

-Terra Nova-

By Tom Williams

*"And though mine arm should conquer twenty worlds,
There's a lean fellow beats all conquerors,"*

-- Thomas Dekker

Published by Awe-Struck E-Books

Copyright ©1999 Thomas Williams

ISBN: 1-928670-56-3

Table of Contents

[Prologue](#) [Chapter One](#) [Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#) [Chapter Four](#) [Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#) [Chapter Seven](#) [Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#) [Chapter Ten](#) [Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#) [Chapter Thirteen](#) [Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Chapter Fifteen](#) [Chapter Sixteen](#) [Chapter Seventeen](#)
[Chapter Eighteen](#) [Chapter Nineteen](#) [Chapter Twenty](#)
[Chapter Twenty-One](#) [Chapter Twenty-Two](#) [Chapter Twenty-Three](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Four](#) [Chapter Twenty-Five](#) [Chapter Twenty-Six](#)
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#) [Chapter Twenty-Eight](#) [Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)
[Cast of Characters](#) [Weights and Measures](#) [Terra Novan Terms](#)
[Imperial Terms](#) [Nations of Terra Nova](#)
[PROLOGUE: THE WINDS OF CHANGE](#)

After the winds of change had swept across Earth in the period around the beginning of the third millennium, the path was clear to a new world order.

Not too far into the twenty-first century, virtually all war ceased. A small part of the reason for this was that international relationships had improved; mostly, however, it was due to the increasing effort required by individual nations to feed and maintain rising domestic populations.

The environmental destruction characteristic of the twentieth century had largely ceased, but the damage, some of it irreparable, was already done. It was some time before the technology and resources existed to both feed the world's enormous population and undo some of the ruin humanity had inflicted on the Earth.

When problems eased as populations adjusted to prevailing circumstances, it would have been easy for humanity to regress into barbarity. But people all over the planet realized the senselessness in returning to the old ways, realized how much better life was when resources were squandered not on the materiel of warfare but on more worthwhile things. Moderate parties -- espousing humanist and Green policies -- were elected in an increasing number of nations.

Of course, some nations (or, more accurately, their leaders and policy-makers) *did* wish to go back to the twentieth century's methods, still dealt harshly with their neighbors -- whether by military or subtler methods, such as economic or trade embargoes and restrictions. But the more moderate nations created multinational military juggernauts or economic unions to compel the aggressors to back down -- in effect using their own weapons against them -- or scattered them to the winds.

Towards the middle of the twenty-first century, after a series of not inconsequential obstacles had been overcome, a planetary government was formed, its first elected leader, President Moses Appleton. The

world parliament was based, in theory at least, in Zurich, but the two hundred senators representing each of the old nations were rarely actually present in the European city: it was far easier for them to vote "on-line" on the occasional issues considered worthy of international interest. For the most part, the world parliament did not interfere in the day-to-day affairs of each nation, which still governed their own domestic affairs according to individual constitutions.

A decrease in weekly working hours, necessitated by the reality that there was insufficient work for one hundred percent full-time employment, meant increased leisure time for the average person. The standard of living of the person in the street was high, as technology cheaply supplied every need -- and most wants. People enjoyed the extra time that they could spend with their family and friends or in developing themselves in new directions. With the relative anonymity of the Internet and virtual reality devices, more and more people interacted with others from all over the world. A new spiritual awareness spread across the Earth, and -- whether due to this mass change in mind-set or simply a quirk of evolution -- an exponential increase in the incidence of psionic talents manifested in people all over the planet. The latent talents had always been present to some degree, occasionally appearing in isolated individuals, but now, perhaps due to the overwhelming evidence of their existence, they appeared to be almost universal, as humanity flexed previously dormant mental muscles for the first time. The power of these talents was undeniably weak, but they could be improved with discipline and application.

Eventually, with the discovery that the faster-than-light tachyon particles were the source of psionics, computers that could amplify psionic strength were developed. Now, a person strong in telepathy could communicate by mind with another person on the other side of the world, however weak the other's telepathy; now, an individual with strong telekinesis could pick up a small object, such as a glass, without using the hands.

Technology in many fields received a boost, as scientists and engineers previously committed to military projects turned to work in other areas. Controlled fusion reactors, anti-gravity generators, and genetic engineering were among the innovations that improved the human condition. With the discovery of the psionic talent of teleportation, humankind found access to hyperspace, and true interstellar travel became possible.

Hyperspace travel required human interaction with an advanced computer: the natural psionic talent of teleportation needed monumental amplification in order to shift an occupied spacecraft across light years of space.

The Pathfinder series deep-space probes were the first mass-produced spacecraft to feature human/computer mind-links. The Pathfinders investigated nearby star systems, able to make interstellar journeys infinitely more quickly than the older unoccupied space probes, which were limited to sub-light velocities.

Discovered in orbit around most stars were planets, including a select few potentially inhabitable with terraforming alterations, techniques pioneered during the restoration of the Earth. Starships, carrying fleets of robot terraforming spacecraft, were sent to the most promising planets; the probes descended on their target worlds, adjusting climate and atmosphere, creating terrestrial biospheres. Within thirty or forty years the planets were suitable for human occupation.

Some of the more restive or adventurous people of Earth volunteered to colonize these new worlds. They set forth in groups -- specially selected by computer to offer the best genetic mix for their destination planet -- in fully equipped starships, with the raw materials necessary to establish a self-contained village. Thus were Thermos, Hibernus, Aquarius, and Terra Nova first settled. The Empire of Earth had been created in essence and was soon enshrined in name and constitution as well.

Pathfinder 131, investigating the Ursae Majoris 47 system, found a number of gas giant planets, completely unsuited to human habitation. It did find, however, that a moon of the largest planet was eminently suitable for terraforming probes. Jane Buckley-Thorne, the civilian pilot of Pathfinder 131, chose to go into orbit about the moon in order to make a more detailed survey. As she neared the area, her tiny spacecraft was suddenly destroyed by a burst of electromagnetic energy from the gas giant's satellite.

It was the latest in a long line of tragic events in humanity's conquest of space. Many people had been killed in space accidents before, but Buckley-Thorne's loss seemed different from the norm. No one could explain exactly how or why she had been killed. Some thought the energy burst was an unknown natural phenomenon. Others suggested a more sinister reason: intelligent alien life existed in the Ursae Majoris 47 system, a life form that had maliciously attacked an unarmed exploration vessel. But humanity had never before encountered alien life in all its travels, and the Imperial government was slow to accept such an explanation.

The Ursae Majoris 47 system was in the center of the next designated sector of human expansion, and the demise of Pathfinder 131 required further investigation. An Imperial starship was sent to the area, and it released a squadron of reconnaissance probes into the star system. These probes came under attack by spacecraft of unknown design that swarmed from hidden bases on the moon at the heart of the mystery.

A tachyon signal was received from beyond the frontier of human exploration. It was incomprehensible, but its staccato rhythm was menacing. For the first time the truth of the Ursae Majoris 47 system was confirmed: it was inhabited by intelligent alien life (or such a life form had left robotic military vessels), and these aliens were aggressive. Their hostility brought to the fore old, basic human instincts: Imperial President Cheryl Wootton considered the military option.

In a secret base beneath the surface of Luna, Earth's moon, Imperial scientists and engineers, both human and computer, designed and built spacecraft armed with humanity's most sophisticated weapons. Citizens of the Empire were covertly recruited to train for service aboard the new interstellar warships, forming the Imperial Navy and Star Marines.

The alien moon in the Ursae Majoris 47 system was designated E-1 -- or Enemy 1. It was decided that E-1 should be studied in the short term, until more was learned of the aliens and their capabilities. The original tachyon signal had emanated from a point in interstellar space, suggesting the aliens possessed interstellar travel and possibly occupied other star systems. Human stubbornness and innate curiosity meant exploration of the region was not going to be abandoned, so in future the secret Navy warships would discreetly escort Pathfinder probes into new systems.

Newly recruited military scientists -- graduates in multifarious fields -- were directed by the Imperial armed forces to furnish theories about the nature of the aliens of E-1. They were asked to devise a means of communicating with these aliens, and various message-bearing tachyon signals were sent both to E-1 and the source of the original tachyon transmission. But no one could interpret the infrequent replies received.

Twelve years passed. Then Pathfinder 165 and its warship escort came under attack in the soon-to-be-designated E-2 system. The Navy warship held its own: its nuclear missiles destroyed some of the alien spacecraft that brought energy weapons to bear in the space battle. The human spacecraft limped away, still intact but heavily battered.

The farther away from Earth that exploration progressed, the more frequent became the incidence of alien star systems. It soon became clear the electromagnetic weapons the aliens employed were

secondary arms. They used psionic weapons that seemed to have no effect on humans. The aliens changed tack: soon Imperial spacecraft found themselves assaulted by a psionic weapon that *was* capable of influencing human minds. People not in control of their own thoughts directed *INS Rommel* to a fiery destruction in the E-5 system star.

In time, humanity perfected psionic shields, and the scales were readjusted. The balance was maintained, until the aliens countered with an awesome new weapon: the atomic disrupter.

Human military technology had stagnated since the twenty-first century, and so the atomic disrupter came as a complete surprise. The crew of the *INS Apollo* was killed, snuffed out in an instant, in the E-6 system. But it was not long before Imperial military scientists and engineers were hard at work, striving to create their own weapon from what they had learned of the aliens' device.

It was now common knowledge that there was an alien civilization hostile to the Earth, and the existence of the Navy warships had been revealed to the general public. Citizens of the Empire overloaded public and government opinion sites on the Internet, demanding that humankind strike back, not knowing the Empire had already struck -- and, for the most part, failed.

The highest officials of the Imperial government privately feared the consequences if the aliens were to press into human territory with their terrifying atomic disrupter; President Huang Lee's Navy advisers informed him that they believed even defending Imperial Earth itself might be an impossible task. For the time being, however, the aliens seemed mercifully reluctant to leave their own star systems.

The vulnerability of the human situation lessened with the creation of humanity's own version of the atomic disrupter, which enabled the Imperial Navy to wreak havoc on an alien fleet in the E-8 system.

And so an intriguing situation had developed. The Empire pursued its expansionist policy, spreading through the galaxy. Sometimes humanity encountered alien-occupied star systems, where the mysterious Enemy -- as it had become known -- fiercely defended its territory. But the Enemy never attacked human settlements or even ventured out of its own systems.

Navy warships still accompanied all expeditions into unexplored regions. Small, single-seat reconnaissance spacecraft surveyed the known alien worlds, and they were always unmolested, for it seemed the Enemy recognized that they were mere observers.

The two interstellar civilizations had developed a kind of treaty in an undeclared war. The Enemy did not attack human worlds but defended its own; the humans, for their part, did no more than survey Enemy worlds. But human spacecraft sometimes blundered into the aliens' systems, for the Enemy did not know how -- or did not choose -- to warn them off.

Neither side could afford to fall behind in military technology, for the next innovation could be costly to the civilization that failed to make the breakthrough.

CHAPTER 1: VANISHING POINT

A stationary, planet-bound observer would have judged him swift. But set against the vacuous vastness of space, his velocity was not especially significant. And that insignificant velocity -- around ten percent of the speed of light -- meant Lieutenant Mikael Anders Svensson was in deadly peril.

His mission had been to reconnoiter E-7, an outpost world of the Enemy. As he drew within sensor range of the pink-and brown-banded gas giant, an anti-spacecraft missile had been launched from E-7's dayside. That missile had caught the scent of his Eagle Eye spacecraft's sensor emissions, and ignoring all decoy probes, it now accelerated in pursuit.

The Eagle Eye was the standard Imperial Navy reconnaissance spacecraft. Roughly wedge-shaped, it was twenty-five meters long and seven meters wide at the rear, tapering to a conical nose. A self-contained sphere three meters in diameter, the cockpit bulged from both sides of the streamlined hull (reminiscent of a pill in a blister pack, Svensson always thought). Two fat cylinders -- the drive tubes -- extended from just shy of the nose, through the stubby wings, to marginally past the rear of the hull. The majority of the spacecraft was constructed of silver plasteel, the outer hull, including the cockpit sphere, burnished like a mirror: this was a last-line defense against lasers and other electromagnetic weapons. The faint golden glow of the defense shield was an aura over the mirrored hull. Presently, from the rear of the drive tubes spat jets of dazzlingly brilliant, purplish-white fusion flame, accelerating the spacecraft, but it was too little, too late.

Englobing Svensson (though he rarely had the leisure or inclination to consider his immediate environment) was the relatively featureless white plastic of the interior of the cockpit sphere. Illuminated by dim, pinkish light, it was not an especially roomy setting; some people might have suffered claustrophobia in the confining space. But Svensson, like most military pilots, was genuinely at ease within the Eagle Eye's cockpit: he felt that it conferred an inordinate sense of assurance. Completely naked, he lay suspended, wholly immersed, within transparent, though pink-tinted gelatinous sustagel. He was readily able to breathe the oxygen- and nutrient-enriched material, and its high viscosity enabled him to move -- or, rather, swim -- passably freely within its embrace. He felt a distinct lift as artificial hormones surged into him -- compounds that could not be diffused through sustagel -- via a drip feed attached to the skin of his neck. The drip administered a constant, precisely measured dose appropriate to his body's needs. A perpetual replenishment and filtration of the viscously flowing sustagel swiftly extracted what little waste his body still excreted. A perforated plastic canister that bulged from the curved interior wall of the cockpit sphere dispensed both sustagel and the contents of the long, flexible drip-feed hose. He could not begin to imagine what concocting and mixing went on in there but sincerely hoped the right stuff emerged from the tank.

Currently, he was mind-linked to Ms Mary, the spacecraft's flight computer: he and the computer were as one. Much of his time was spent in mind-linkage with Ms Mary, receiving information telepathically and/or by holovision. The latter created a three-dimensional virtual realm that seemed to surround him so that his true environment -- the cockpit sphere itself -- was invisible to him. While he was receiving such a projection, a theoretical observer would note an impenetrable black fuzziness enveloping his head.

He had instantly realized there was no escaping the Enemy missile; he and Ms Mary had less than a second to think and act. Their symbiotic mind-link was millions of times faster than the human norm. His human inventiveness was a good foil for Ms Mary's logical intelligence, and they ran through thousands of escape scenarios within a quarter of a second.

There was only one plausible option: they were going to have to undertake a hyperspace jump -- a "hy-jump." Unplanned, it was a potentially hazardous procedure, but the alternatives were much worse.

Linked, Svensson and the Eagle Eye computer focussed on being somewhere else. Anywhere else. The cockpit sphere about him warped and rippled, as if water ran sluggishly over his eyes -- it was not a characteristic of the circulating sustagel but a quivering of the sphere's very plastic structure. The stars surrounding the spacecraft -- observed by holovision -- transmuted into bizarre, unnaturally colored pinpoints, then abruptly extinguished. E-7's customary rose-streaked brown became a weird lime-green and tangerine combination, before it, too, evanesced. Everything seemed to be stretching, twisting, and...turning inside out. Even the Eagle Eye's technology could not protect Svensson from all the exotic forces generated. He was momentarily impossibly heavy and compressed, then light and expansive. The chemicals pumped into his bloodstream could not keep him conscious.

As he began to black out, Svensson sensed a powerful spike of psionics that stabbed mercilessly into his fortunately ebbing consciousness. A burst of telepathy and empathy -- and compulsion -- it originated in the warhead of the anti-spacecraft missile that, riding its own violet plasma exhaust, closed on the Eagle Eye. 'New psi-weapon,' he thought, then lost consciousness completely, as the spacecraft slipped into hyperspace.

The pilot woke after what seemed only an instant's blackness. Blinking, he peered around. Its dim interior no longer shivering with apparent -- or actual -- movement, the cockpit sphere had stabilized around him. The view of space external to the Eagle Eye had also normalized, but it was a greatly altered star-field to that observed from the vicinity of E-7: the spacecraft had obviously jumped quite some distance to make the star patterns appear so radically different. He sensed, too, that he had lost time.

"What happened?" he wondered aloud, momentarily disoriented. Sound, though marginally distorted, carried readily through sustagel.

The facts started to filter through as he snapped back into mind-link with Ms Mary. An intense tachyon stream had violated his brain just before the hyperspatial teleportation. The attack had come at an awkward moment, disturbing his mind as he prepared for the hy-jump. Logic suggested the Enemy's missile had contained some sort of psionic relay in its warhead.

He let his breath out explosively, sending a momentary ripple through the sustagel. It was an alarming thought that the Enemy had such mastery that it could relay psionics so powerfully without a mind present to generate them. Surely, there had been no alien actually inside the missile. (An intelligent creature would not sacrifice itself in such a way, would it? Not that he, a Navy flyer, could pretend to understand the psychology of a largely unknown alien species. Yet surely...) After launching its psionic strike, the missile had probably detonated in the routine way -- nuclear fission -- though the Eagle Eye had left the vicinity of E-7 by that time.

At that moment the mind-linked pair was nearly 417 light years away from the nearest Imperial planet. Svensson was astounded. It was the Imperial homeworld, Earth, a planet more than thirteen hundred light years from E-7. A normal hy-jump was less than fifty light years. The Eagle Eye had made an unplanned emergency jump, warped by the influence of a potent psionic assault. With that power and his mind distracted and poorly focussed, the spacecraft could have ended up anywhere. Though it did not really feel like it, Svensson realized he had been let off lightly.

He recalled his sense of having lost time. "How long was I out, Mary?"

"About thirty-two days," she replied in her husky, disembodied voice. "That Enemy psionic attack left you virtually comatose, and the psionic node of your mind was inactive, so hy-jumps were impossible. We've cruised in a sub-light, random stealth pattern while your PC and I restored you to health."

"I understand," he said. Ms Mary was programmed to make his welfare her prime consideration. Everything else, including heading home, was lower on her order of priority.

The Enemy's actions would surely have made sense by now. He wondered if the missile attack had heralded the long dreaded Enemy invasion. Judging from their previously unknown ability to relay psionics so strongly, the aliens would make a fearsome opponent. Now that humanity had matched their other accomplishments, it would have required them to come up with just such an innovation to break the peace. One thing was certain: it was much too late for Svensson to be warning anyone.

There were no signals forthcoming from Old Earth or any of its colonies -- the Imperial Navy did not often break its communications blackout with reconnaissance pilots -- and Svensson transmitted none of his own. The Imperial homeworld was the best port of call in his current circumstances, so he

surrendered himself to suspended animation for the journey.

Situated deep within his brain, his personal computer, in consultation with Ms Mary, adjusted the blend of nutrients surging through the drip feed and diffusing through the sustagel, adding new drugs. His heart slowed almost to a standstill, and he lapsed into a dreamless, preserving, hibernation-like sleep. This was the ideal state in which to undertake a hy-jump, for the conscious human mind was generally too erratic, lacking in sufficient powers of concentration; an unconscious mind, however, still generated a psionic signal a flight computer could amplify. For Svensson there was a subjectively brief blackness, followed by a gradual return of awareness.

Curled into a fetal ball, the pilot groaned wheezily. Lethargy pervaded his body, rendering his limbs heavy, despite the support of the sustagel. His tongue lolled between slack lips. When he opened his eyes, the lids immediately descended back over the gritty, reddened orbs. Acutely aware of a bad headache, something rarely experienced by a twenty-fourth century individual, he lay perfectly still, trying not to think too much.

"Don't move," Ms Mary told him. "I am restoring you to optimum condition."

He was supplied the chemicals necessary to revive him from days of existing just on the living side of the thin line between life and death. After several minutes he started to feel better. Within half-an-hour he was fully recovered, properly alert and healthy.

Svensson re-established his link with Ms Mary, and his senses expanded dramatically. The Eagle Eye, he now knew, approached Sol at standard cruising speed: ten percent of light. It had taken a dozen hyperspace jumps to reach this point, still approximately ten light hours from the small, yellowish star. Ms Mary had not dared jump any closer: there was too much risk of materializing where solid matter already existed...

Earth was the third planet of the Sol star system, the very heart of the Empire. No interrogative signals assaulted the Eagle Eye. Svensson frowned. It was strange that he was being allowed to approach without questions being asked. He decided to decrease speed.

Within two days the Eagle Eye neared the Perimeter, just beyond the maximum orbit of Pluto, where ships of the Imperial Fleet should have been waiting to intercept it. But there were no ships.

