'd tried freezing something without one--what was left?

#

"Phar?" The voice was neither Tamara's nor Emily's.

Phar looked up from his reading. "Yes?"

"This is Boardbill. Can you talk now?"

"I'm alone in my cell. What do you wish to talk about?"

"History. Literature. Music. Art. We've all been concentrating so hard on finding a way to bring you home with us that we've completely ignored the rest of your culture. It's time we started gathering what we can. Whether you can make the trip or not, there's no sense letting your whole civilization die in the Final Battle."

Phar laughed. "That, of course, is exactly counter to all the Temple's teachings. Civilization is *supposed* to die in the Final Battle."

"Do you really think so?"

"No."

"Then let's start saving some of it. Can you smuggle books and artwork out of the temple and hide them someplace where we can pick them up?"

"No," Phar said. "My movements are carefully watched. There are guards at either end of the corridor outside my door even as we speak, and one in the garden below."

"Can't you bribe them with something?"

"These are temple guards."

"I take that to mean 'no.' All right, then, you'll just have to use a holocam."

"That would be equally impossible. Khorph has had them destroyed by fire, and even if you somehow sent me another one, that would only get *me* burned next."

"Oh. Damn. Well, then I guess you'll just have to read aloud to us. Have you got anything handy?"

"I'm reading a book on comparative anatomy at the moment."

"Blah." *Buzz*. "Let's go for something a little more exciting. How about fiction? Have you got anything you read just for fun?"

Phar looked around his cell. On a shelf above his desk rested four volumes; he knew their titles without getting up. One was his copy of the *Hallowbook*, one was the well-worn *Penitent Prayer* book, one was his journal, and the other...

"The only fiction I have is a copy of a banned romance."

"A romance? Banned? Why?"

"It depicted a former Temple Chief unfavorably," Phar said.

"Hah, that ought to be great! Politics, religion, maybe even a little gratuitous--" *buzz* "--sex for flavoring. We'll learn more from that than from the whole rest of your library. Start reading."

"I don't know if this is the image I want us remembered by," Phar said, nonetheless picking up the book.

"Then read us something else tomorrow. For now, what you've got will do fine."

Phar looked up at the *Hallowbook*. He really should be reading that for posterity instead. But when it came right down to it, he never really cared much for the rigid dogmatism advocated in its pages. Besides, the *Greatsun* and the *Red One* were about to end their battle; shouldn't the *Hallowbook* die with them?

It was an easy choice to make. Phar flipped open the book in his hands and began to read. "*Fear of Sailing*. Chapter one...."

#

Tamara stared at the wall screen through reddened, puffy eyes. She was on board the starship again, watching the two suns circle each other in their ever-narrowing spiral. The *Greatsun's* tidal bulge was obvious even to the naked eye now, the swollen star straining against the *Roche lobe* like an overinflated balloon. A hammer of energetic gas aimed at the anvil of the *Redsun*, it would soon spray ionizing radiation throughout the planetary system, sterilizing everything in its path. Only the few kilograms of

genetic material in the starship's freezers would survive the onslaught. That genetic material would be more than enough to re-start the planet's ecosystem somewhere else, but that was little comfort to Tamara. Phar would not be coming with them, nor would any others of his race.

They had plenty of Phar's genes, collected when they implanted the transceiver in his head, and they had gathered dozens more samples from other aliens caught out in the open, but those aliens themselves were doomed.

She heard someone move up beside her, turned to see Boardbill standing there. Damn it, couldn't he see she wanted to be alone?

"Go ahead, say you told me so, then go away," she said.

He shook his head. "That's not what I came here for."

"What, then?"

"I came to see if I could help you through a difficult time."

"Oh." Tamara took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Sorry." She looked back to the wall screen. "I guess I'm just not used to failure."

"That's what you've got to understand," Boardbill said. "This isn't failure; it's one of the biggest successes in the history of spaceflight. We've saved the only other intelligence we've ever encountered. We can't save Phar, but his descendants will share the galaxy with us. How can you call that failure?"

"Easy, when I'm about to watch a whole world go up in flames."

Boardbill put an arm around her shoulder. "It would have died whether we were here to witness it or not. We aren't responsible for that. It's not your fault, Tammy."

"Maybe not." She hesitated, not wanting to send the wrong signals, but at last she put her own arm around Boardbill's waist. The human contact *was* comforting, even if it was Boardie. "Maybe not," she said again, "but I'll never think of this place without wishing we could have done more."

"Neither will I," he said, "but at the same time, I'll always be glad we did what we could."

Tamara nodded. Not a bad philosophy, when it came down to it. Not a bad philosophy at all. She could live with it, anyway.

#

"Phar."

He opened his eyes and finished the stanza he'd been reciting. He'd relented after all and was quoting the *Hallowbook* from memory, outside under the boughs of a tree in the courtyard where his implanted transmitter could send the clearest signal. The first shots of the Final Battle--flares, Tamara had called them--were making reception difficult.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Tamara here. Phar...it's starting. The Greatsun is spilling over."

He looked toward the dawn. Although the suns would not rise for over an hour yet, the eastern horizon blazed as he'd never seen it. Mountains stood outlined against stark whiteness, as though some terrible fire had been ignited beneath them. Phar had no doubt that was exactly what was happening. The crackling in his ear had been getting louder for days, but now it grew worse even as he listened.

"Phar, I want to thank you for what you've..." Her voice faded in a swirl of static.

"You're the one who should be thanked," he said, on the chance that she might still be able to hear *him*. "I thank you for opening my eyes to the truth, and for helping another being in need. I bid you farewell on your journey."

Her voice momentarily overrode the static. "...always remember you. We'll teach..."

He listened for more, but she was gone. Standing, he brushed off the twigs and leaves from his robe and walked out from under the tree to where he could see the entire sky. The eastern horizon truly blazed now. Brilliant flickers shot up from behind the mountains like skyrocket, and overhead aurorae writhed like damned souls, obliterating all but the brightest stars. He looked on in quiet awe. His earlier fear was gone, replaced by a great peace. He'd seen more than any others of his race, seen a vision of worlds without end, scattered through an unimaginable void. The aliens had also given him a vision of the future, of a time when his own descendants would travel from sun to sun like them, in a realm far vaster than the one their father had known.

That was enough. He was content. He lay back in the grass to watch the suns rise over a new universe.