<'Mary,'> thought Svensson telepathically. <'Establish contact with someone. Anyone.'>

After a brief pause, she replied: <'There's no response.'>

"What's going on?" Svensson demanded aloud in exasperation.

"I don't know, Mikael."

"I don't like it."

Ms Mary did not need to be told twice. She could not sense anything out of the ordinary, but she respected the obscure human instinct. She activated the Eagle Eye's defense shield, then primed its atomic disrupter cannons.

<'Computer: plot a course to Earth via a Mars slingshot,'> commanded Svensson telepathically.

Accelerating on a course marginally above the planetary ecliptic plane -- this avoided most of the dangerous, hard to detect stray matter orbiting Sol -- the Eagle Eye streaked towards Mars. The atomic disrupters blasted any solid material -- small asteroids, rocks, even dust motes -- that crossed its path.

At high velocity even a dust particle had potentially destructive kinetic energy.

Five days later the spacecraft neared Mars. At a distance of just over one hundred million kilometers, Ms Mary started to receive sensor readings from the red planet. They were extremely unusual.

Svensson frowned. "This doesn't look too good. Give me a visual, Mary."

Ms Mary magnified a holovision image of Mars. Presently crescent-shaped, it was a fuzzy, orange-red color. It looked wrong somehow, though he could not decide why.

"Let's have a close-up of the surface."

Ms Mary obliged, and Svensson gasped, then cursed helplessly. Mars was destroyed. Dead. Annihilated. He ran out of words to express his horror and disbelief and disgust. This planet, the red planet, the first extraterrestrial world where a person could live and breathe out in the open, had been ruined, the target of a campaign of terrible, unprecedented destruction. The Martian landscape had suffered a sustained bombardment from all manner of weapons. Through transitory gaps in a pall of red dust and thick cloud, he could see great strips of scorched, blackened earth and glassy slag a thousand meters wide and hundreds of kilometers long. Reducing the scale of magnification, he noted: shattered mesas, even mountains; crater-pocked crust of the southern highlands that had fissured into plates separated by wide canyons; and volcanoes, some ancient -- including the broad though lofty shield volcanic peaks on the Tharsis Ridge of the northern hemisphere. Then there was Olympus Mons, Pavonis Mons, Ascraeus Mons, and Arsia Mons -- and some newly created, that spewed forth varying mixtures of rock, ash, noxious clouds, and lava. Just south of the equator, the mighty canyon, Valles Marineris -- initially a staggering four thousand kilometers long and, in parts, more than six kilometers deep -- appeared to have lengthened and widened...and overflowed with incandescent lava. At dozens of locations across the planet colossal levels of residual heat and radioactivity were detectable: nuclear blast sites. An ocean's worth of underground water had been released into the atmosphere, and the polar caps had melted, producing the peachy cloud flurries concealing most of the planet: it was as if Mars itself attempted to hide its ravaged landscape.

As Ms Mary flicked through a succession of images from various parts of the devastated planet, Svensson was unmoving, shocked into silence. Finally, after two minutes of complete inactivity, the pilot stirred himself. "Give me a close-up of the Martian capital," he whispered hoarsely.

He thought for a moment that she had disobeyed him, an almost impossible thing. But it was hard to believe his eyes. He was staring at an ancient lava plain of the Northern Hemisphere, at...at a vast impact crater, six or seven kilometers across, where none should be. Observation of the surrounding area revealed, radiating in a starburst pattern away from the crater's raised rim, great quantities of ejecta material. Closer inspection showed huge droplets of some silvery matter -- some of them four or five hundred meters in diameter -- spattered about the Martian landscape.

"Oh, no, no," moaned Svensson, suddenly realizing just what he beheld. This was the site of Vulcan, Mars' largest city. Twenty million people had lived in a cluster of towers that soared five kilometers into the thin Martian air. Towers constructed of *silver* plastic. A massive object -- an asteroid, probably -- had been cast at Mars to impact here, and kinetic energy had produced a blast of cataclysmic proportions. All that remained of a city of twenty million people was the plastic that, melted by extreme heat and pressure, had been squeezed from the blast zone like drops of mercury to splash outside the crater. It was as if humanity had never existed on Mars.

Svensson sighed heavily, thoroughly despondent. "Any signals? Any life signs?"

"None of either, Mikael."

Ms Mary banished the holovision picture, and Svensson closed his eyes. He knew now why the long-range shot of Mars had seemed flawed: there were none of the green patches that had once dotted the face of the planet, the patches of Earth vegetation gradually expanding outwards from the equator -- primarily northward -- to cover the rust-red Martian landscape. The Enemy invasion had finally come, more devastating and horrific than even the most paranoid of human fears. None of this made any sense, though. It seemed like wanton destruction. There were other, more efficient methods of destroying a city, if that was one's desire. Vulcan must, at the end, have been totally defenseless to allow an intact asteroid to smash into it. And why pulverize the rest of the planet, where humanity and its enterprises were simply non-existent?

"What sort of creatures are they?" he wondered, though he realized the Enemy could not be judged by human standards. They were truly alien: almost nothing was known about them. Their origin was a mystery. No one even knew what they looked like. The acknowledged Enemy planets -- E-1 through -19 -- were merely the sites of underground spacecraft bases; they showed no evidence of actual alien settlements.

"Let's go to Earth," he suggested finally.

Svensson had a suspicion of what he might encounter at Old Earth, but even that vague anticipation could not prepare him for what he *did* find.

What had been done to Mars paled beside the deed that had been done here. Luna had been shattered. A miniature asteroid belt of irregular gray- white chunks of rock and a copious volume of dust swiftly orbited the Earth -- or the place where the Earth should have been. The Imperial homeworld had vanished. Irrespective of the degree of magnification, the Eagle Eye's cameras could produce no image of the famous blue planet. But there *was* proof that the Earth still existed. From the co-ordinates of the planet's core, gravity still reached out with its insistent fingers; indeed, pieces of Luna were being inexorably drawn into the sensor-dead place. As their orbit decayed, the lunar fragments swiftly became supremely hot, then abruptly...collapsed, coalesced...to become another indistinct fraction of a tiny, intensely radiant ring -- parallel to Luna's original ecliptic plane -- the center of which was impenetrably black in all forms of radiation. Lethal bursts of x-rays periodically spat forth from near the edge of the invisible zone, as did two plumes of super-heated gas -- clearly detectable to infrared sensors -- which shot, perpendicular to the glowing ring, in diametrically opposite directions. Though he had never seen it before, the Earth was indisputably changed from what it had been.

"Where is it?" Svensson asked Ms Mary in disbelief. The facts made it clear, but he could not quite bring himself to acknowledge the dreadful reality.

"The Earth has been incorporated into the mass of a black hole, Mikael."

Even his personal computer's adroit administration of exotic compounds through the drip feed and sustagel failed to maintain Svensson at his physical and mental peak. He shivered and felt alternately chilled then overheated. His head and guts ached abominably, unfamiliar sensations (could he be dying?). This, the annihilation of humanity's homeworld was beyond anything he had ever experienced. Beyond anything *anyone* had ever experienced. How could it all be gone? Nearly five billion years the planet had existed. More than twenty billion people. Untold trillions of life forms gone, never to be duplicated. All of it just obliterated, consumed by the hungry black hole. (The aliens could not have created the black hole, could they? Such power... It could not be true. No, surely they had...found it in their travels. Yes, they had found the black hole and given it a charge. Then they had "towed" it with a "tractor" particle beam.) How the Enemy must have rejoiced when it perpetrated that deed! Yet who could comprehend what the aliens felt? Perhaps they had no emotions. Perhaps...

His thoughts were wandering. "Get me out of here, Mary!" he suddenly ordered. "Take me home."

Svensson did not want to think about his homeworld, the desert planet, Thermos. Let the Enemy have been satisfied with demolishing the Sol system. Craving oblivion, he gladly yielded himself to suspended animation, not really caring if it became permanent.

It did not last long enough without dreams. He did not miss the dreams, for they surely would have been nightmares. Yet they may have helped him cope with what had happened. Madness might lurk nearby, so perhaps his apathy to his fate was a clever defensive ploy by his subconscious. If he allowed the full horror to overwhelm him, likely he would succumb to utter insanity.

Svensson did not feel much improved even after Ms Mary and his personal computer had stimulated his mind and body. "All right," he muttered, "take us in."

There were no signals he could detect. He was not all that surprised. In a corner of his mind, despite the lack of encouragement he offered it, a seed of despair had already sprouted. Tears suddenly squeezed from his stinging eyes to disperse into the sustagel. Ms Mary advised his personal computer not to inject him with "happy" drugs: he needed to withstand and transcend this painful psychological trauma.

"Oh, Mary," he blubbered. "There's no hope, is there?"

"I'm afraid not."

"All my family...friends...the whole bloody Empire!" He howled, unable to check the tears that oozed from his puffy eyes. "Why, Mary? Why? Why do they hate us so much? Why kill us all?" He shook his head again and again, striving -- and failing -- to make some sense out of what had happened. Ten thousand years of human civilization and its achievements. The civilization that had birthed Da Vinci, Shakespeare, Mozart, Einstein, Hawking, and countless other genii, major and minor. Ordinary people, loved only by those to whom they were related or friend. All gone. Why was he here? Why had he been spared, when so many people, good and great, had died? He was drowning in overwhelming grief, swamped in guilt. And tantalized by that one overriding question: Why?

"I will have revenge," Svensson declared finally. "In some small way I will pay those bastards back." He took a deep, shuddering breath, almost a whimper. "I don't want to see it," he resolved. "I want to remember Thermos as it was. I never saw Old Earth before. All I can visualize is that avaricious sucking vortex. I will remember the heat and the landscape and the sunsets and the people of Thermos. I'll remember them as they were."

Svensson did not know what else to do, so he hy-jumped towards Aquarius, longing to find a survivor somewhere, a single living human being or even just an answering voice. Perhaps he would discover an Enemy fleet that he might descend on like an avenging eagle, atomic disrupters blazing...

He was disappointed on both accounts. Aquarius had suffered less physical damage than the other worlds, but in a way its fate was worse, a gross defilement of its former beauty. The oceans -- which had abounded with marine life as prolific and nearly as varied as that to be found on the Earth itself -- had boiled away, and the exposed seabeds emitted frequent, deadly pulses of radiation. Not one of Aquarius' fifteen million human inhabitants had survived.

"What...an abomination," Svensson murmured numbly, face expressionless. "I just don't -- can't -- understand this."

When next he was roused from suspended animation, in proximity to Hibernus, the Thermosian could scarcely open his eyes. "I feel like I'm a thousand-years-old," he croaked.

Despite Ms Mary's best efforts, not to mention those of the personal computer located in his head, Svensson had never felt more fatigued. Of course, no one had ever undertaken so many hyperspace jumps across hundreds of light years in such a short time.

"I still feel about 750," he quipped without much amusement after an hour had passed. "Where are we now? Oh. Hibernus. The cold planet. At least it was." He sighed heavily, expression resigned. "Better take us in, Mary."

At first inspection Hibernus appeared to have been the least affected of the Imperial planets. Very little of the surface had been blasted, and most buildings remained undamaged in the various cities. Only under extreme magnification did Svensson perceive what the Enemy had done.

In the streets of Saint Petersburg, the capital of Hibernus, were untold thousands of bodies. Dressed in stark, bright, typically Hibernusian colors that loomed out of drifting streamers of smoke, they lay in unnaturally twisted attitudes, shockingly strewn over one another in veritable drifts, a rainbow forest of felled trees. Nothing moved. Bullet-shaped aerocars hovered in mid-air at varying altitudes, their occupants as lifeless as the people in the streets below. Ten times as many people were likewise dead in buildings throughout the city. Svensson, grateful to be scrutinizing only a panoramic overhead shot, declined Ms Mary's offer of a close-up: an amorphous sea of bodies was bad enough, but the notion of individual faces with blank, staring eyes... He transferred to vision of other cities, and it was the same everywhere: mass extermination. He could not find a single living thing on the planet, human or otherwise.

"No signals, Mary?" It was not really a question.

"No, Mikael."

He shook his head. "I've heard of twentieth century Nazi Germany, but this... It's almost as if they all died at once; like they were poisoned or gassed."

"No," Ms Mary disagreed. "They have been systematically gunned down with low caliber projectiles. Precisely directed projectiles -- miniature anti-personnel missiles, presumably -- aimed so they would pass through the intestines and exit the lower back, not instantly lethal. They would have died slowly, over perhaps an hour. Apart from military installations, the only structures destroyed are hospitals and other potential sources of medical aid. This was the first planet to be attacked, Mikael. From here the Enemy moved on Aquarius, then Thermos, then the Sol system."

Svensson let his breath out slowly. This apparently sadistic act was the most terrible crime of them all. At least to human sensibilities. People gunned down, for no good reason. There was not much material damage here, and no sign of an Enemy presence. Yet the Enemy had wreaked even greater physical destruction on Aquarius, more on Mars, and still more on the Earth. It was almost as if...

"They're trying to outdo themselves!" he cried. "Where can they go after what they did to the Earth?"

Rage filled him, and he fairly trembled with its force, but it sputtered and expired. He concentrated again, fuelling a fiery fury, before it, too, flickered fitfully and failed.

Svensson supposed he was too numb and spent for anger and hate. The Enemy was faceless, giving him nothing on which to focus his negative emotions. How did you hate someone you could not visualize? He guessed that his personal computer and Ms Mary diluted his responses. Was he inhuman himself with his natural impulses and hormones suppressed and controlled by machines?

[CHAPTER 2: THE GAUNTLET](#)

As the Eagle Eye cruised towards the Perimeter of the Hibernus system, warning lights suddenly flashed before his eyes, flooding the cockpit with pulsing, crimson radiance, and alarm bells pealed resoundingly in his ears, snapping Svensson's attention back to the situation at hand.

<'Two fighter spacecraft on interception course,'> thought Ms Mary urgently. *<'Two minutes, twelve seconds until contact.'>*

Data about the Enemy vessels appeared in the form of neon green characters and figures on a data screen -- a transparent, two-dimensional rectangle edged in orange that remained within his line of sight no matter which way he looked -- within the holovision projection. Though individually inferior to the Eagle Eye, they presented an undeniable threat with numerical advantage. Both were armed with a single, nose-mounted atomic disrupter. The alien spacecraft were under heavily boosted acceleration, endeavoring to match the velocity of the Eagle Eye. Beyond the data screen was three-dimensional footage -- computer simulation or authentic reconnaissance camera stuff, he was not sure -- of squat, unembellished matte gray cones riding blazing spears of light. Ms Mary had had no difficulty detecting their approach, for not much could be done to mask the revealing emissions of maximum acceleration. Svensson had ample time in which to evade them.

<'All right, Mary. Let's get the hell out... '> He paused. *<'Computer: initiate attack run.'>*

The data screen seemed to fold in on itself and vanished, leaving the holovision with the predominantly black arena of combat mode. In the center of Svensson's "view," the Eagle Eye was a silvery triangle with a thin silver line stretching from its nose: its currently projected course. Two gray cones represented the alien spacecraft, and their projected gray course-lines intersected Svensson's silver thread. The Eagle Eye adjusted its course, angling away from the converging Enemy fighters. The alien spacecraft seemed to vacillate for a moment, then they separated, one -- a gray cone designated "Bogey A" in combat mode -- heading on a vastly divergent vector to the other: "Bogey B."

<'Computer: plot attack course on Bogey A! '> Svensson ordered. Ms Mary had already directed potent drugs through the drip feed to enhance his reflexes, and he was on a razor's edge of alertness. Now thoroughly integrated with the flight computer, his reactions, even his thoughts, could be measured in infinitesimal fractions of a second. He grinned maniacally. He was going to have his revenge!

Ms Mary abruptly shifted the Eagle Eye onto a course almost perpendicular to the Hibernus ecliptic plane, and combat mode's silver simulated arrowhead mirrored the move. As his spacecraft oriented on the alien fighter, Svensson was gripped by some of the crushing effects of massive inertia -- a slight pressure and pull -- despite the anti-gravity technology and compression-resistant sustagel protecting him. He had the superior vector of attack, with a clear shot at Bogey A's belly, but he was only going to have a fraction of a second's firing time at these speeds.

"Eat that!" Svensson snarled, bearing his teeth. At his mental command, the twin cannons emerged from the Eagle Eye's nose and blasted the Enemy ship with streams of atomic disrupter fire. There was a double row of brilliant flashes, like winking stars, across the gray hull of the fighter, but its golden shield held.

<'Damn it,'> the Thermosian thought. *<'Mary, transfer 20% of shield power to the disrupters.'>*

With the supplementary firepower, the atomic disrupters produced a veritable flurry of sparkles on Bogey A's shield. *<'Just a few milliseconds longer,'>* Svensson thought to himself. He checked "behind" himself on the progress of Bogey B. Having been wrong-footed by his abrupt maneuver, it was three light seconds away. Its gray course projection line had the beginnings of an arch, indicating the Enemy fighter was wheeling around in order to come after the Eagle Eye, but it was well beyond attack

range for the moment.

<'Psionic attack! '> Ms Mary suddenly telepathically shrieked in his mind. <'Shield breached! '>

Svensson immediately ceased firing on Bogey A, frantically attempting to redirect power to the psionic sub-shield. He cursed himself. Of course, tachyons were infinitely fast and had tremendous range. And the Enemy was the master of psionics. Had he not learned that already!

The holovision projection was inundated by a rapid, chaotic sequence of fluctuating figures and distorted visuals as Ms Mary resisted the psionic attack. Briefly, Svensson discerned an image of Bogey A disintegrating with a fleeting purple-white flash as its shield failed under the last antiprotons of his atomic disrupter fire.

A faltering voice came to him, trailing away to nothing: "Flee, Mikael Svensson. And always remember...that I love you..."

Svensson experienced a sudden, shocking, wrenching sensation, a feeling of having been spurned and cast aside. Dazed, he did nothing for several seconds, while his wits belatedly returned. The mind-link had gone dead. He swam through the sustagel and punched a manual keypad recessed into the cockpit's white wall, but there was no response. Ms Mary's higher interactive functions were gone. There was nothing left of her consciousness. She had cut the mind-link and sacrificed herself to save him.

Svensson blasted out of the Hibernus system so savagely that acceleration forces blurred his vision. Bogey B was left far behind, and it soon abandoned the pursuit.

His back against the concave curve of the cockpit's interior wall, the Thermosian curled into a defensive ball. He blinked suddenly stinging eyes. Presently, body heaving, he sobbed uncontrollably. A high price had been paid for his little act of revenge. Far, far more than it was worth. He had interacted with Ms Mary for three years, experienced many things with her. He had regarded her as human, albeit bodiless. Over three years a basic artificial intelligence program had, with his influence, evolved into a distinct, well-rounded personality. Ms Mary had had her individual quirks: she had frequently harried and teased him. Yet she was ever responsive to his needs, mental and physical, and he often had to remind her not to mother him (though he secretly enjoyed the excess attention). The beauty -- and the curse -- of these AI programs was that no two were ever alike. Ms Mary was, to all intents and purposes, dead, and because she was a one-off, he would never be able to bring her back. Fighter pilots were reputed to be closest to their computers, for in the intensity of high-speed combat they mind-linked completely, but he rather fancied the long flights of reconnaissance pilots made them similarly involved with their computers. Certainly no one human had been as dear to him as Ms Mary. There had been a few occasions in pleasure simulators when he had fantasized her as having a human body as attractive as her voice... They had dwelt in each other's minds, relating on a purely psionic level. She had been his lover in the truest meaning of the word, someone who had loved him unconditionally. It did not matter to him if it was programmed love, for who was to say it was not as genuine and complete as that between two humans?

The Thermosian suddenly launched into a frenzied pounding of the spongy plastic of the wall alongside him, expressing a compound of powerful, coalesced emotions. He finally sagged limply, drifting idly in the sustagel. He felt hollow: this last, pitiless deed of the Enemy had surely ripped away what little remained of his essence. "Why? Why me?" he moaned.

Not caring what befell him, Svensson allowed the Eagle Eye to cruise aimlessly for a few days. His personal computer did what it could to look after him, but it was doomed to be a losing struggle if he did not recover the will to survive.

On the fourth day he stirred from his bout of self-pity, savagely castigating himself. "Be a martyr, then!"

But go and look at Terra Nova first. *That* might give you something to cry about."

It was not an expedition to be casually undertaken, however. With the loss of Ms Mary's consciousness, he had no access to hyperspace and was confined to sub-light velocities. Terra Nova was nearly twelve hundred light years away, and that meant a journey (even allowing for time dilation) of over two thousand years' duration.

Svensson started to laugh hysterically. "Now you've got something to cry about!" he told himself. "Two thousand years! It must be the longest trip ever attempted!"

Poor as it was, it seemed to be his only choice. There was nowhere else to go. No one he loved -- no one he even *knew* -- lived any more (were there any humans still alive somewhere?). There was nothing for him here in this era. He realized that only one's links to others tied one to one's home. He had none of those now. Of Thermos itself, who knew what remained? Maybe someone yet abided on Terra Nova, however. It was the last possible human outpost. But after two thousand years there was likely to be scant sign of humanity *or* the Enemy invasion left on Terra Nova. The planet might not even exist any more. Still, it was not important, he decided. This would definitely be his final mission, so it would be of no import whether it lasted two thousand or twenty thousand years: he was literally going to go out with a bang at its end.

It was tragic to think of the fate of Terra Nova, the paradise world, humanity's great prospect for the future. Everyone had aspired to go there, and only the elite had been selected: the finest scientists and scholars in the Empire. And the planet had had the best defenses outside the Sol system, so maybe... No, it was too much to expect after two millennia. Perhaps in the present but not when Svensson arrived in the fifth millennium. It was far too long. However, any evidence that humanity had survived for some time after the Enemy invasion would offer a modicum of comfort and satisfaction.

On May 4, 2392 -- after a torturous week pondering his plans, in which he confirmed, then revoked his decision a hundred times -- Svensson finally committed himself to his only positive, proactive option: a mission to Terra Nova, beginning with a long, long sleep.

Time, despite distortion dictated by relativity, advanced with its inevitable, relentless impetus. Mind virtually inert, Svensson floated in his pink, semi-fluid environment, preserved in a near-death-like condition. Every now and then different parts of his body -- organs, glands, muscles, joints, nerve channels -- were stimulated to maintain some semblance of their function. Though the Eagle Eye sprinted through the inky void of interstellar space -- its acceleration had been partly boosted by controlled matter-antimatter annihilation within its drive tubes -- the great journey was not swiftly completed. Thrice the spacecraft was assaulted by a shield-draining burst of gamma rays from distant sources; twice it was bathed in the brilliant light of newly revealed supernovae; and once it was compelled to alter course to avoid a passing comet. Even its perfectly reflective mirrored hull dulled somewhat with the ravages of long-term exposure. Not until late 4729 AD, 2 337 years later -- or 2 032 years, subjective ship time -- did Svensson awaken from his hibernation.

He had been inactive for such a fantastic length of time that, despite liberal usage of the drip feed, his personal computer needed three days to rouse him to consciousness, and it was another two days before he was able to move even fractionally. Every muscle of a boneless body quivered and ached, and it felt as if a blunt object had penetrated his skull. Due to the slight though measurable inefficiency of the suspended animation process, his body had aged approximately two years. None of these inconveniences especially surprised or disappointed him: after all, he had been inanimate since the twenty-fourth century.

"A two-thousand-year-old man has to take it easy!" he told himself with a half-hearted laugh.

The events of his past remained clear in Svensson's mind, however. Time had not blurred the memories of the Enemy invasion, for it seemed, to him, to have transpired only a few days previously. Though reinvigorated, the longer he stayed awake, the more his memories disheartened him.

"I can't forget," he muttered. "Well, I'll be joining you all soon." Rendering one hemisphere of the cockpit sphere transparent (the defense shield still protected him from dangerous radiation and particles), he stared into the star-spattered ebony of space. "Wherever that is. Mother and Father and everybody. Every-bloody-body! I'm coming, too. Two thousand years I've delayed it, but I'm coming. The living dead man. I am coming."

Svensson piloted the Eagle Eye slowly towards Terra Nova, almost enjoying himself, knowing his ordeal would soon be over. His self-imposed mission to...chronicle -- confirm? -- the passing of the human race concluded at Terra Nova. Happily he overrode his personal computer by preparing and ingesting powerful drugs via the drip. Who cared what happened to one's body when one was soon to die?

Half a day out from Terra Nova, the Eagle Eye's automatic warning devices jolted him out of his drug haze -- at least after the tiny computer in his head had shot him full of sobering stimulants.

"What did you do that for?" Svensson whined petulantly, before the lights and sirens became suddenly obvious to him.

He blinked itchy, reddened eyes and shook a buzzing head. He cried aloud wordlessly when he comprehended what the spacecraft was trying to tell him.

Each one circling like a mosquito searching for bare skin, a fleet of alien spacecraft surrounded Terra Nova: two immense, disk-like spacecraft carriers; six spherical battle cruisers; and a swarm of the compact, gray conical fighters. Holding them back was a globe-encompassing defense shield that incessantly flickered as different parts of it were alternately strengthened and weakened (it required enormous power to keep a *whole* planet under perpetual maximum protection). A myriad of orbital defense satellites hovered just within the shield's golden glow. A powerful computer had to be managing such a vast network.

Svensson laughed and laughed. "Oh, how ironic! The Enemy waits for Terra Nova to weaken, but the planet has held it out for two thousand years! It must be the longest siege in the history of the universe!"

The Thermosian could almost picture the scenario. The Enemy had launched all its forces on a mission to destroy the human race. The aliens had breezed past the colony worlds of Hibernus, Aquarius, and Thermos, probably sustaining inconsequential losses. Then they had made their move on the Sol system, and it must have been there, around Mars and Earth, that a heavy toll had been exacted on their fleet. The greatly depleted armada had traveled to Terra Nova, only to confront another vigorous defense. And, stalemated, it remained there still.

During his approach Svensson had detected the remnants of Imperial ships drifting around the outskirts of the star system. He noted now that more than three-quarters of the orbital defense satellites originally defending Terra Nova had been destroyed over the centuries. Without satellites to repulse the Enemy's attacks on the global shield, the aliens would soon be able to strike directly at the planet. To his eyes, it seemed that the Enemy must certainly be in a position to make the final assault on Terra Nova at some stage in the next few years. Terra Nova was the stuff of legends -- to have held out for so long against a superior force spoke volumes for its defenders -- but the odds had been too great, and soon it must all end.

And yet Svensson felt a flicker of hope. Surely, he reasoned, even the most loyal of computers would not have defended for so long if it had no one to defend. Perhaps there were a few descendants of the

Imperial colonists left on Terra Nova.

He was not generally a sentimental person, but Svensson suddenly felt proud of his race. Human tenacity could be no more evident than in the defense of Terra Nova. And the computer regulating the defense network had been programmed with all the attributes of its creators.

'Emotional fool,' he told himself, though without heat, as his eyes watered.

There were no welcoming signals (*or* unwelcoming ones) forthcoming from Terra Nova. But someone could be there, *had* to be there. His mission was not complete until he had proof that someone human was alive down on the planet.

The Thermosian knew what he had to do. He must get down to the surface somehow, bypass the Enemy fleet *and* the Terra Novan defenses (he was not certain they would recognize him as friendly). Then he would see if any vestige of humanity remained.

He no longer had the benefit of super-fast reflexes provided by the mind- link, so he required a plan of some merit. A few hours' thought provided no logical plan, so he chose an *illogical* one. 'They won't expect someone to attempt that in a reconnaissance spacecraft,' he thought.

Svensson accelerated towards Terra Nova. Like an ant nest that had been turned over, the Enemy fleet boiled with activity, ships heading in all directions. The aliens must have realized that he was making a break for the planet, as squadrons of fighters were launched, maneuvering to screen the gaps between the spacecraft carriers and battle cruisers besieging the planet.

The Thermosian smiled broadly, as the Eagle Eye headed for the largest gap, where the greatest number of Enemy fighters had collected. Even as he approached their numbers surged: thirty, forty, fifty! Svensson had pre- programmed his course into the navigation computer. It was out of his hands now, as ordinary human reactions were too slow to permit him to make last minute changes. The personal computer in his skull worked overtime, preparing him for what lay ahead. He watched the Enemy vessels streaking towards him on interception courses, paths their navigation computers would be certain intersected that of the Eagle Eye. His own course projection, however, told a different story.

A countdown began on a small data screen in the top left corner of his vision, ticking off the seconds until he -- and the Enemy -- were in atomic disrupter range of one another. 6...5...4... Svensson took a deep breath, steadying himself. 3...2...1... He exhaled again in anticipation of the next phase of his plan.

On the count of "0", as programmed, the Eagle Eye sharply shifted course, racing across the leading edge of the cloud of alien fighters, defense shield set at maximum on the side that faced the Enemy vessels. Svensson was compressed by partly dispersed inertial forces, then jolted as the Eagle Eye rocked under the impact of atomic disrupter fire. Nightmarish hallucinations pervaded his mind, and he screamed in absolute, paralyzing fear. He had anticipated a psionic attack, however, and had made certain he was incapable of doing anything to alter or ruin his plan at this late stage. His personal computer mercifully blacked him out, and this saved him from going insane under the mental assault.

The Eagle Eye, still acting on his programming, fled the Enemy fighters and angled towards a battle cruiser. Svensson's original plan had been a drive at a spacecraft carrier, but he had decided not to push his luck *that* far. Yet even this variant of the plan was likely to fail, for an Enemy battle cruiser -- a smooth, matte gray defense shielded sphere more than a hundred meters in diameter -- had at least ten atomic disrupters, not to mention a battery of missiles. His principal objective for attempting the feat revolved around eluding the fighter fleet; but he was also conscious of an element of sheer, astonishing audacity.

Jinking from side to side and rotating along its central axis, the Eagle Eye rocketed at the battle cruiser, choosing the course of least resistance. Some disrupter beams sprayed harmlessly past, though many produced glittering trails of golden stars on the shield of Svensson's spacecraft. Sensor-equipped missiles leapt into flight, hot on the scent of the human vessel, and it loosed a host of decoy probes -- each one diverging from its current course and releasing convincing emissions at levels consistent with an Eagle Eye -- to lure the missiles astray. (Fortunately, there did not seem to be any of the psionic-relay-equipped missiles.)

The Eagle Eye's shield was almost down, but before the battle cruiser or the approaching fighters could finish it off, they suddenly had another threat to deal with: several slender, cylindrical defense satellites -- essentially maneuvering thrusters married to atomic disrupter or electromagnetic weapons -- had moved into position, covering Svensson's descent on Terra Nova.

Svensson regained consciousness in time to see the global shield glowing brightly goldenly before him. He had scarcely started to make a move, when an opening appeared in the shield -- the coded Imperial Navy ID signal he had been transmitting had finally produced results -- and the Eagle Eye gratefully dived into it, like a rabbit down a burrow. The breach closed behind him, and Svensson was at last in Terra Novan airspace.

Terra Nova was a small planet, sapphire blue and light green and dusty brown, swathed in swirls of white cloud. It looked strange to Svensson, who was accustomed to the tawny- and reddish-brown face Thermos exhibited to space.

'They say it looks just like Old Earth,' he thought.

The Eagle Eye rapidly decelerated as it orbited the planet, bleeding off some of the enormous velocity it had accumulated in its run on the Enemy fleet. Traversing the terminator, the spacecraft swept over the shadowy dark side of the planet. Svensson gradually worked his way into the atmosphere, and air resistance produced a fiery wreath over the silvery plasteel of the spacecraft, so it appeared the Eagle Eye was at the core of a raging inferno.

Black continents and blacker seas blurred below Svensson. He was going far too swiftly to land, but air continually dragged at the spacecraft, retarding its headlong flight back into daylight.

Still ostensibly ablaze, the Eagle Eye punched through scattered cloud, bearing westward across a vast ocean and over a large island, perhaps a small continent. Its velocity slowed to somewhere around Mach 8, and Svensson considered landing on the other side of the continent. He had barely flown over a rugged, snow-capped mountain range, when an explosion rocked the spacecraft: the personality-free flight computer flashed a message onto a data screen, informing him the Eagle Eye's oxy-atmosphere turbine had been destroyed by a series of pulses from an x-ray laser.

"Where the hell did they come from?" he roared in alarm and frustration.

Svensson evaluated his prospects. The Eagle Eye would glide onward for some distance, but it would have to come down at high speed, and he did not like his chances of survival.

He nursed the spacecraft for as long as he could, searching for something, anything that might soften his landing, when he abruptly crossed the shoreline of an inland sea. "That will do nicely!" he thought in relief, allowing the Eagle Eye to descend towards the water.

The spacecraft struck hard. Svensson felt the impact shake the vessel, despite the in-built technology designed to nullify physical assault, for the Eagle Eye still traveled at close to Mach 1 when it hit the surface of the sea. The pilot commanded the cockpit sphere to become translucent (it was still opaque

from without, mirror-finished like the rest of the hull). It hardly affected his exterior view, and what he could see sobered him. The Eagle Eye had plunged deep beneath the waves, hurling a welter of superheated water and steam into the air. The cockpit sphere was all that remained -- it was designed to protect the pilot when all else had failed -- and it had slowly floated back up to the surface. Everything outside the cockpit had either been destroyed or sunk (hopefully, the antiproton ammunition would remain safely contained at least until he had departed from the immediate vicinity). Buckled and torn pieces of plasteel bobbed about on the sea. He was not going to leave Terra Nova in the same way he had arrived, not in this Eagle Eye, at any rate.

Breathing heavily of the sustagel, Svensson lay still. The entire descent, from his initial run at the Enemy line until splashdown, had taken just over thirty seconds. With a quivering hand he detached the drip feed, and after a brief delay, it abruptly whipped into the recycling canister. He covered his face with his hands. He had crash-landed on Terra Nova, two thousand years into his own future. He felt suddenly, absolutely alone and vulnerable.

The Thermosian stirred himself. He had come here to search for evidence of humanity. He needed to reach dry land, then he would ascertain whether any possible inhabitants remained on Terra Nova.

After a significant pause -- it was a momentous decision -- he keyed a code into the keypad. Warning chimes sounded, and he duly repeated the code. Abruptly, the sustagel began to contract and retreat into the recycling canister. Air hissed into the gap swiftly growing above the descending surface of the sustagel, and Svensson sank towards the "floor" of the sphere. The pilot found himself sprawled on the curved white plastic, sustagel gushing from his open mouth, nostrils, and other orifices. He coughed convulsively as the last of it flowed out and was forced to take a sudden, shocking breath of flat, sterile air. He hyperventilated for a minute, until he had readjusted to the requirements of breathing ordinary air after so long in sustagel.

Feeling weak and dizzy, he slowly got to unsteady feet. "Is this one of the Empire's mighty warriors?" he asked himself. "No wonder the war was lost." He suddenly sniggered, then laughed outright for a full minute. He felt remarkably better. "Come on, Mikael. Get dressed, and then you'll *really* feel like you're on a post-orgasmic high." His expression grew wry. "Well, maybe not that good!"

In a storage compartment recessed into the wall next to the keypad, he found a bright orange survival backpack, which contained a few standard items -- such as a climate suit package, food and water capsules, medikit, and sleeping bag -- but no weapons, unfortunately. >From the backpack he fished out the climate suit package; approximately five centimeters cubed, the package was made of white hypercompressed -- hy-c -- plastic. He pressed a thumb against a depression in one ivory face and commanded telepathically: <'Activate.'>

As if it were fluid, the plastic package abruptly started to expand and spread. Rippling and flowing like a living white puddle, it swiftly engulfed Svensson's arm, then spilt over his torso and legs. Within seconds, he was clothed in a white, neck to ankles, figure-hugging body suit, capable of keeping him perfectly comfortable regardless of external temperature. With pleasure he ran a hand over the pearly material covering his arms and legs, strangely grateful to find the muscles beneath still hard despite the ordeal he had undergone (his personal computer discharged its duties admirably). Other hy-c packages produced an all-purpose wristwatch-style computer and tough, matte black boots with soft linings. He sealed up the orange backpack and shrugged it over his shoulders. With a mental command to the flight computer, he produced a holovision image of himself -- dressed and ready for action -- and approved of what he saw: the tight, synthetic material looked good on his trim form. "Hot, ice hot," he told himself. 'Ahh, a "living dead man" with vanity.' Yet it oddly succored him to be dressed in customary attire and to know that he yet remained in excellent shape. Svensson glanced outside again. All he could see was water.

There was nothing to prove that he was not alone on this planet. He shrugged and punched the code on the keypad that created an emergency exit hatch. A rectangular, human-sized panel of plastic, set approximately halfway up the side of the sphere -- above the waterline of the sea -- abruptly melted away, and a set of steps formed leading up to it. Natural light and air flooded the cockpit. Svensson climbed the steps and paused in the doorway. Terra Nova's sun was perceptibly whiter and dimmer than Thermos' system star, but its rays felt extraordinarily wonderful on his skin, and he closed his eyes for a few seconds in appreciation. He sniffed cautiously, though he knew the planet's humid, strange smelling air -- salt? -- was excellent. This was the first time he had actually landed on another world, so he lingered a moment, savoring the occasion.

"Look at all that water," he marveled, a little disconcerted by the encircling, glittering expanse of blue wavelets. Thermos was -- had been -- a dry planet, with but a few small salt lakes.

His plan was simple: hop onto a piece of the highly buoyant plasteel hull and ride the prevailing currents to land. This was not a big sea, by all accounts. Hopefully, someone would come for him if he used the comset in his wristwatch computer to continually broadcast an SOS signal. His climate suit would keep him comfortable as he drifted away from the cockpit sphere. Awaiting a retrieval that would probably never come, the naked sphere would float on. He made a wry face at his sentimental thought: he had enough to worry about without considering the future of the cockpit sphere! But then it *had* taken him so comfortably and safely so far across space and time...

Steeling himself, he leapt out onto a floating section of mirrored plasteel. He twitched in shock as a white-sailed boat, three people aboard, suddenly came into his line of sight. From where had they sprung? Two of the people were white, dark-haired youths -- one larger than the other -- of about nineteen or twenty Standard Years. Their dress looked primitive, white, loose-fitting tunics and black trousers of some coarse material. The third person was a much bulkier, older man with long black hair, perhaps thirty-four or thirty-five. Shit! The older man appeared to be encased in silver metal, and there was something reminiscent of a sword at his side! The trio jabbered urgently among themselves, and the Thermosian could not understand a word of what they said. What the hell was going on? He stared about him in panic and desperation, but he was stuck on the floating sheet of plasteel, the cockpit sphere already out of reach and only deep water all around him.

Resigned, Svensson squatted down on the piece of plasteel, rubbing his eyes with stiff fingers. Why was he apprehensive and unnerved? He had come here fully expecting, even intending to die, and had he not found what he sought? There *were* people still living on Terra Nova. Unless he was hallucinating, these people were plainly human. Yet they did not seem to speak Imperial English and wore poor clothes and steel armor. A sailing-boat would not be unusual on a world with oceans, but this one looked as if it was made not of plastic but *wood*! Could the Imperial colonists have lost all technology and regressed over the years? It was remarkable to think that humanity survived on Terra Nova, but this was not how he had envisaged that survival!

The Terra Novans cautiously sailed towards him. They eyed him with a degree of apprehension -- even the big sword-bearing one -- but also with undoubted curiosity. They chattered among themselves, then with hesitant, though unmistakable gestures, they invited him aboard the boat. After deliberating briefly, Svensson stepped into their boat. What else could he do? He had nowhere to go. They cleared some primitive backpacks from a wooden bench in the prow of the boat, motioning him to sit. Facing the Terra Novans, he perched awkwardly on the bench, feeling uncomfortable both because of the hard seat and their curious stares. He closed his eyes in submission. After all he had been through, barbaric types armed with steel swords had apparently taken him prisoner!

CHAPTER 3: REUNION

They were twin brothers, not identical, yet as alike as any two normal brothers. Both were dark-haired and of a little more than average height. Wilfen, the elder by half an hour, was wiry, possessing fine features and unremarkable gray-green eyes; Alvonne was stockily built, and bright green eyes blazed out of his hawkish face.

Wilfen and Alvonne Argindell dwelt in Mardine, a village on the forested island nation of Nevanderlof, which was situated in the Warldife Sea of the land of Terra Nova.

They lived with Filgen Culdana, their maternal grandfather, an elder of Mardine. Filgen's knowledge was phenomenal. His grandsons constantly asked him questions, for they were curious youths. Filgen Culdana tutored them in various subjects, including the foreign language, Oriental, the native tongue of their dead father.

Filgen's lessons occupied their mornings, so in the afternoon the twins enjoyed visiting the beach. The village of Mardine was about a kiloword from the southern coast of Nevanderlof, and it was a short and pleasant walk through the forest to Mardine Bay.

It was a sunny afternoon in the month of Bren -- early winter, though the season was rarely harsh here -- of Holmish Year 862. Wilfen and Alvonne descended the spiral staircase from Filgen's home among the trees, their young dog, Kinser, following their every step. The brothers leapt the last sword to the ground, landing easily with bent knees.

Mardine was sited predominantly on the forest floor. Nearly all of the village's robust, leaf-thatched log cottages, daubed in mud tinted green or brown, were positioned among the trees at ground level, but a half-dozen -- the homes of Mardine's esteemed elders -- were actually set high in the forest canopy, nestled in the intertwined limbs of several eucalypti. A series of rope ladders and bridges, reminiscent of a mass of cobwebs, connected these elevated cottages to the staircase that spiraled around the trunk of a tall gum- tree at the center of the village.

Scattering free-range red-crested chickens, the twins headed away from the spiral staircase, passing the village barbecue: a round steel plate placed over a shallow pit that could be filled with hot coals. Once a week, Mardine's inhabitants held a feast, at which they roasted one of the sheep or cows penned in a forest clearing just outside the village proper.

A few of the villagers, wearing the ubiquitous grass green Nevander cloaks, waved to them. Brawny, balding Kilm, the village blacksmith, lugged a huge cooking pot towards his wood-fired forge deeper in the forest. Ma Indini, a plump middle-aged woman, who adored children, though she had none of her own -- she was especially fond of the orphaned twins -- gave them a kindly smile. They smiled and waved back: Ma Indini was never shy about offering them one of the delicious tidbits she had created, and it made good sense to retain her favor.

Nevanderlof was an impressive forest. Their bark mostly smooth and white, towering evergreen eucalypti stretched thirty swords or more into the sky. A few massive fig trees formed the middle stratum, gnarled trunks perhaps ten swords in girth, and crowns, dense with overhanging branches, more than fifty swords across. Bearing a multitude of glossy leaves and ripening fruit, the figs' branches created almost complete twilight beneath them, and the twins had often used them for shelter during a rain shower. Various smaller trees and shrubs sprang from the earth where sunlight broke through the forest canopy: sword-high tea trees with masses of tiny pink flowers; spirea with their thin, vividly orange leaves; eye-catching red-, pink- or white-bloomed rhododendrons; outlandish strelitzia, their orange and indigo flowers strangely reminiscent of a bird's beak; clumps of cymbidium orchids, with their clusters of red-streaked cream or yellow trumpets; and lantanas, their trails, festooned with miniature purple or yellow stars, snaking insidiously far and wide through the undergrowth. Clumps of drab fungi and saw-toothed ferns filled

dark, moist hollows. The majority of plants were evergreen, but columns of ants trailed over what leaf litter had accumulated, and beetles and other crawling insects flitted in and out of the refuse. Above the ground, webs linked trees and bushes, some merely tenuous single strands easy to miss for the inattentive passer-by -- more than once apiece the twins had to pull sticky threads from their face or hair -- others elaborate constructions of concentric rings, their creators lurking within. Overall, the not unpleasant earthy aroma of the forest itself just registered on the nostrils.

The twins tramped through the familiar woodland, frequently glancing about in an attempt to catch a glimpse of wild life. They made plenty of noise to flush out anything hiding in the undergrowth, especially any snakes still abroad and active. They perused overhead branches for screeching multi-hued parrots, laughing kookaburras, raucous piebald magpies and satin-black crows, and other more sweet-voiced birds. On the ground they observed assorted drab-colored rodents, as well as several small marsupials, and, once, a wild tabby cat raking its claws down the scarred trunk of a eucalyptus. All around them, mostly hidden from their senses, was a myriad of fauna.

The predominant trees about them gradually became needle-leafed casuarinas and paperbarks with creamy, tattered bark, then thinned and failed, leaving the twins standing on dunes of fine gray-white sand. The beach extended away out of their sight to either side. Ahead of them the Warldife Sea invited the youths with its restless, moody waves. Dazzling their eyes, sunlight scintillated from the shifting sapphire surface, and the aroma of salt water assailed their noses.

Alvonne required no further encouragement. He stripped to old cut-down trousers and, dispersing resting gulls, raced down the sand into the sea. Fighting the waves that rolled onto the beach, he swam out into the bay.

Wilfen grimaced. He seldom swam -- he disliked being buffeted by wild surf -- much preferring to recline on the sand and enjoy the comfortable warmth of the sun.

Kinser did not relish the water, either. After tiring of pursuing shrieking gulls, the black pup settled on Wilfen's legs, despite the boy's protests, and proceeded to snooze. Kinser's bristly heat soon compensated his master for the sunlight the dog obscured.

Wilfen and Alvonne were, as usual, the only people around. The sea was not a noted passion of the Nevanders. Filgen reckoned their father's Holmish blood made the twins respond to the call of the sea. Wilfen was not so convinced: after all, the two of them had been brought up as Nevanders from a very young age. Yet it was an irrefutable fact: they were the only regular visitors to the beach.

After an hour Alvonne wearied of his swimming and joined his brother in lazing on the sand. Content to be stroked by two pairs of hands, Kinser reposed between them.

They had lain there for quite some time, when Alvonne, expression apprehensive, abruptly stood up.

"What is it?" Wilfen inquired, too comfortable to want to get to his feet.

Alvonne did not reply, continuing to stare out to sea.

Curiosity piqued, Wilfen raised himself on one elbow to gaze out into the bay, and what he saw troubled him as well. He stood up immediately.

A modest sailing-boat, a Holmish vessel perhaps, headed for the beach on which they stood; indeed, it seemed to be coming straight at them. There was no question of their moving: it was if they were spellbound by the growing silhouette of the sail, entranced by the stylized eye depicted on the white canvas. They waited side by side, as the boat drew closer to shore.

A figure with long black hair grew visible in the stern, steering the rudder. It was a man. A white cloak draped over his broad shoulders, and he wore black, baggy trousers and calf-high leather boots. Badly scored in places, a cuirass of steel plates encased his torso. At his side rested a sword, its pommel a great red gem. The stranger was of indeterminate age: his tanned face seemed youthful, but there was an air of experience about him.

The sailing-boat struck the shore, and the man single-handedly dragged the boat up beyond the level of high tide. He approached the speechless twins and stood squarely before them, proving to be at least three inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Alvonne.

"Good afternoon, Wilfen and Alvonne," he greeted in Oriental, extending his hand in an Eastlander custom. "I am Shondal Argindell of Ambell."

Startled, Wilfen took an unconscious pace backwards, accidentally standing on Kinser's tail. The dog yelped and scurried out of reach of Wilfen's feet, regarding the youth reproachfully.

Blue eyes twinkling, Shondal Argindell started to laugh, hands on hips and head thrown back. Shondal's laughter was infectious, and soon, too, the Nevanders were helpless with amusement.

Wilfen struggled to speak: "Welcome back to Nevanderlof...Uncle Shondal." He recovered from his spasm of laughter. "Kinser doesn't like to be laughed at."

Shondal bent down to the black pup. "My apologies, Lord Dog! My laughter was in poor taste!" He winked at the Nevanders; they grinned and inexpertly returned the gesture.

"I believe he accepts your apology, Uncle Shondal," Alvonne remarked, watching as Kinser permitted the man to stroke the dog's short fur.

"Good." Shondal straightened, studying the twins speculatively. "'Uncle Shondal,'" he repeated with self-mockery. "I've never really thought of myself as anybody's uncle."

"You're our father's brother: that makes you our uncle," declared Wilfen, and Alvonne nodded agreement.

"Some uncle!" Shondal snorted. "I've not seen you in three years. I told you I would come back for you both soon, but 'soon' can be a long time coming. You both had probably given up on me, even if Filgen promised you I would return. Actually, I'm amazed you even remember me."

"Three years *is* a long time," Wilfen had to agree. "And I didn't recognize you at first."

Their father's younger half-brother had joined the Holmish Army shortly before their parents' death in a plague. He had taken the orphaned twins to Filgen Culdana, promising to return for them. He had visited a few times but never to take them back to Holmis.

"I should have come more frequently," Shondal murmured slowly. "But there have been so few opportunities. I have fought wars in the Barbarian Lands and Arndlund, commanded a legion, become a bodyguard to the King of Holmis.

"It's all inexcusable, I suppose. Guilt about you two has haunted me. But I was only nine-years-old when you were orphaned by that plague. I didn't really have the experience or knowledge required to raise two babies, especially in a garrison." His voice picked up. "Anyway, I'm here now. There is peace in Terra Nova, and I have two months' leave."

Wilfen could not really condemn his uncle. He was nine-years-old himself, still nearly a year short of his

coming of age. The Nevander was unable to conceive how he might manage to look after a child or, worse, a baby. He did not have the prerequisite skills or, he realized, adequate maturity.

"Can this peace last?" the elder twin asked.

"Not a chance. My guess is that there'll be war within a year. The Western Alliance of the Nulls and the Tharms will mount a major offensive in the East again; this is the calm before the storm."

The brothers were hushed, wondering at their uncle's stoic acceptance of the life he led as a professional soldier. It was almost as if he did not fear combat...

"Aren't you scared of war?" Alvonne wanted to know.

Shondal nodded earnestly, bobbing his long hair. "Absolutely. A sane man is. Some of us cope better, however."

Wilfen saw the subject was an uncomfortable one for the soldier. "Do you wish us to guide you to Mardine?"

"Yes, I believe I do," Shondal replied hastily. "I'm not confident I could find it after all this time."

They trudged through the hot, powdery sand towards the forest. Wilfen could feel the sun on his head, and the sudden coolness he experienced on passing into the midst of the trees was almost shocking.

The twins knew this part of the forest rather well. Through habit they generally took the same path to the beach and back, but they could find their way home from anywhere in the vicinity. Kinser at his heels, Wilfen led the party, followed by Shondal and Alvonne. They hiked in silence, past trees familiar to the youths, stepping over partly exposed roots that had tripped young feet on occasions gone.

The silence chafed at Alvonne. "Have you been to Nevanderlof many times, Uncle Shondal?"

"No, this is the fourth. The first was in the summer of '55, when I brought you both here, as you know." The Holm deliberated for a moment. "Boys: just call me 'Shondal.' It must be awkward calling someone 'Uncle.' And, to be honest, it embarrasses me."

Alvonne seemed on the brink of asking another question, so Wilfen got in first with one of his own. "What sort of gem is that in your sword, Shondal?"

Shondal unsheathed his broadsword, glancing at the blood-red jewel that nestled like an egg in the golden cup of the grip. "It's a ruby," he said. "Its purpose, as the pommel, is essentially to prevent my hand slipping from the sword." He handed the blue steel blade to Wilfen, pommel first. "Have a look for yourself."

Wilfen held the sword aloft, marveling at the glints of color from the ruby, and found the weapon to be very cumbersome. He felt a thrill at holding such a thing, but its weight discouraged any thoughts he had of swinging it around.

He passed the sword back to Shondal. "It must be valuable," he commented.

Shondal considered the ornately worked hilt with its ruby and gold pommel. "It *is* quite valuable. It's worth more than a thousand Holmish golden crowns. But *Findram* is worth more to me as a family heirloom; a Memmish craftsman forged it for our family, and my brother bore it last. I retrieved it from the armory a week after your father's death, intending to destroy it, but at the last, I was moved to retain the sword and put it to good use. *Findram* is too fine a blade to discard."

Wilfen was impressed. He did not know the value of a golden crown, but he was aware that gold was a highly prized metal.

A short time later they came to Mardine and headed towards the spiral staircase. A few of the villagers greeted them perfunctorily, apparently incurious about the stranger in their midst.

Filgen Culdana's house was situated twenty swords above the ground and close to the trunk of the central tree. Alvonne and Shondal waited on the rope-bridge outside the front door, while Wilfen went inside to tell Filgen about the soldier's visit. The youth found the old Nevander had retired for his customary afternoon doze. He rapped softly on the thin wooden door of Filgen's bedroom.

"Grandfather," he called. "Wake up!"

"I'm awake," Filgen returned. "You may enter."

Wilfen opened the door. "Grandfather! Uncle Shondal is outside!"

Still attired in his usual white robe, Filgen lay atop the counterpane of his pallet bed, rubbing at his eyes. "Shondal!" exclaimed the old man, a frown on his lined face. He scratched at his bald pate. "It's three years since last he came!" Filgen started to muse: "Shondal... Is it time already?"

Wilfen shifted uncomfortably in the doorway. "Shall I let him in?"

"Yes. Yes, at once!"

Wilfen beckoned Shondal inside Filgen's house. The Holm ducked his head in order to avoid both a branch that grew outside the front door and the top of the low doorframe.

"Greetings, Filgen," said Shondal on entering. He grinned in response to the old man's smile.

"Welcome back to Mardine, Shondal, my boy."

The main room of the house was comfortable and well lit with resin-scented lamps. The walls were varnished logs and adorned with Filgen's own woodland paintings. A small cabinet against one wall contained a priceless collection of leather-bound books. A shelf above the cabinet held a number of curios Filgen had collected over the years, both natural and artificial, including an elaborately carved, redwood ornamental rod -- a token of his status as a village elder -- a stuffed rosella, a chess-board made of alternate squares of red and white wood, and a silver nugget shaped vaguely like a fist. The floor was topped by thick, chocolate brown Adar Mutian rugs. A circular casuarina table was positioned near a large window made up of stained-glass panes in a wooden, grid-like framework. Bulky, comfortably cushioned chairs were arranged around the table.

Filgen and Shondal sat at the table. Under the Nevander's questioning, the younger man summarized events that had taken place in the world outside Nevanderlof in the previous few years. Filgen probed the soldier at length, and the Holmishman answered every query in detail. It was Filgen's first tidings of the outside world in some time, and he was eager to hear as much as Shondal could recount.

Alvonne became engrossed in the conversation, but Wilfen soon grew bored: the outside world was too far removed from his own. Involuntarily he began to fidget.

Shondal curtailed mid-sentence a description of the Adar Mutian fishing fleet. "Don't let our talk bore you. Have a peek at my boat, if you wish."

"I will. Thank you," Wilfen said. He called Kinser and ventured out, climbing quickly down from Filgen's

house. The dog showed its usual dexterity in following his descent of the stairs that spiraled around and around the thick white bole of the village's main tree.

Shondal's boat lay where he had left it, high on the beach. Wilfen stepped into the boat, glancing around. He guessed it to be about five swords long with a beam of perhaps half that. There were two oars which, on his testing, proved to fit the rowlocks on the boat's sides. At the rear, immovably bolted to the gray, weathered planking, was an ironbound chest, shaped like a plump, oversized loaf of bread. Following some debate with himself, Wilfen opened the chest (which was unlocked, fortunately) and examined its contents: there was a folded, frayed map, some dried fruit in a tightly woven basket, a skin of water, and a hooded lantern with associated fire-making apparatus. Next to the chest he discovered a round shield half a sword in diameter emblazoned with a crouching, fire-breathing dragon, underneath which were a short recurved bow and a quiver of blue-feathered arrows.

Wilfen settled down on the bench in the stern of the boat, studying the map he had discovered. It was incredibly detailed, displaying the known extent of Terra Nova, from the Nullish Empire in the West to the Holmish Confederation in the East. He could see the names of places he had learned about. Foreign cities were labeled in faded ink. Peering closely at the parchment, Wilfen made out a diminutive black circle entitled "Mardine" in Oriental.

An unexpected thump caused the Nevander to start guiltily. He whirled in panic, anticipating a confrontation with a Shondal incensed at finding Wilfen going through the Holm's property. He found Kinser instead, realizing almost immediately that the slight sound of a young pup landing in the boat could not possibly compare to that of a heavy, booted man. He sighed and stroked his pet.

"Thank the Goddess," he said in relief. "You scared me, Kinser. Well, it serves me right for trying to be as daring as Alvonne, because, Goddess knows, it does get him into more trouble." To prevent further frights, he restored the contents of the chest and closed the lid.

On his way back to Mardine, Wilfen came across Erfind, a Nevander not much older than he, who was collecting mushrooms.

"Hello, Wilfen. I hear your uncle has come to visit," said Erfind. "Been gone a while, hasn't he?"

"Yes," agreed Wilfen. "Three years."

Erfind nodded vaguely and, sketching a wave, strolled away. Wilfen smiled to himself. In general, Nevanders were a very sober race. Hardly anyone ever came to Mardine, yet even a young man had no especial interest in a visitor. Wilfen was convinced that he and his brother would never be genuine Nevanders, no matter how long they lived in the forest.

When he returned to Mardine, Wilfen found Shondal still deep in discussion with Filgen and Alvonne. He quietly took a seat and listened to Shondal's travel tales.

"Had a look?" Shondal inquired of him after a few moments. "Tried the oars? Looked in the box?" Wilfen nodded shame-facedly to the last question. "Good!"

Wilfen excused himself and went to lie on his bed. Kinser lay abutting his master, resting a furry head on the youth's leg. Wilfen reflected on the momentous event of the day: his long lost uncle had returned. He had an impression that his life was about to be irrevocably changed.

CHAPTER 4: THE CHOICE

Shondal Argindell spent several days in Mardine. The soldier took the twins sailing in his boat, *Sea Jewel*. He told stories of the world outside Nevanderlof, showed things he had collected in his travels through

foreign realms: precious gems from Magon Vald; dried leaves of the great forest, Jherdol Tay; a flask of water from the Pink Lake, Mirn Dul, in Tharm; the broken blade of a Barbarian's sword; and his shield, which had been crafted by a Memmish tribesman.

The Nevanders were fascinated by their uncle's anecdotes. They hung on his every word, for he was a good storyteller: his tales had that ring of conviction about them. Before long they both yearned to visit the outside world. They esteemed their worldly-wise uncle, envying his experience.

It was Shondal Argindell who taught the brothers swordplay. Using wooden blades he had carved from a fallen tree branch, they drilled on the beach at Mardine Bay.

"Keep the point low," the Holm instructed his nephews. "It's more difficult to avoid or block. At the same time, be prepared to defend your upper body. Don't duck or side step what you can readily parry: there is less chance you'll become unbalanced or lose sight of your opponent."

Their mock duels were conducted in slow motion, as Shondal strove to impress on his pupils the correct techniques of sword fighting. The soldier fought the twins simultaneously, easily besting them.

On the fifth day of his visit, Shondal called a halt to their enthusiastic swordplay. "That's good, both of you," he praised. He smiled fleetingly. "Boys, I must return to Holmis soon."

"When?" Wilfen demanded, dismayed. "You've only just arrived!"

"The day after tomorrow." "Are you going to Himberon?"

"Yes."

"Himberon," Wilfen breathed, thinking of the Eastern University in the Holmish capital, where one day he hoped to study. "I wish we could go with you."

"If all wishes were fulfilled, what then of their worth?" Alvonne said, quoting Lianken Firsh, a famous Nevander poet.

That evening Filgen called the twins for a discussion in the central room of his house. Shondal, who sat in one of the chairs arranged around the circular table, abruptly stood up, nodded to the others, and retrieved his bedding and backpack from the corner of the room where he had arranged them. With a quick wave, the soldier declared that he was going to "camp out" and left Filgen's house. The trio that remained sat down at the casuarina table, the old man with his back to the mullioned window.

"I believe your uncle has informed you that he is soon to depart from Nevanderlof," Filgen said, opening the topic of conversation.

"The day after tomorrow," Wilfen agreed.

Filgen was silent for a moment, then: "You know he always intended to take the two of you back to Holmis with him?"

The twins nodded slowly, wondering to what their grandfather alluded. Surely he was not...

"Shondal has proposed to take the two of you to Himberon now." Filgen took a shuddering breath. "I have spent two days considering the idea. I have reached the only conclusion I could reasonably achieve: I believe the two of you are ready to leave Nevanderlof -- if you wish to do so."

Wilfen and Alvonne gaped at each other in shock. Only that day they had had wistful thoughts about

leaving Nevanderlof; given the choice for real, the decision was not so easily made. The allure of the outside world was offset by the comfortable familiarity of Mardine.

"Of course, Shondal does not expect you to fend for yourselves," Filgen continued. "Wealthy friends of his would take you in until you were able to make your own way in the world. And Shondal himself would be readily available for advice at the Palace of the Holmish King.

"Wilfen, I know you value your learning and wish to attend the Eastern University. I am convinced that you are learned enough to secure entrance.

"Alvonne, your future is less clear to me. I think you are also more than capable of entering the University, but I don't believe that would be your favored course in life. Yet I am certain your intrinsic determination would take you a long way in the Holmish world."

"It can't be an immediate decision for us, Grandfather," pointed out Wilfen.

"Of course not," Filgen acceded. "I understand completely. You have tonight and all of tomorrow in which to decide. I'll leave you now." The old Nevander rose and went into his room, softly closing the door behind him.

"It's something that warrants some thought," Wilfen commented understatedly.

"A good deal of thought," Alvonne concurred, grinning.

By mutual unvoiced agreement, they discussed the subject no more. They took to their separate pallet beds in the room they shared and lay in the dark, pondering the alternatives, until sleep claimed their conscious minds.

That night Alvonne had a bizarre dream. He beheld a man flying in the air! A slight man, attired in a white, figure-hugging costume and black boots, flying like a gliding bird, arms outstretched to catch the wind. Chortling in obvious delight, the fellow swooped and soared in an aquamarine sky over indigo waves. Then, without warning, the man abruptly plummeted, tumbled end over end, to plunge into the sea, where he thrashed and struggled, frantically flapping his arms. Alvonne felt a powerful impulse to go to the stranger's assistance, to help this drowning man whose wings had so suddenly been clipped. He was awakened before anything else could occur, however, by Kinser leaping onto him.

The young man lit an oil lamp, his eyes blinking vigorously before they became accustomed to the flickering light. His wits were slightly dazed, but he had the impression sleep had brought not only the weird dream but also an important decision.

He recalled the choice he had been given: he could journey to Holmis with Shondal; or remain in Mardine with Filgen.

He had opted for Holmis.

The choice made, he felt a peculiar easing of pressure. Such a decision was agonizing to make. With his mind set, Alvonne felt quite cheerful, and so he tossed Kinser onto Wilfen.

Yelling in fright, Wilfen practically leapt out of the heap of blankets piled in his pallet. The sight of Kinser wagging his tail quieted the Nevander.

"What made him do that?" Wilfen wondered aloud, not spying Alvonne lying on the floor rug between their pallets.

Alvonne lost control of himself, laughing without inhibition. He rolled around on the floor in his amusement.

Wilfen stared at his twin in bewilderment. "Have you gone insane?"

Alvonne's laughter faded reluctantly, and he panted to regain his breath. "No."

"What are you so happy about, then? We have an important decision to make."

"I've made it."

Wilfen was astounded. "What? Already!"

Alvonne nodded. "Yes. I'm going to Himberon with Shondal."

"I couldn't make a choice that quickly," Wilfen said slowly. He glanced down at Kinser. "You're certainly spontaneous, Alvonne."

Alvonne just grinned.

Wilfen smiled back faintly. He was still remembering the dream *he* had had. Haloed in light, so detail was hard to discern, had been a young (he guessed), beautiful woman, blond hair piled high on her head, apparently dressed in a shimmering white robe. She had hovered in an otherwise dark and featureless environment, as if she stood on an invisible floor. She had called to Wilfen in a booming voice that shook him to the core: "YOU MUST GO!" There had been a sense of compulsion about the single command. Did it refer to the journey with Uncle Shondal? Was it his own mind attempting to help him make a decision? It was blasphemous, perhaps, but he rather thought the woman had been Anbridge, the Goddess Under The Mountain! He could be deluding himself, of course, as it was only a dream. But if it had been a message from the Goddess...

That afternoon Shondal took his nephews sailing aboard *Sea Jewel*. The twins eagerly helped the soldier get the boat afloat, observing in interest as he raised the sail and directed *Sea Jewel* out to sea.

As the sailing-boat crashed through the swell, salty spray and a southerly breeze lashed at Wilfen. He felt decidedly ill. His face was off-color, its expression more of a grimace than anything else. Fingertips pressed to the temples, his hands cradled his cheeks.

Alvonne laughed aloud, patently pleased by the sensation of sailing. He avoided looking at his brother, and Wilfen, in his suffering, surmised that Alvonne tried to hide a grin only partly attributable to the younger twin's enjoyment of the boat ride.

"Where are we headed?" Alvonne inquired, noticing that Shondal still pointed *Sea Jewel* at the southern horizon.

"Wait, and you shall see!" Shondal answered, smiling.

Sea Jewel sped into the teeth of the wind, its zigzagging defying the lively breeze. Alvonne took up a position in the bow of the boat and surveyed the sea for anything out of the ordinary. Wilfen looked as well, peering through his fingers and trying not to succumb to nausea. The eye on the sail seemed to search with them, watching the expanse of the glittering waves. Suddenly Alvonne spotted the object of their search.

"There it is!" he cried. "An island! It must be!"

Shondal, who worked the tiller, glanced at what could only be land rising out of the sea. "That it is. That's Harsy Elar."

The island became more distinct as *Sea Jewel* moved in. Harsy Elar was an immense, rocky hill looming out of spray and surf. The craggy black rock was almost whole; only a few loose boulders littered the thin strip of beach. The occasional stunted bush clung to places on the hill where a little soil had accumulated. It was a grim and forbidding place.

They sailed around Harsy Elar, outside a ring of jagged rocks that surrounded the island, defending it from seabound approach. Overhead, safe in their aerial domain, seabirds cried their lonely, mournful calls and flew towards the island's rugged hillside, unheeding of the terrible rocks below.

Alvonne saw something on the southern side of the island. "Look!" he shouted above the roar of breaking waves. "A tower!"

Shondal nodded. "I see it! That is Arlund!"

"Can we land on the island?" Wilfen asked, sensing an opportunity, however transitory, of getting back onto solid ground.

"Yes!" Alvonne agreed with typical enthusiasm. "Can we?"

"No!" Shondal returned inflexibly. "Look at those rocks! A gust of wind could pitch us onto them now, and we're just sailing around the outskirts! It's out of the question!"

The twins subsided in acceptance, disappointed nonetheless. It would be nice to examine Arlund at close quarters, but Shondal was right, of course: the black rocks would tear the bottom out of the boat if it ventured too near.

As *Sea Jewel* sailed along the southern side of Harsy Elar, the tower grew clearly visible to the twins' curious eyes. Arlund had been constructed from blocks of some grayish stone, possibly granite. The tower was in ruins now -- testifying to its great age, a pile of the stone blocks lay at its base -- which made it difficult to determine its original height; what remained, however, was by Wilfen's estimation, at least twenty swords high.

"Who built Arlund?" Alvonne wanted to know.

"The Adar Mutians," Shondal replied. "Two hundred years ago. It was built to be a stronghold in the Worldife Sea when the Adar Mutians were a power in Terra Nova. They had a secret pathway through the rocks, known by only a few sea captains."

Wilfen regarded the tower with renewed interest, striving to imagine it as it had been when first constructed, guarding a fleet of ships. A wavy, intermittent trail of stones strewn along the beach suggested a high wall to keep out invaders. He could imagine looking out from the tower, watching the moody sea vainly striving to reach him.

When they had negotiated the southern side of the island, Shondal steered *Sea Jewel* away from Harsy Elar, pointing the bow north towards the coast of Nevanderlof. The wind blew from astern now, and the sailing-boat raced before it, sail bulging.

Late in the afternoon, after the twins had helped Shondal secure *Sea Jewel* high on the beach, the trio returned to Mardine. It had been a joyful trek back to the forest village, as Wilfen had informed the others that he would accompany them on the journey to Himberon. The elder twin had decided to accede to his dream's suggestion: he wanted to go, anyway, and it certainly did not hurt to do what might

well be the will of the Goddess.

* *

Wilfen woke before dawn and rose with a feeling of high excitement, thinking of the adventure ahead: nearly twelve hundred kiloswords from Mardine to Himberon. The path crossed the Warldife Sea, traversed the Holmish province of Kenderlan, then led south through Camfolar province to the capital of the mighty Confederation of Holmis, site of the Palace of the Holmish King.

He was sad at the thought of leaving Kinser behind, but Shondal had said it was impossible to take the dog with them in such a small boat. Erfind, however, had volunteered to adopt the twins' pet.

The young man dressed himself in a white, short-sleeved tunic, black, baggy trousers, ankle-high leather boots, and a green, woolen Nevander cloak. He called to his brother: "Get up, Alvonne! It's time to get ready!"

Shondal was absent when they breakfasted with Filgen at the round table. Later, Wilfen realized his uncle had deliberately given them some time alone with their long-term guardian. Delaying the instant when they would be forced to say goodbye to Filgen, the twins finished their food slowly.

The moment came all too soon, as Wilfen and Alvonne scraped up the last of their porridge. They sat awkwardly for a few moments before standing up. Filgen raised inquiring eyebrows, then got to his own feet.

"Are you ready to leave?" the old man asked.

The twins found it impossible to reply. They nodded.

"You'd best go and collect your belongings, then."

Startled, they fetched backpacks they had prepared the night before.

"I'll never forget you, Grandfather," Wilfen said. "You've done so much for Alvonne and me."

"Goodbye, my boy. Shake hands in the Holmish fashion," Filgen replied solemnly. "You're entering their world now."

Wilfen clasped the old man's frail hand for a moment, shaking it vigorously. Filgen pressed something coldly metallic into the youth's hand. With a final glance and wave, Wilfen passed out of Filgen's house, where he awaited his brother. Alvonne appeared shortly afterwards, hastily wiping his eyes with a sleeve.

A gathering had occurred at the base of the spiral staircase. Virtually the entire village had turned out to see them on their way, and Wilfen suddenly realized just how many people he was going to miss. There was Erfind, waving lazily and smiling wryly (thankfully, he had left Kinser at home: it would not have done to have the dog madly barking and trying to follow the twins); and red-haired Mizzy Doon with the cheeky smile, who had let Wilfen kiss her once or twice (though Alvonne many more times); and Ma Indini, she of the scones smothered with fig jam and a hundred other delicacies. Even craggy-faced Sarbijen the carpenter (said to have been the one-time fiancé of the twins' mother) was present to wish them well. Nevanders were a reserved and unemotional people, so there were no tears. One or two people called, "Good luck, boys," but most just nodded respectfully.

Though it was not apparent, Wilfen was sure he and Alvonne had caused a sensation, for it was almost unheard of for anyone to leave Mardine: he guessed their outland birth would be used to explain their eccentric behavior. He looked at his brother, who seemed to nod in shared understanding.

Alvonne grinned broadly. "Goodbye, Mardine!" he cried. "Never fear: this strange Nevander shall return!"

CHAPTER 5: THE SKYLORD

Wilfen and Alvonne reached the edge of the forest at almost the same moment as the sun surmounted the treetops to illuminate the bay and turn the sea orange. They hastened across the sand to where Shondal had hauled *Sea Jewel* to the water's bounds.

With his nephews' assistance, Shondal pushed the sailing-boat into the sea. *Sea Jewel* became afloat as a result of their labors, and they leapt aboard in triumph. The soldier placed the oars in the rowlocks and rowed powerfully out into the bay.

Trying to ignore persistent seasickness, Wilfen sat in the prow, looking back past the others at tree-lined Mardine Bay, watching it begin to shrink. The wind made his cloak stream behind him or, at times, wrap itself about his body. He felt something pressing into his leg and recalled Filgen had given him something that he had put in the pocket of his trousers without a glance. It proved to be a belt buckle of silver made in the shape of a dragon's head. He liked it greatly and showed Alvonne. His brother nodded and produced its twin, a buckle fashioned in the likeness of a snarling dog's head.

Shondal offered the oars to Wilfen, who rowed furiously, immediately propelling *Sea Jewel* on a circular course. At his uncle's recommendation, he next attempted to put equal effort into both arms, and after that he pulled the boat in only a slight arc to the right.

His arms and shoulders began to ache embarrassingly quickly, and Shondal soon regained the oars. To Wilfen's amazement, his uncle caused *Sea Jewel* to glide through the water, each stroke driving the boat twice the distance of one of the Nevander's own. During the hour the soldier rowed the coast of Nevanderlof retreated dramatically.

The prevailing westerly had strengthened, so after laying the oars aside, Shondal raised the white sail, and its ever-vigilant eye again surveyed the sea. He took the tiller, as the forceful wind filled the sail.

The sun traversed the sky and sank into the west. A red wine sea glittered with flame-crested wrinkles. Overhead clouds developed pink frosting on their fluffy undersides. In the east the heavens were purple, above azure, before pastel blue merged into the yellow afterglow of the sun's passage. Shortly, before their very eyes, darkness overwhelmed the light, and night descended over the Warldife Sea. Stars, pulsing motes of brilliance, speckled the newly blackened sky. Head propped on clasped hands, Wilfen lay on his back between two benches, watching the scene unfold before him.

The next thing he beheld was the disk of the sun high in the sky. The Nevander sat up, yawning and stretching.

"Good morning!" Alvonne said.

"Good morning!" Wilfen replied. He blinked a few times to focus his eyes and took a look around.

Nevanderlof was gone: the boat was completely surrounded by sparkly water. Without the visible comfort of land, Wilfen felt curiously exposed and vulnerable.

"How far are we from the Holmish coast now?" he asked his brother.

"About 230 kiloswords from Bonvalur," Shondal answered for Alvonne. "That's where we make landfall."

On Shondal's map Wilfen determined *Sea Jewel*'s position: the sailing-boat had rounded the cape on

Nevanderlof's southeastern coast and bore northeast towards Bonvalur on Holmis' western shoreline.

At Shondal's suggestion, the trio resolved to spend the morning fishing. Shondal handed each brother a hook and a wooden spool that held twenty swords of fine twine. After expending some time trying to lure fish with unsuitable bait, Shondal managed to catch a small, dark fish that proved hard to hold. Finally, however, it was subdued, and he cut it into little pieces for their hooks.

Shortly after midday an eerie whistling sound from above interrupted their companionable reverie. Their fishing abruptly forgotten, the Argindells peered upward. A strange manifestation had appeared overhead, a silvery speck that streaked across the sky from east to west. A momentary flash engulfed the silver...thing, and suddenly it fell. Soundlessly, with the illusion of a graceful, floating descent, it plunged downward, slamming into the sea not two kiloswords from *Sea Jewel*. The stunned and speechless travelers were rocked by a fast-moving sword-high wave, then almost blown overboard by a searing blast of wind that followed.

They picked themselves up from where they had tumbled and gaped skyward. It started to rain then, a shower of hot, blackened metal fragments that pattered and sizzled on the water around them, forcing them to duck until it subsided.

"Does anyone know what that was?" Shondal asked in a strained voice after several moments had elapsed.

Both twins slowly shook their heads.

"I didn't think so."

There was a brief silence.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Shondal asked no one in particular.

"I believe so," Alvonne answered, grinning slightly.

"More than likely," Wilfen said.

Something akin to madness seized them. Shondal took the oars, and the twins manned the tiller, pointing *Sea Jewel* back westward. They cackled almost hysterically, as heedless to possible danger, they headed towards the place where the sky-thing had fallen into the sea.

Torn by colossal force, twisted sheets of shiny metal from the sky object lay scattered about the gently heaving sea. The warped metal was hot to the tentative, hurried touch. Shaking their heads at the wreckage, the travelers sailed around the limit of the flotsam. The silvery thing had apparently been smashed by the impact, leaving behind, bobbing in the midst of the debris, a mirrored sphere about two swords in diameter; the Argindells could see a distorted reflection of themselves aboard *Sea Jewel*, open mouths exaggeratedly vertically elongated.

A buckled plate of metal caught Alvonne's eye: red characters were marked on it. "Look at this, Wilfen!" he called excitedly, pointing.

Eyes wide, Wilfen stared at the red letters. "Skylord writing!"

"Skylord!" exclaimed Shondal. "I thought the Skylords were a myth."

"The language we are speaking, Oriental, owes a lot to the Skylords' tongue," declared Wilfen, sobered by what he looked at. "They were...*are* quite real."

"If that was part of their armory," said Shondal, "then I'd hate to fight all their forces."

"To think someone rode in that," Wilfen said slowly.

"Yet even such a ship was not safe from wrecking," Alvonne observed.

"Incredible," Shondal said in wonder and disbelief. "How much cleverer they are than we."

There was a movement, and they froze. Just above the waterline, a rectangular panel of the mirrored sphere -- sword high and half that wide -- had abruptly vanished, simply dissolved away, revealing an opening that emitted dull pinkish light. They rowed farther away and, lowering the sail, settled to watch, fearful of what might come out of that aperture.

Nothing happened for a few minutes. They began to calm their ragged breathing and racing hearts.

Alvonne suddenly laughed. "There's no one in there! It's -- "

A movement caused the words to die on Alvonne's tongue. Wilfen felt the hairs on the back of his neck stirring, as moisture beaded on his forehead and upper lip, and, almost paradoxically, his mouth became dry. A figure had materialized in the sphere's opening: it was a Skylord.

The Skylord was a short black man. He was clothed in a white, form-fitting outfit of some kind, and his high boots were black. On his back was what was obviously a backpack, though, peculiarly, orange in color. Squinting in the bright, early afternoon sunlight, he looked cautiously about, then stepped out of the sphere onto one of the larger sections of wreckage.

The Skylord spied them as the sailing-boat drifted towards him. The stranger's eyes widened as he stared at the Argindells in amazement.

"Now what?" Wilfen demanded.

"He looks as surprised as us," Alvonne noted, unable to hide a speck of amusement. He was thinking about the portentous dream he had had back in Mardine. The Skylord looked exactly like the man who had been flying above the waves. Had it been a dream sent by the Goddess? It seemed clear to him: he should help the stranger. "Do we take him with us?" he asked Shondal.

"He might come with us," Shondal said thoughtfully. "The King would certainly be interested in him."

"How can we get him to come with us?" Wilfen asked. "We can't really force him."

"I don't think we need to compel him," Shondal replied. "The Skylord is marooned on Terra Nova, I believe, with his sky ship wrecked. He'll probably come willingly, since he has nowhere else to go."

CHAPTER 6: NERVE

Wilfen contemplated the Skylord. Older than the Nevanders but younger than Shondal, the stranger was about eleven or twelve years of age. He was broad-featured, and his black, wooly hair was cut close to the skull. He was slenderly built, seemingly small and fragile. Wilfen put his height at a little less than a sword, at least five inches shorter than the twins. He wore outlandish clothing: so shiny and with no obvious weave, it was much different to what a Terra Novan would wear, whatever their nationality. And yet for all that, he appeared human enough.

Eyes blank, the Skylord had joined the Terra Novans in *Sea Jewel* like an automaton. Shondal had initially drawn his sword, but he quickly sheathed *Findram* again, realizing the outlander was no threat to the Argindells. "Anyway, he could probably kill us in the blink of an eye if he wanted to do so," he told

the twins.

The stranger suffered from who knew what degree of the doldrums. Head bowed, he sat resignedly on the bench in the prow of the boat. Wilfen considered the Skylord's circumstances: he was marooned in a land he would deem utterly barbaric.

The Skylord was suspicious of the food and drink the travelers offered him. He sniffed at it dubiously and would not touch anything, muttering incomprehensible words in a high-pitched voice.

As the afternoon wore on, the Skylord acquired more of an interest in his surroundings. Instead of scrutinizing the floorboards between his feet, he studied the endless waves with curious eyes.

"Terra Nova," he declared suddenly.

The Terra Novans gaped.

"Can he speak Oriental, after all?" Shondal wondered.

Wilfen shook his head. "I doubt it. 'Terra Nova' is a Skylord term."

The Skylord had turned his head and was watching them intently. Gesturing to himself, he spoke again: "Mikael Svensson."

"What's that?" Shondal demanded. "More Skylord language?"

"I'm not sure," Wilfen said, and Alvonne shrugged.

The stranger prodded his chest with a finger. "Mikael Svensson," he said more insistently.

"It might be his name," Alvonne said. "It sounds different to normal Skylord, though."

"It could be a foreign name, like the Tharms or Nulls have," Shondal suggested. "It's stranger than any name I've ever heard."

Alvonne pointed to himself. "Alvonne Argindell."

The Skylord smiled, revealing perfect teeth that were overtly white against his ebony skin. "Ahl-von Ahr-gihn-dell," he repeated slowly. "Alvonne Argindell. Argindell, Argindell, Argindell." He looked inquiringly at Wilfen and Shondal.

"Shondal Argindell," said the soldier.

"Wilfen Argindell," the older Nevander introduced himself.

The stranger nodded to each in turn, reproducing their names quite accurately. He glanced back and forth between the Terra Novans.

"It seems he's ready to continue," Shondal observed.

That evening they sailed towards a coral atoll shaped like a horseshoe. The blue-green water of the sheltered inner harbor was shallow but sufficiently deep to allow *Sea Jewel* passage en route to beaching on a shell-strewn strip of soft sand. The island was a bleak, virtually barren place. Hardly a stunted weed could grow on the wind-swept outcropping; indeed, apart from the scant sand that had collected on this tiny beach, situated around the inner curve of the horseshoe, barely any soil had accumulated on the rough, pale, weathered coral. Even seabirds did not bother to nest here. The odd miniature creature --

the source of the shells, perhaps -- wriggled in the shallows and on the beach where intermittent waves rolled onto the sand, but nothing else deigned to live on the atoll.

The sun was an orange fireball sinking amid pink and purple plumes of cloud, when the travelers began to set up camp on the fine white sand. Shondal warned the others to leave their boots on when walking around, as the sand only thinly covered coral capable of slashing unprotected feet. They arranged their sleeping things. The Terra Novans were amused to note that even the Skylord had something reminiscent -- though made of a much finer, more colorful fabric -- of a sleeping bag. As Wilfen thumped his own backpack into the semblance of a pillow, he noticed Mikael Svensson rummaging through the orange backpack.

"The Skylord seems greatly interested in the contents of his strange orange backpack," Wilfen remarked.

"They're all he has to remind him of his home, I suppose," Shondal said with a shrug.

Wilfen gave a start. "What does he have?"

Mikael Svensson had produced a black, marble-sized sphere from his backpack. He lobbed it into the air, and incredibly, the orb hovered unsupported, a sword above the ground and before the Skylord's eyes. Then another truly peculiar thing happened: a ghostly, effulgent projection sprang forth from the sphere, an enveloping globe -- mostly blue but with yellow- brown splotches -- about a foot in diameter that completely engulfed the black ball. It was becoming dark now, and the bright globe lit up the immediate area with an eerie light, bathing Mikael Svensson's in an unnatural glow. He winked at an open-mouthed Wilfen, then frowned in thought as he studied the apparition he had wrought. He said a word, and a pinpoint of red light winked into existence on one of the glowing globe's irregular yellowish areas.

Alvonne paused from collecting driftwood and came to his brother's side. "What's happening?" he asked softly.

Mystified, Wilfen shrugged.

Mikael Svensson spoke a brief, sharp command, and the projected sphere altered to become a rectangular plane of light that faced him alone. Blue surrounded a yellow-green area reminiscent of a splash of paint. The mote of red was in the center of a blue gulf that indented into the yellow blotch.

"There's something familiar about that yellowy patch," Alvonne murmured, idly turning a piece of wood in his hands.

Wilfen tilted his head, considering the projection. He went and stood behind the Skylord, looking over the man's shoulder. "You're right," he agreed. "It does remind me of something." It hit the Nevander like a blow: he literally staggered back a step or two. "Goddess! It's a map!" he cried. "Look! You can see the Worldife Sea, and that smaller blotch is Nevanderlof!"

Alvonne studied the ghostly map for a moment and started to laugh. "If I'm not mistaken, then that red star is east of Nevanderlof and precisely where we are at this very instant."

Wilfen squinted, then his eyes widened. "That is a very clever device."

"That's an understatement," Alvonne said.

"That's for sure!" agreed Shondal, who had been silent up to that point.

The Skylord turned and regarded the Terra Novans quizzically. He caught their attention by gesturing at

his floating spectral map. He started to speak in his own language and caught himself. With a sweeping motion he indicated himself and the Argindells, before pointing again to his supernatural map of Terra Nova.

"What's he trying to say?" Shondal wondered.

Wilfen shook his head in puzzlement.

The Skylord struggled to speak in halting, though recognizable Oriental: "Where...where...where go?"

The Terra Novans stared at each other in astonishment. Alvonne laughed and tentatively placed a finger near the red light (though not actually touching the projection). He cautiously traced a path across Svensson's map to where Himberon was approximately located.

The Skylord followed Alvonne's finger intently, apparently trying to memorize the planned course. Obviously satisfied, he said a few words, and the glowing map disappeared, leaving the floating black ball. He plucked it out of the air and deposited it back in his orange backpack.

Shondal started a campfire out of driftwood Alvonne had collected. The travelers collected around it and consumed their evening meal, eating dried figs with some distaste. (Though it kept fresh for weeks, dried fruit was not enjoyable eating day after day.)

"Is our friend still not eating?" Shondal inquired of the twins, grimacing at the mouthful he had just swallowed. "Can't say I blame him if he isn't."

"He seems to have his own food," Alvonne said.

After brushing his hands free of sand, the Skylord had taken a fist-sized decanter of some sort from his lurid backpack and extracted from it two diminutive ovoid objects. Tilting his head back, he tossed the pills into his mouth and evidently swallowed them.

"Ahh," sighed the Skylord, looking satisfied.

"You don't suppose that was some kind of instant feast, do you?" Wilfen asked.

Shondal gave an expression of indifference. "I've seen enough of his tricks. Nothing surprises me any more."

"We've had small maps," observed Alvonne. "Why not instant food and water?"

* *

Svensson woke with a jerk, wondering where he was. He was tightly cocooned in something that rested on a compact yet malleable surface. A breeze caressed his face -- real air! -- and his mouth was filled with a gritty substance -- sand? Rhythmically rising and falling in volume, a constant susurrant registered on his ears. Silhouetted by grayish light, three nebulously human forms moved about him. Then he remembered, and his mind quailed as it all came crashing down on him. Enwrapped in a sleeping bag on a lonely, inhospitable island in an endless expanse of deep blue water, he was marooned on a forsaken planet, the captive of sword-swinging barbarians.

This was Terra Nova: a world circling the giant blue-white star, Alston; a planet with an exotic yellow moon; a planet with a year of nearly eight hundred Imperial Standard Days, though an unusually circular orbit and minor axial tilt dictated that its seasonal climatic variation was mild; a planet that was, despite having been colonized two thousand years previously, patently undeveloped.

'What a situation!' he thought in despair. 'Can things get any worse than this?'

Yet even as he considered the turn of events, he felt perceptibly more composed. The previous day he had been in a complete daze, allowing the Terra Novans to lead him by the nose. He had been in a state of shock over the destruction of the existence he had previously known. Today, by contrast, he was able to think, and there was much that was worthy of thought.

Firstly, and most significantly, the people of Terra Nova had survived: the proof was with him on this beach. But they had lost their technology if these three accurately represented all humans on the planet. He had fallen into the clutches of an apparent Iron Age human culture, where none should be, though, of course, many things could change over two thousand years. It did not make sense to Svensson, however, since modern technology was beyond the average person's comprehension and operated entirely by psionic control: most machines would do one's bidding even if one did not know how they worked. He found it difficult to accept that anyone would willingly concede technological devices, but they were just not evident. He *had* seen high technology defenses during his descent on the planet, so a computer, presumably a standard Central Computer, still watched over Terra Nova, but the people under its shield were probably unaware of it. Had the ancestors of these people simply forgotten about machines? Perhaps these three were part of a primitive, isolated tribe, though that did not seem all that likely, because they did have access to transport.

Terra Nova had been a very small settlement in 2392, the year Svensson's great journey began, a Central Computer Complex containing a handful of people. But if those people had survived to procreate, then two thousand years should have been sufficient to significantly boost population numbers. Therefore, these three men *must* be descendants of the original Terra Novan colonists. From where else could they have sprung? They called Svensson a word that was recognizable as "Skylord," so they must have some recollection of what they had been capable of, but they believed him a member of a race apart, beyond them. It was ironic, he realized, that the Terra Novans esteemed people that were, in a way, themselves.

The Enemy still lingered in the vicinity of Terra Nova, and this puzzled him. From what Svensson had seen, there was little threat to the aliens here on Terra Nova, which was certainly the last outpost of humanity. The Imperial fleets had represented a genuine danger, but these people, the Argindells, were unlikely to menace an interstellar civilization with steel swords and bows and arrows. The Enemy must have enormous patience to have lain in wait for two thousand years -- or an overwhelming need to destroy the human race.

Though the equipment he carried in his backpack was not the most sensitive known to humanity, it should still have detected some evidence of high technology. The Central Computer apparently coordinating Terra Nova's defense had given no indication it was conscious of his presence, but it must have had a hand in helping him elude the Enemy fleet. It was, he supposed, feasible the Enemy jammed all communications, even psionic.

One question vexed him: who had blasted him out of the sky? The global defense shield should have made it impossible for the Enemy to strike the Eagle Eye with a laser of adequate power. The planet's Central Computer, with its array of orbital defense satellites, had the means, yet why would it shoot him down after seemingly helping him escape the Enemy fleet? He dismissed the conundrum with a shake of the head: it was, all things considered, a minor issue.

His inability to control or even influence his situation troubled him. Svensson dealt with primitives in their own environment, almost as limited, due to circumstances, as they were. His spacecraft was destroyed. Most of his backpack gear was survival equipment: medikit, laser cutter, nuclear converter, sleeping bag, hands-free torch, and other such basic items. It had never been envisaged that a crashed pilot would land on an inhospitable planet or be too distant from rescue. This planet might be hospitable, but no rescue

seemed in the offing. Any more sophisticated devices were ineffectual, for the Central Computer did not respond, and as a consequence no data from satellites or survey probes was accessible. His electronic surveyor -- which the Terra Novans had seen him use -- could offer only a rudimentary geographical outline of any region of the planet. He was only now beginning to acknowledge that he might well be marooned among barbaric peoples henceforth.

His circumstances were such that, due to his lack of experience of this planet, he was actually at a substantial disadvantage compared to the Terra Novans. He was totally impotent, dependent on their good will. The three men treated him courteously, however -- perhaps it was customary hereabouts -- by offering him their food and water and generally being solicitous of his needs. It seemed he was not so much a captive as something of an honored guest, though of course he could be reading the signs wrongly. Perhaps today it would all change. Perhaps a captive was entitled to one day's good treatment, then swiftly dispatched the following day. He just did not know.

He formulated a plan of sorts. For the present he would remain with these people -- assuming they were willing to keep him -- and get to know Terra Nova. Eventually, however, he must locate the complex of the planetary Central Computer: from there he might be able to do some small thing to strike back at the Enemy.

His first objective was establishing effective communication, because improvised sign language was quite inadequate. Closing his eyes, he thought for a time and came up with an interesting notion. If these people *were* descended from Imperial colonists -- and their language was clearly derived from Imperial English -- then it was conceivable that they had some semblance of psionics. Svensson had his personal computer to amplify his telepathic power, and the Terra Novans would possess no psionic shields: if they had any psionic talent at all, then he just might be able to communicate telepathically.

He slid out of his sleeping bag, then sat up on its flaccid form, resting his hands on the white, satiny material covering his knees. The prevailing westerly breeze assailed him, but his closely cropped hair and tightly fitting climate suit were unruffled. He sought the attention of the passing, middle-sized Terra Novan, hawk-faced Alvonne, and caught the young man's eye. *<'Can you hear me?>* he asked telepathically.

Alvonne froze in mid-stride. His startlingly green eyes were comically wide as he stared down at Svensson for a moment. He said something unintelligible in his own language.

Svensson shook his head. *<'No. If you can hear me, think what you want to say.'>*

Svensson perceived the youth's excitement. *<'Lord Mikael Svensson?>* Alvonne communicated. It was faint but definitely audible. *<'Are you talking to me? In my mind!>*

<'Yes!> Svensson felt eager himself. A person of an Iron Age culture he might be, but Alvonne Argindell was human. The Thermosian had not anticipated talking to any person of his kind again, ever since... No, he did not want to think about that.

<'Can you speak my language?> Alvonne wanted to know.

<'No. This is pure mind-to-mind communication. It happens at a level deeper than language. I think in my language, and you understand it in your own.'>

Alvonne fidgeted. He squatted down to Svensson's level. *<'Do you think the others can talk this way, too?>*

<'I don't know. Why don't you try it?>

Wilfen, to Svensson's right, was in the process of loading his primitive backpack. Alvonne looked at the thin young man -- a brother? -- and focussed. Svensson, not the target of the attempted telepathic contact, perceived only a faint buzzing. Wilfen paused in confusion for a moment. Then he frowned and abruptly tightened the straps on the backpack.

<*It didn't work!*> Alvonne thought in frustration to Svensson.

<*I didn't think it would. I have my power increased by...an artifact. Not many people can communicate without such aid. Let me try with Wilfen.*>

The Thermosian turned his gaze on the elder brother. <*Wilfen! Can you hear me?*>

The effect was amusing. Wilfen suddenly straightened, dropping his backpack on the soft sand. Like a mouse that knew a predator prowled nearby, he looked frantically all about him, then up into the yellowing dawn sky.

"What is it, Wilfen?" Shondal demanded, returning from a call of nature.

"I just heard a voice. In my head."

Alvonne and Svensson were smiling.

Shondal stared at them. "What's going on, Alvonne?"

"Lord Mikael Svensson can communicate with us by mind," Alvonne explained matter-of-factly. "You just have to concentrate and *think* what you want to say, then he can understand it."

Wilfen frowned. <*Like this? Can you hear me? Lord Mikael?*>

<*You're soft but clear enough.*>

"How amazing!" cried Wilfen aloud. "What a marvelous talent!"

Shondal spoke, and Wilfen relayed the essence of the soldier's remark to Svensson: <*We thought you couldn't speak our language.*>

<*It automatically translates all languages, Shondal.*>

The warrior clutched at his head. "I can hear him!"

<*Try and think back to me,*> directed Svensson.

<*Hello. Hello, can you hear me?*>

<*Just. You'll get better with practice.*>

"I've never heard of anything like this," Shondal mused. <*The Goddess taught you this?*>

Svensson was instantly alert. "The Goddess." The Terra Novans had created their own religion. It figured, he realized. When one did not have an explanation for the things that happened around one, one devised an explanation. He needed to be circumspect: human history was littered with the bodies of those who had, unintentionally or not, insulted gods.

Their hair disheveled, faces stubbled (such primitive grooming problems; his personal computer had suppressed his hair growth since he had begun his last and final mission), all three Terra Novans gathered

closely around Svensson. They sat on the sand in their various fashions, interested in what he had to impart. *<'What makes you think I might have had contact with...the Goddess?'*> he said, answering a question with a question.

Squatting on his haunches, Alvonne gestured expansively with his hands. *<'You have powers far beyond us. Divine powers.'*>

<'I am as human as you are. You, yourselves, can communicate like this. Are you associated with the Goddess?'>

Shondal sat up perfectly straight, his naked sword resting on his crossed legs (the weapon's aspect of raw, primitive...menace unnerved Svensson). He snorted expressively. *<'Us? Disciples of the Goddess!'*> Despite his apparent amusement, Svensson sensed a sudden guardedness about the big man.

The Thermosian grinned. *<'My abilities are innate yet weak. They are amplified by machines of clever manufacture. I have more knowledge and understanding, but, like you, I am flesh and blood.'*>

<'What are your plans on Terra Nova, then?'> Shondal asked, studying him with intent blue eyes.

Svensson smiled bleakly. *<'I have none. I fled my enemies and was wrecked on Terra Nova.'*>

Wilfen hugged his knees to his chest with long-fingered hands. *<'Do you seek revenge on your enemies?'*> he inquired.

The Thermosian frowned. He took a deep breath and sighed, vigorously scratching his head and creating a brief cascade of sand. He held his face in his hands, rubbing his eyes. *<'I don't know,'>* he replied finally. *<'I don't know anything. The last thing I knew I fled my enemies, vengeance out of the question. I then inexplicably fell into the sea. My people on Terra Nova, if they survive, have not contacted me. If the entire universe is in flames, I do not know it!'*

'I'm lost and ignorant, and that is something hard to bear for one of my heritage.'>

The Terra Novans regarded him with somewhat sympathetic expressions. Wilfen, the most empathetic of them -- it could be that he was rather talented, psionically -- grimaced and suffered along with him. The Thermosian forced a smile, but he feared it lacked conviction.

<'We'll help you,'> Shondal promised, his scarred knuckles whitening as he gripped his sword's pommel with a huge hand.

Svensson stared at him, suddenly unreasonably irritated. 'How can this barbarian assist me in affairs of interstellar import?' he wondered.

Ashamed by his thoughts, the Thermosian dropped his eyes. As a sincere expression of loyalty and support, Shondal's statement did more for Svensson than any dispassionate offer of true aid. More and more it seemed he was not so much a captive as a...what? Revered guest? A Skylord, whatever that entailed. He felt a surprising wave of emotion sweep over him: he liked the unsophisticated yet honest Shondal, liked all the Argindells.

<'Thank you,'> he thought softly. And he meant it, for he *did* need their help. Despite his cleverness and supposed superiority to these people, Svensson still could not handle the entire planet -- not without companionship.

<'You must come with us,'> Shondal suggested, surprisingly keen. *<'We can enlighten you about*

Terra Nova.'>

The quartet finished its morning routines and packed up its possessions (Svensson downed a gastronomically unsatisfying food pill and, following established convention, went behind a sand dune to relieve himself, a function that had been spontaneous and free of embarrassment aboard the *Eagle Eye*).

They boarded the boat once more. The Thermosian was uneasy about sailing in the primitive wooden watercraft -- *Sea Jewel*, they called it -- and distracted himself by telepathically conversing with the Argindells. The Terra Novans were quite happy to answer his questions about their land. They were amazed by his ignorance of some things but good-naturedly assuaged his curiosity.

To Shondal and the twins the entire world was the continent on which they lived; there were rumors of distant lands beyond the seas, but apparently no one had sailed back to this land with proof of their existence. A number of countries were formed into two major blocs, loosely aligned except in times of war: the Western Alliance and the Eastern Alliance. A country called the Nullish Empire largely controlled the Western Alliance; the Eastern Alliance was mostly influenced by Shondal's nation, the Holmish Confederation. There were also a few neutral countries, such as the twins' adopted homeland, Nevanderlof.

Terra Nova, the continent, had a documented history of around one thousand years (about two thousand Imperial Standard Years), dating back to somewhere around the time of the Enemy invasion. The standard calendar was the Holmish model, which divided the Terra Novan year of 728 days into eight months of ninety-one days apiece. It dated back to the unification of the Holmish Confederation by some fellow called King Andor the Great. It was presently Holmish Year 862.

As far as Svensson could tell, Terra Nova resembled, both in social structure and technology, Earth's Europe in the eleventh or twelfth century AD. Most countries were governed by a hierarchical system ultimately headed by a monarch of some kind. Ordinary people worked farms or lived in villages and towns, though the desert-dwelling Memm had no permanent settlements.

Terra Novans -- Shondal's family, anyway -- believed in one Anbridge, the Goddess Under The Mountain. To pick up a pinch of dirt was to invoke the blessing of the Goddess. The powers of evil that opposed Anbridge lived in the sky.

Svensson reflected on the religion of Terra Nova. Apart from the usual omniscience, the Goddess did not seem to have any definite powers. She dwelt under the earth, some sort of earth mother, perhaps; and the enemies of the Goddess abided in the sky, very much opposite to most Earthly religions. He wondered if some kind of vague perception of the Enemy fleet waiting in space had influenced the respective placement of Terra Nova's versions of Heaven and Hell.

The Argindells were on their way to the city of Himberon, capital of the Holmish Confederation. From what Svensson could gather, Shondal escorted the twins, who hoped to make their mark on the world. They were seemingly too restive to remain in sleepy little Nevanderlof.

* *

It was late afternoon, perhaps an hour or two shy of the gloaming. Shondal froze in the act of peering over one white-cloaked shoulder. Wilfen followed the direction of his uncle's gaze across the waves out towards the west; squinting, he distinguished a faint speck against the horizon. He abruptly curtailed telepathic communication with the Skylord.

"This could mean trouble," Shondal said grimly. "That's a boat headed our way. It could be coming to attack us. I want you boys to keep *Sea Jewel* on course."

Wilfen and Alvonne nodded. They understood the danger inherent in their circumstances. The loser of maritime combat did not ordinarily survive: if not killed outright, there was the likelihood of drowning. Hastily explaining the situation to Svensson, the twins took the tiller between them and held *Sea Jewel* steady.

Shondal took up the oars. Gritting his teeth, the soldier threw all the power of his upper body into the task, lashing the waves and impelling *Sea Jewel* into flight.

Yet Svensson could see the other vessel gained on them. Even as he watched, the minute speck grew into something easily identifiable as a boat, red sail silhouetted against the descending sun. It filled his vision. Shondal perceived it, too, and snarling with the strain, he redoubled his efforts. No one spoke. The constant sounds of the oars dipping and the sail flapping seemed to increase in volume, threatening to overwhelm the ears.

For an hour the apparent pursuit continued. The following boat proved very swift, for it eroded *Sea Jewel's* head start back to next to nothing. The distance between the vessels was now not much more than a hundred meters, and Svensson discerned two figures bearing bows in the boat with the red sail. He had thought he was nervous before, but now, suddenly, his heart drummed, and blood roared in his ears.

A glimpse of slender objects, jet black against the orange afterglow, arching towards him panicked the Thermosian; he ducked, barely suppressing a yell, but the arrows dropped a dozen meters short. The twins were troubled as well, glancing at Shondal, who nodded and ceased to stroke the oars.

"Get my shield, Alvonne!" the soldier commanded. "Protect the three of you as well as you can!"

As he fetched the round, dragon-charged shield and hefted it awkwardly, Alvonne grinned tightly at the Thermosian. The shield looked heavy to Svensson; he wondered how effectively it would block arrows. Despite the climate suit, he suddenly felt badly overheated, and sweat poured from his brow and stung his eyes. His labored breath came in short gasps.

Shondal shot an arrow of his own at the other boat; simultaneously a near-spent arrow rebounded from his armored chest.

During the next few minutes: Alvonne maintained his attention on incoming arrows; Wilfen concentrated on holding *Sea Jewel* on a straight course; Svensson hunkered down, unable to believe the situation in which he had found himself. The younger Nevander defended them all by blocking and deflecting several arrows. The shield shuddered with each impact, and one or two shafts broke on its face. Pungent sweat soaked their bodies, and none of them could hear much over their own rasping breath.

Shondal discharged several arrows at the pursuing boat. Svensson could not be certain of the Terra Novan's accuracy, but a few times he saw the figures in the other boat taking evasive action.

The gap narrowed. Soon only fifty meters separated the two boats. Svensson could clearly see the attacking archers: one was short and utterly bald, the other tall, thin, and dark-haired. A third man steered their boat. <'*They are Tharms!*'> Wilfen informed him, radiating a fear so palpable it almost overshadowed Svensson's own anxiety. <'*There is no mistaking those Southlander features. Tharm is part of the Western Alliance.*'>

Shondal muttered under his breath. "By the Goddess. Will Waghel never tire of dogging me?"

With a suddenness that was shocking in spite of its inevitability, one of the combatants was struck: an arrow lodged in the chest of the tall Tharm. The other Tharm, seemingly oblivious to his fellow's

wounding, continued to shoot resolutely. During the rapid interchange of fire that ensued: Shondal was struck in the leg -- a resounding thwack! and a sudden spurt of intensely scarlet blood -- which he totally ignored; and a blue-feathered shaft abruptly sprouted in the bald Tharm's left biceps. Face wracked in pain, the Tharm sighted his target and let fly one last arrow. It fell well short, and Svensson heard the man's cry, apparently ordering his companion at the tiller to abandon the pursuit. The pursuing boat changed course, angling away from *Sea Jewel*.

Shondal was beside the twins, releasing their hands from tiller and shield. "You're safe now," he reassured them.

"They were trying to kill us," said Wilfen, shaking.

"Tharmish pirates!" Shondal spat. "They infest these waters."

Svensson shivered, staring across the darkening sea at the departing boat. He had thought a person of his heritage would be able to comfortably deal with a barbarian world like this. But he had been mistaken. He had been petrified by the archer attack. Being shot at in space was nothing compared to being shot at with steel-tipped arrows.

He marveled at the fortitude of Shondal, who had not only risen to his feet to draw the Tharms' fire but had shrugged off being struck by an arrow. The barbarian soldier discovered that the red-feathered arrow had inflicted only a shallow wound. Without wincing, he removed the arrowhead, bathed the injury in salt water, then bound his thigh with a strip of cloth.

Somehow, Svensson knew the soldier would refuse the succor of the Thermosian's medikit, so he did not offer. If the wound looked like turning septic -- surely a strong possibility for someone using primitive first aid and possessing no personal computer -- then Svensson would insist on utilizing his medical device.

Shondal regarded Svensson quizzically, contemplating the Thermosian's face. The soldier seemed assured by the brave demeanor that Svensson feigned, nodding knowingly. <*You've seen combat of some kind,*> the Terra Novan thought, and it was not a question. <*You're afraid but hiding it well. Keep it up for the boys' sake.*>

Svensson nodded.

"You boys did extremely well," declared Shondal aloud. "The first time a man finds himself in combat changes him. You'll never be the same again."

* *

Night shrouded the sea once more. Now, in darkness, a vision of the Tharmish attack grew bright in Wilfen's mind. He appreciated the weight of his mortality more than ever before. He fiercely told himself he was out of jeopardy but was incapable of persuading his disconcerted mind.

It was a long, long time before Wilfen was able to sleep. And then he was haunted by nightmares that seized his unconscious mind with a grip of iron.

By morning his fears of the night before seemed foolish. He basked in the warmth of the morning sun, which rose from land, low and level, on the eastern horizon.

"Why does it look so flat?" Alvonne asked Shondal.

"You're actually seeing the Malian Farn, a huge plateau a few kiloswords inland. It's about two hundred kiloswords long and a hundred-and-fifty wide in places. It's made of hard rock, and the edges are steep cliffs. Some people think the Malian Farn is a single gigantic rock."

As time passed, a small gray smudge against the horizon swelled and resolved itself into a town. *Sea Jewel* sailed towards Bonvalur and the overbearing Malian Farn. Two fingers of land curved around to almost touch. High gray towers on each headland were linked by a sturdy wooden bridge that spanned the fifty-sword gap about ten swords above the water. Troops with crossbows paced atop the bridge, guarding the entrance into Bonvalur's harbor.

Shondal turned *Sea Jewel's* sail so it would catch no wind, and the sailing-boat slowed to a bobbing halt under the bridge. Sizing up the travelers, a guard in steel-studded leather armor peered over the railing.

"Name and business?" he demanded.

"Shondal Argindell. Traveler."

The guardsman removed his crested helmet, revealing blond, sweat-plastered hair. He bore a faint, buck-toothed smile. "I never thought I'd see you again, Shondal."

"Maybe you hoped you wouldn't!" Shondal's smile was cautious. "I know you, Jhaylon." "I was sorry to hear about your brother," Jhaylon stated solemnly. "He was certainly a great man."

"Yes, he was."

Jhaylon nodded slightly. "Well, I may see you again, Shondal, but I doubt it. What you're doing in Kenderlan I don't know nor wish to know. I trust you, Shondal. You may proceed into the harbor. Goodbye."

A few moments' pause. "Goodbye, Jhaylon."

Sea Jewel sailed into the inner harbor. The shoreline bristled with hundreds of jetties, most with adjoining docked vessels, ranging from one-person Adar Mutian fishing-boats to Holmish ocean-going ships that sported many tall masts.

"Who was that?" Wilfen asked. "He seemed nice enough, if a trifle abrupt." By now the Argindells had mastered the technique of talking aloud and communicating telepathically at the same time; Svensson was able to follow most of their conversations.

"He's a good man. That was Jhaylon Falds. He and I served in the Holmish Army's Eighth Legion a few years ago."

"Why isn't he in the Legions any more?" Alvonne wanted to know.

Shondal frowned, and it seemed at first he would not reply. "It was early in '55, just before the Great Plague that killed your parents..." he began finally. "The Barbarians invaded Arndlund. We were sent to hold the Livenine River. Jhaylon was my century's leader: the centurion. When the Barbarians attacked, Jhaylon lost his nerve. All his ability deserted him, and he was unable to make a single decision. Our century was decimated. The Army threw Jhaylon out in disgrace. That's why he was not especially pleased to see me: I bring back unpleasant memories."

The others were silent at the conclusion of Shondal's brief oratory. The twins regarded him with awe, for Filgen had once told his grandsons about the Battle of the Livenine River. During the Northlanders' invasion of Arndlund, the Eighth Holmish Legion had held off a superior force of Barbarians, said to be five times its number. The Eighth was cut to pieces, but for three days it slowed the Barbarian advance, until the First and Fifty-second Legions arrived to rout the Barbarians.

A majestic ship stood out from the others, an enormous galleon. The ship's four treelike masts appeared

capable of housing thousands of square swords of sail. It was assembled of such a prodigious amount of weathered wood that Wilfen could guess -- without glancing at the faded red and white flag fluttering from the mainmast -- that the galleon was a Camfolar province vessel. No other land (except Arndlund, whose people had no great love for the sea) had such access to the hardwoods of Jherdol Tay, which were so suitable for shipbuilding. Rugged-looking sailors whistled and shouted and cursed as they worked on the galleon: clambering up and down ropes and masts with rungs; scrubbing decks and caulking seams on hands and knees; forming chains to unload crates and barrels; and engaging in various other activities Wilfen could not readily identify.

"Do you know that ship?" Alvonne asked Shondal.

"I do. That is the *Camfolar Dragon* out of Campport, Camfolar. The '*Dragon*' is the largest ship sailing the waters around the known world. Many are the times it has rounded the Cape and been attacked in Manim Bay. But try as they might, the Barbarians have been unable to sink *Camfolar Dragon* or even fire it."

Shondal steered *Sea Jewel* around a narrow-beamed Holmish Navy galley, whose sweating, bare-chested oarsmen toiled laboriously on a training run heading out of the harbor; three banks of white-tipped oars rose and fell in rhythm with a beating drum and a resounding chorused "Heave!" Shondal headed deep into the harbor, directing the sailing-boat at a pier from which children fished. The soldier tied the boat to an old but sturdy post and climbed a rickety ladder onto the pier, beckoning the others after him.

Walking felt strange after four days at sea. To be on a surface that did not undulate beneath the feet seemed unnatural. After a minute, however, Wilfen found he was able to progress more freely.

At the end of the creaky pier was a rude hut raised on stilts above the beach sand. The victim of years of storms, it was quite dilapidated. Shondal knocked on the door, calling: "Captain Brammin! It's Shondal Argindell!"

Nothing happened for a few moments, then with a creak the door opened a crack, momentarily revealing an inquisitive, leathery face partly concealed by a thick, untidy gray beard. The door abruptly swung back on its hinges, and Brammin was exposed in his entirety, from his black-nailed toes, past his ragged trousers and food-stained shirt, to his matted, wooly hair. Wilfen swore he saw something tiny jumping about in those greasy locks. Gold earrings hung from each of his lobes. He smiled, displaying broken yellow teeth.

"Come to let me look after your boat, have you, Mister Argindell?"

"Yes, Captain Brammin. I've tied it up at the end of the pier."

"Thank you, Mister Argindell," Brammin said as Shondal handed him a few silver coins, some shiny, some dull. "Come back any time you require it."

"I will."

Brammin closed the door, chuckling. They heard him muttering incomprehensibly, presumably to himself, until he moved away from the door.

"What was that all about?" Alvonne asked his uncle, as they all strode up the beach.

"Brammin looks after boats for a few silver crowns. That gives him something for his 'investments': gambling, mostly. He must be good at it, though, because I've never heard of him being short of money."

"Is that all he does?" Wilfen inquired. "Gamble and watch over boats?"

Shondal nodded. "Yes, that's about the extent of his activities, these days. He hires out other boats to local people. He's the best man to deal with, because he keeps all the boats safe from thieves."

"How can he prevent them from being stolen?" Alvonne demanded. "He's just a dirty old man in a little shack."

"His appearance is pretense: it makes people underestimate him. And he has some influence over the local underworld, as he's rumored to be a former leader of the local League of Assassins!"

CHAPTER 7: AMBELL

The travelers strolled along the main street of Bonvalur. The cobble-stoned street was dirty and crowded with humanity (Wilfen could not believe there were so many people in the world). Hawkers and peddlers extolled the virtues of their wares, often humorously, with carrying shouts. Others offered services: they tailored clothes, shone or cobbled boots and shoes, cut hair and trimmed beards, composed or transcribed letters and songs, dyed or painted, told fortunes, lent or collected money, guarded valuables or persons, healed and alleviated -- or claimed to -- various ailments, and many other things. Milling around the vendors were -- apart from the soberly dressed locals -- people of all types and nationalities: white folk in Adar Mutian woolens or Magon leather; blacks in flowing Memmish robes and head-cloths or Kydemish silk caftans and tasseled top hats (even Svensson's strange dress was not especially out of place here). They jabbered deafeningly, bargaining in several languages with the multilingual sellers, negotiating mutually acceptable deals.

Svensson and the twins turned this way and that to see what was being bought and sold. There were both humble, home-made and exotic, imported beverages: stone jugs, cheap skins, or stacked ironbound barrels of various sizes containing milk, mead, ale, or wine of fluctuating quality (though all were declared to be the "finest available"). There was food -- fruits and vegetables, haunches of meat, fish, wheels of cheese, eggs, loaves of bread, pies, cakes -- some of it prepared and ready to eat, some of it still alive and clucking, quacking, grunting, bleating, even lowing, albeit temporarily. Jewelry -- rings, earrings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces -- some of it cheap trinkets, made from glass, semiprecious stones, pewter, or copper, some of it fine merchandise, crafted from silver, gold, sapphire, ruby, even diamond, was displayed on cloth-covered tables or from beneath concealing cloaks. New and old, finely-worked and not, there were metal articles: swords, knives, arrow- and spearheads, horseshoes, hammers and nails, cutlery, pots, pans, bells, mirrors, razors; and wooden ones: bows, arrow and spear shafts, bowls, chairs, tables, ladders, crates. There were: cut flowers -- chrysanthemums, rhododendrons, gardenias, roses, and others; potted plants -- assorted crops, vegetables, cacti, ferns, palms, trees; seeds and bulbs and bags of grain; caged, bawling pet animals of all kinds -- songbirds, dogs, cats, even a kangaroo; harness and saddles; lucky charms to be worn or consumed or placed over one's front door; woven baskets, nets, ropes, tapestries, and rugs; knitted jumpers, cloaks, and blankets; coats, hats, and gloves of rabbit, kangaroo, leather, and more exotic furs and skins; bottles and vials of perfume and incense sticks; pills and potions and lotions; shoes and slippers and boots; flutes and lutes and drums; parchment and books and maps; lanterns, candles, torches, and their fuel; hand-made puzzles and games, and a thousand other things not readily identifiable. Flowery and fruity fragrances, not to mention peculiar and pungent spices, tickled their noses, overwhelming the stench created by filth and rotted produce and animal droppings. The overall impression was of a dazzling, chaotic assault on the senses.

A bearded, sharp-eyed hawker attempted to interest Svensson in some shells he stopped to inspect. "Do you like what you see?" the man asked, indicating the intriguing blue, palmate shells.

Svensson shook his head in incomprehension. Wilfen came to his rescue. "My friend is foreign; he doesn't speak Oriental," the Nevander told the hawker.

"Well, then, perhaps you'd be interested. They're Adar Mutian Sea Snail shells, young sir."

Wilfen had never heard of Adar Mutian Sea Snails or their shells, so he had no conception of their true significance. He replied with a careful lack of expression: "Are they?"

"Certainly, young sir. They make marvelous gifts for young ladies." The hawker winked extravagantly. "Even the most demanding of them!"

Wilfen reddened. "I'm sorry, but I have no money."

The man grew angry. "Do you expect me to believe that? You -- a Nevander -- with no money? Look at your fine cloak! Surely you jest with a hard-working man!"

Wilfen was uneasy. Had he broken some local rule? "Really," he insisted, "I have no money."

The fellow persisted, ignoring the Nevander's explanation. "Come now, I don't ask for a golden crown. Just fifteen silver crowns will procure you an authentic Adar Mutian Sea Snail shell. That's the lowest price in Bonvalur."

Wilfen wanted to sink into the ground. "I don't have any money," he repeated miserably.

"Well, piss off, then!" The hawker turned away in disgust to serve another patron.

Wilfen was left looking rather foolish. He felt Shondal's hand on his shoulder. "I saw what happened," the soldier said. "You must be mindful of local custom. If you pause to look at something and don't stop the seller from telling you about it, then you are required to at least haggle with him for it. It is tradition and adhered to fairly strictly hereabouts. To be on the safe side, speak to no one selling anything."

The company walked on, passing out of the street-side market. Bland residential buildings -- some two stories tall -- with gray stone facades and small, square, deep-set windows lined both sides of the street; they looked peculiar to Wilfen, accustomed as he was to living in Filgen's wooden cottage in the canopy of Nevanderlof. Local and transient pedestrians passed by on errands known only to them. Surrounded by armed guards who shouldered aside other passers-by, one man, burdened by masses of excess weight so that his disdainful face seemed cherubic and his body bloated, proceeded down Main Street away from the market area, overtaking the unhurried travelers. Rings set with large diamonds and emeralds adorned his chubby fingers. His great bulk was clothed in an exotic robe of orange silk, exquisitely made and covered in intricate designs of gold thread. In his hands he clutched a bulging leather bag that jingled as if filled with coins.

"Who is that?" Wilfen wondered when the big man and his contingent had passed, noticing how some of the other people in the street suddenly looked sour or spat on the ground.

"A produce merchant," Shondal muttered venomously, more contemptuous of the fat man than he had been of the Tharmish pirates. "His kind buy from poor villagers and farmers at low rates and charge equally struggling townspeople exorbitant prices for essential items."

The startling array of humanity bewildered Svensson. The Argindells seemed normal enough, but the old fellow, Brammin, had looked at death's door to him; clearly, old age naturally produced that worn, crumpled, wasted appearance. This produce merchant was also a disturbing sight: no functional personal computer would allow a Citizen of the Empire get that out of condition. Some of the people he had seen had obviously been affected by improperly treated diseases or injuries: scarred, freckled, pimpled, birth- or pock-marked skin; discolored, crooked, or even absent teeth; scalps with little or no hair; weeping, clouded, or plainly vision-impaired eyes; and deformed or missing ears, noses, fingers, and limbs. There

were broken or varicose veins and capillaries, atrophied muscles, stiff or swollen joints, hunched backs, partly slack expressions, involuntary twitches, hampering limbs, labored breathing, and hacking coughs. Who knew what other less apparent or internal problems these people had? They looked...afflicted was the word, he realized. This was humanity in all its true, varied glory. And ugliness. It was an eye-opener for someone who had evidently led a very sheltered, pampered existence.

Only now was it plain just how lenient the Human Integrity Acts had been. Citizens of the Empire may not have been physically enhanced by technology, but they certainly had not deteriorated with time or misfortune, as these Terra Novans had. A response to the growing trend of improving the "natural" human form with genetic engineering or artificial implants, the Human Integrity Acts had been ratified during the first half of the twenty-first century. In essence, the intention of the Human Integrity Acts was not to restrict the improvement or cure of debilitating afflictions but rather to prevent the creation of so-called "super-humans." Standard limits were determined and imposed for various functions of the human body, such as muscle strength, intelligence quotient, reaction time, psionic power, even the rates of food absorption and urine production. Initially, individuals and multinational corporations exploited loopholes in the Acts, interpreting "normal" limits as the more desirable upper range; a celebrated individual, John Ultra, was born, who was immune to almost all disease and possessed a weight-lifter's strength, a gymnast's agility, and genius intelligence. By the time of the passing of the last of the Acts it was commonly recognized that, for example: a person with defective vision might improve it -- by surgery or genetic engineering -- to normal 6/6 standard but no further; one could replace a lost or dysfunctional organ or limb with a prosthesis that was only as effective as the original or the designated standard. The twenty-fourth century individual, therefore, had lived in a body as healthy as it could possibly be for their age; it was not unusual for people to be more than 150-years-old, and only the fact the irreplaceable brain tended to degenerate before the age of two hundred precluded people surviving even longer.

Personal computers facilitated the maintenance of the standards of the Human Integrity Acts, though they had, in themselves, been touted by some as an unnatural way of sustaining optimum bodily function. Smaller than a pinhead, they were implanted in the brains of Imperial Citizens soon after birth, where they remained for life. Extruding a network of filaments into all parts of the brain, as well as many glands and nerve ganglia, a PC gave the body a gentle nudge here and there as required to perfectly maintain its many parts and systems. Assisting the PC in its task was a fleet of miniature self-replicating robots that could roam throughout the body. Doubtless, Svensson surmised, even run-of-the-mill, relatively healthy Terra Novans would be much better off with such a set-up inside their bodies.

The travelers passed yet another gathering of people trading from food stalls in the street. Shondal said, "I'm hungry. How about you three?"

The twins nodded enthusiastically, but Svensson declined politely: he was not keen to try the local diet, which was probably partly responsible for some of the people's afflictions. Shondal approached one of the food stands, returning with hot pies bulging with spicy meat chunks. He offered a pie each to Alvonne and Wilfen and guided the quartet to the town square. Sitting on the elevated base of the bronze statue of a mounted warrior, they consumed the pies, watching the hive of activity around them.

"This is great," Alvonne declared.

"What is?" inquired Shondal.

"All of this." Alvonne nodded at what transpired around them, at the hustle and bustle of the city.

"It's different to Nevanderlof, certainly," Wilfen remarked, still shaken by his encounter with the hawker. "But yes, I like it, too."

"There's so much going on," Alvonne continued ebulliently. "It seems more happens here in a single day than in Mardine in a whole year!"

"I can believe that," Wilfen concurred soberly.

Towards nightfall Shondal led them to an inn set in the center of Bonvalur. It was an old yet tidy and respectable wooden building on Main Street. Outside, a sign swung in the breeze: it depicted a fire-breathing dragon, superimposed on which was the silhouette of a spear.

Inside the *Spear and Dragon* Shondal directed the others to a table in the corner of the taproom, while he approached the bar. His back to a wall, Svensson sat on a hard chair opposite the twins. The Thermosian surveyed the establishment, noting various groups at other tables. Men, both -- according to the refinement and cleanliness of their dress -- blatantly rich and patently poor, told each other lies, loudly conversing and laughing with drunken coarseness (it was clear to Svensson that, lingering side-effects aside, alcohol evinced much the same symptoms as the more modern stimulants and drugs he was used to). The only women present were the nimble-footed maids who, bearing pewter tankards, wove across the straw-strewn floor, skillfully avoiding tables, outstretched legs, and straying hands. A smattering of what looked like Tharms made him somewhat nervous. At one table an arm wrestle between a Tharm and a Holm was in progress. Around the contestants, apparently gambling on the outcome, a small crowd of both nationalities had gathered.

Shondal returned with four filled glasses balanced in his hands. He gave one each to Svensson and the twins of a pale orange beverage. "This is sundew: not too intoxicating, so you shouldn't get drunk."

Svensson inspected his glass. It appeared clean enough, and nothing untoward floated in the drink. He took a tentative sip. Sundew had an unusual tangy taste that, to his surprise, he discovered he quite liked. He had not drunk alcohol before, though he knew his personal computer would quickly eliminate it from his system. <'So,'> he announced telepathically, <'this is Bonvalur.'>

"This is Bonvalur," Shondal repeated, nodding. "Is it as you expected?"

"No!" replied the twins in unison.

<'I didn't really know what to expect,'> Svensson admitted. <'It's all a little overwhelming. I'm happy to be able to sit down here and take it all in.'>

"I anticipated a city of shining towers, I suppose," Alvonne added.

"Himberon is like that," Shondal remarked. "Bright and colorful, mighty and inspiring. The older cities of the Confederation are generally similar to Bonvalur: plain but unpretentious. Himberon is exciting to visit once or twice, but I believe Bonvalur and Glastor are more interesting. I could visit them again and again."

They talked for a while longer, before Wilfen inadvertently yawned. Shondal smiled. "It would, perhaps, be best if we retired now. We depart at dawn, anyway."

* *

Svensson found himself shaken awake. He was encased in his comfortable, form-fitting sleeping bag on a hard floor. A black shape in the pre-dawn dark, Shondal, risen from his pallet, loomed over the Thermosian. (The previous evening Shondal had laughed when he had declined the opportunity to use the second blanket-filled pallet in the room they shared; Svensson had shuddered at the thought of what vermin might be sharing the blankets in such a bed.)

"Get dressed," the legionnaire told him. "We have a long journey ahead, and an early start will not hurt us."

After eating their breakfast -- Svensson a bland though nutritious food pill, the Argindells some sort of cereal prepared by the early rising staff of the *Spear and Dragon* -- the travelers departed the inn and found Main Street in semi-darkness. Svensson noted a distinct lack of activity in the street. The odd scrap of rubbish blew about unimpeded. A few hawkers were setting up their stalls, but the huge crowd of the previous day was absent.

"Where are all the people?" Wilfen wondered aloud, voicing Svensson's thoughts.

"In their beds," Shondal replied. "Bonvalur rises at dawn. Just you watch."

He was proven correct. As the travelers strode towards the south side of town, the sky brightened with the new day's light, and soon after people started to show. Within minutes the streets teemed with humanity. Whereas earlier the quartet had been able to proceed freely, they were now compelled to jostle their way through the horde -- its individual members as diverse as those of the previous day's congregation -- that had surfaced at the break of day.

They took a road that led southward out of Bonvalur. Abruptly the seaport was behind, and the travelers were out in the open on the Bonvalur Coastal Plain. This highway, the Central Kenderlan Road, with its uneven, cracked cobblestones, was poor to Svensson's eyes (though he supposed his standards were way too high for this planet). In the first half-hour out of Bonvalur they saw many farmers transporting produce to sell in the town. Cheerfully waving to the quartet, the farmers passed by on squeaky, horse-drawn carts laden with freshly picked fruit and vegetables, crops, Svensson realized, actually grown in the ground.

The Thermosian inhaled deeply of the air. He was almost dizzy with the richness of the scents borne on the wind. He had thought the dry, sterile atmosphere of Thermos was pure, yet somehow this air, with its taints of the sea and grass, seemed incredibly pristine.

He found himself surprisingly glad to be out of the town. It was an especially astonishing discovery when he bore in mind how his two previous long-term abodes -- his home apartment on Thermos and the cockpit sphere of the Eagle Eye -- were closed environments where he had felt most comfortable. But a feeling of claustrophobia had smothered him in Bonvalur's narrow, dirty, dingy streets with their rude stone and wooden buildings whose windows glowered at him. He supposed, too, that the town's modest pretensions to development and civilization had also bothered him. It was -- if he ignored the construction of the road -- far easier to pretend, out here, that he was in the wilderness of an advanced planet.

Omnipresent, the Malian Farn cast its shadow over them. The massive, iron gray rock plateau (surely it was too big to be a monolith) demarcated the landscape on their left, just fifty meters from the road. The Central Kenderlan Road snaked along the base of the plateau's rearing, scabrous cliff-face. Svensson studied the furrowed rock of the Malian Farn. Shondal had told them its face rose up more than five hundred swords -- greater than eight hundred meters -- above the level of the road. However high it really was, fluffy cumulus cloud shrouded its summit.

"How do you suppose the Malian Farn was created?" Alvonne asked, breaking a lengthy silence.

Shondal looked thoughtful as he answered. "I've never heard a story that sounded believable. The most absurd said that once all the land around here was just as high; wind and water carried away the softer material, leaving the harder Malian Farn behind."

Svensson smiled inwardly. The "absurd" explanation seemed the most probable to him!

During the day the base of the Malian Farn, and as a consequence the Central Kenderlan Road, ran southeast, becoming steadily farther from the sea. The land was flat for kilometers to the west and south, and the sky met the horizon in a straight line. For as far as Svensson could see, tussocky grass, punctuated by groves of evergreens, carpeted the countryside.

At times, when the warrior was unconscious of being observed, it seemed to Svensson that Shondal's expression was grim. The legionnaire joked freely enough with his twin nephews, but Svensson thought he sensed a reserved solemnity, as if to Shondal this journey was more than a pleasant tour through the sights and wonders of Terra Nova. Did he have some ulterior motive? Why had he so readily taken Svensson along for the ride?

After noon, as the sun commenced its descent into the west, light was cast on the travelers, and their shadows slowly rose up the cliff-face of the Malian Farn. The quartet continued onward, the rocky barrier never too far to their left, the Warldife Sea progressively more distant to their right.

The twins told Svensson they would miss the sea and hoped to see the Endless Ocean, bounding Holmis' east coast, some time soon. The Thermosian felt wistful, too. There was nothing anywhere near as large as the Warldife Sea on Thermos, and after some initial unease, he had enjoyed the boat journey across the dazzling royal blue waves. (He had to admit, however, that without the personal computer to relieve him, he would probably have been as seasick as Wilfen on that trip.)

Soon after dusk they arrived in a village that straddled the road. Bonfires cast flickering light over children playing on the village green. An older, red-haired, freckled boy approached the four travelers. He appeared uncertain whom to address, then decided to direct his words to all of them: "Would you be wanting to stay the night, sirs?"

"Yes," Shondal replied. "If it shall not inconvenience the village, Mister Zem."

The youth looked startled. "How do you know my name?" he demanded.

"I see a resemblance to your father," said Shondal.

The villager seemed irritated. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I am Shondal Argindell. These are my nephews, Wilfen and Alvonne Argindell of Mardine, Nevanderlof. And this is Mikael Svensson...a traveler from another land."

"Shondal Argindell... I know that name... That's it! You're Tannash Argindell's brother. He died, and you are the young half-brother who joined the Army. My mother told me about you. You've been away how long? Six, seven years?"

"Eight."

The young Holm stared at the twins. "And you must be old Ma Dolfray's grandsons."

"They are," Shondal confirmed. "Not that she ever saw them, even as babies." He gave a short, humorless laugh. "My mother stopped seeing -- stopped living -- long before that last plague devastated this village."

"So it is said," murmured the youth uncomfortably. "Anyway, I'm Tarvin Zem. My home is available should you want lodging. My mother and I have plenty of room." Tarvin snorted his own mirthless laugh. "The Great Plague created many spare rooms in this village."

"Take these people with you," said Shondal. "I'll visit some of my old friends and be along later. It is

some time since I've been home to Ambell."

Ambell! Wilfen was enthused. This was the village where the father he did not remember had been born. Here, Shondal and his half-brother, Tannash, had grown up to become soldiers. Nothing about the place suggested it had any qualities peculiar to it that made men of war. Wilfen supposed it might simply have been a rivalry between the half-brothers.

Tarvin strode away, beckoning the trio after him. Alvonne set off after him immediately, but Wilfen hung back a moment, waiting for Svensson. <'We're staying the night here in this village,'> the Nevander explained.

The Thermosian nodded. <'I understand.'>

Past capering children, Tarvin Zem preceded the travelers across the village green, then down a narrow dirt lane lit by lanterns hung from tall wooden poles. The villager halted them at the head of a rosebush-lined path. The path led to a vine-covered log cottage with a straw-thatched roof and smoking chimney.

"Wait here a moment," said Tarvin. "I have to let my mother know you are staying."

The Holm opened the front door of the cottage and entered. Waiting in darkness permeated with the fragrance of late-season roses, the others heard nothing for a little while, then sounds of yelling reached their ears. They caught snatches of Tarvin's voice. A woman screamed almost incoherently, but the word "food" was unmistakable; from what little Wilfen could make of the argument, there was insufficient food for four extra people.

There were a few moments of silence, then Tarvin spoke in a much softer tone than before, altering the method of his persuasion. After another brief hiatus the voices could be discerned closer to the front door. "Nevander boys..." said the woman.

The twins exchanged glances. Alvonne looked confused, but Wilfen guessed what was happening. The "Nevander boys" were going to be fussed over.

The door opened, revealing a triumphant Tarvin beaming at the travelers. "It's all right," he announced. "Come in."

They trooped in, Svensson a fraction hesitantly. A middle-aged, strawberry blond woman in a plain gray dress met them in the hall inside the front door. Though she appeared weary and harassed, she smiled kindly. "This is my mother, Gales Zem," introduced Tarvin. "Mother: this is Wilfen, and this is Alvonne Argindell, Ma Dolfray's grandsons. And this is Mikael Svensson, a traveler from another land."

"We thank you for offering us lodging," said Alvonne in a charming voice.

Wilfen resisted a temptation to laugh. Alvonne *had* caught on, after all.

Gales blushed. "It is no trouble, surely, for such a gentlemanly person could never cause us harm. Besides, I remember Shondal well."

Alvonne inclined his head. "Thank you."

Wilfen stifled a grin. He knew he could not speak so suavely as his brother had just done.

Gales regarded the travelers appraisingly, noting their dusty clothes. "Come," she said. "You look tired and grubby. A hot bath is what you all need. Wilfen, you're first."

The woman turned to Alvonne and Svensson. "I know I can leave you in Tarvin's hands, filthy as they are!"

As Wilfen was ushered away, he caught a glimpse of Alvonne and Tarvin grinning at each other, looking pleased with themselves. Even the Skylord bore a faint smile. They all waved to Wilfen as if in final farewell.

In the end, Wilfen found the bath to be pleasurable. Initially fatigued and dirty, he reclined in the tub until his skin wrinkled. He reveled in the warmth and could only get out when the water cooled.

Gales was not far away. "Feeling better?" she asked when, dressed in fresh clothes, he emerged from the bathing room.

"Yes, thanks."

"You must be hungry. Come with me."

"But -- "

"No buts. You're hungry and tired. Once you've eaten you're getting into bed. Your brother will have a bath now."

Wilfen suspected Gales knew all about the boys' little game of playing up to her and was taking her revenge.

* *

Svensson woke completely refreshed. He felt at peace with the world. There was plenty to like about the simple, primitive charms of hot baths and feather-filled mattresses (and sleeping indoors, he suspected). He had had something of an argument with Gales about his not eating Terra Novan food. The Thermosian was still not quite adventurous enough to try native fare. It had been difficult for both to get across their respective points-of-view, and eventually she had given up with a bewildered shrug, allowing him to down a food pill and slip gratefully beneath the heaped blankets (blankets, hopefully, relatively free of fleas or bedbugs or whatever it was that had infested medieval-era bedding).

He had had a bath in the Zems' bronze tub the previous night (though his personal computer generally maintained him in an extremely clean state), and his climate suit had so far lived up to its manufacturer's claims by surviving all normal wear and tear in a dirt-free state. After dressing himself, he went in search of anyone who might cross his path. The cottage seemed deserted, until he found Gales preparing some sort of chicken egg dish for Wilfen's breakfast.

"Good morning, Mister Svensson," Gales called brightly over her shoulder, using a spoon to stir the egg mixture in a pot hung over a lit fireplace.

"Good morning, Mikael Svensson," Wilfen said.

Svensson was on comfortable ground, for the twins had taught him basic greetings in Oriental. "Good morning," he replied carefully. "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you," said Gales.

"Fine," chipped in Wilfen, who sat on one of four shabby chairs set around a plain pine table.

<Where are the others?> Svensson asked Wilfen telepathically.

Wilfen shrugged, turning to Gales. "Where are our companions, Mistress Zem?"

The woman straightened and faced her guests. "Shondal is with blacksmith Girstim, discussing matters known only to them. Tarvin and Alvonne are chopping wood, supposedly. Now, I want you to finish these scrambled eggs before you go outside."

When they finally ventured outside, the pair found Ambell's boys gathering on the village green. The assemblage seemed to be in the process of organizing something. In the midst of things, Tarvin, who showed no evidence of having chopped wood, directed the others, and Alvonne was also in the throng.

Tarvin saw Svensson and Wilfen at the edge of the crowd. "Hello, Wilfen and Mister Svensson!" he cried. "We are about to play our favorite game. Do you wish to play, Wilfen?"

The Nevander deliberated for a moment and nodded. "Good," said Tarvin. "You're on my team, then. That makes the numbers even again."

Attired in short-sleeved tunics, short-legged trousers, and crude leather boots, the Ambell village boys tramped to what they called their "playground"; later, Svensson would think of it as a battle zone. They crossed the Central Kenderlan Road and halted on an area of grass free of trees. A boy stabbed a picket into the ground and then another five meters away. Another lad stuck two pickets in the grass parallel to and about seventy meters away from the first pair: these were the goals.

The boys lined themselves up at both ends of the field of play. Tarvin placed a leather ball roughly halfway between the goals, then hurried back to join his team. With a shout, both teams charged at the ball, striving to gain the initiative.

To Svensson's eyes, there did not appear to be many rules. The first team to pass the ball between the goal stakes was the winner. As far as he could tell, this could be accomplished by any means the team chose.

A boy on Alvonne's team reached the ball first, kicking it with a booted foot. Svensson saw it bounce off the head of one of Wilfen's teammates. The game was on!

A pile of boys quickly formed atop the ball, all endeavoring to force it towards their goal. A mad flurry of limbs in the center of the field, they shoved at each other as much as the ball. Heavy bodies collided solidly, and Svensson winced in sympathy. But the Holms went on playing as if nothing had happened.

The ball was not being forced very far in either direction before it traveled back the opposite way. With surprise, as he hovered on the outskirts of the scrimmage, Wilfen saw the ball deflect from a bony knee and bounce in his direction. He was clear, for everyone else was gathered around the middle of the field, where play had been since the game began.

Stooping, Wilfen snatched up the ball and ran. Twenty opposing players - - including Alvonne -- chased him, but he was too swift, already in full flight.

The two goal pickets loomed before him, thirty swords distant. Those who pursued him were at least ten swords astern. Wilfen was preparing to hurl the ball forward, when a mound in the grass caused him to stumble and fall. Desperately he punched the ball onwards, as a mass of boys landed on him, struggling to prevent him unleashing the winning shot. He was pummeled by countless blows, kicked and punched in spite of supposed rules against such things.

A victorious cheer erupted behind him, and Wilfen was abruptly hoisted to his feet and dusted off. His body ached all over. He checked his teeth, found them all present, and shook his head to clear the

dizziness that had set in. Spitting out a clod of dirt and grass, he looked to see who had helped him up and was confronted by Tarvin's grinning face.

"What happened?" the Nevander asked shakily.

"We won! Your throw just avoided them and went through! That was the quickest game since Gandrich Rafsins kicked the ball over our heads as we rushed in! Well done, Wilfen!"

"I'm glad," said Wilfen, ruefully feeling the aches and pains in his body. "It's a worthwhile result."

"It sure is: that puts my team up thirty-two to twenty-nine in this year's games."

Shondal had come up alongside Svensson. "I played that game as a boy," declared the soldier. "Wilfen has just created a new tactic. None of the boys here would have thought of it, because the game has always been played by forcing the ball forward with brute strength." He smiled wistfully. "I think that a few years from now the game will bear scant resemblance to the one Tannash and I played."

Svensson's regarded the scene with a wry expression. He remembered the games *he* had played as a boy, games not all that dissimilar to this one. This might be a primitive world, but certain aspects of it were quite familiar to a person of a more advanced culture. The people of Terra Nova deserved the chance to develop their civilization. They did not have a utopia, but it seemed, to the Thermosian, to be a society superior to that present on the Earth in a comparable period. Perhaps that they had descended from enlightened twenty-fourth century individuals had something to do with the Terra Novans' relatively low levels of warfare, racism, sexism, and other social ills.

'But this is all that's left,' he thought. 'This is the remains of my civilization.' He brushed away despairing tears that had suddenly welled out of his eyes. He had been considered something of a cold fish back on Thermos in the twenty-fourth century, not a prime example of mature, evolved humankind. But now his emotions swept away all barriers of reserve. By Terra Novan standards he seemed extremely demonstrative, even when in control of himself.

'Ahh, hell, I'm all messed up. But isn't that to be expected? Hasn't my whole world, haven't *all* human worlds been shattered by the Enemy?' Except this one. This vulnerable jewel of a world, this thin-shelled egg that held the phoenix chick of humanity. 'I must save it. But how can I? How can I?'

CHAPTER 8: CLARITY

On the sixty-first day of the month of Bren (what month was it Empire- style, Svensson wondered, November or December 4729?) the travelers left the village of Ambell. For three days they followed the Central Kenderlan Road, which in turn tracked the base of the Malian Farn. In the morning, with the shadow of the plateau cast over them, it was somewhat chilly, but after midday warm autumn sunshine bathed them. At night they paused in villages located periodically along the highway.

The quartet rounded the southern end of the Malian Farn on the fourth day. The plateau's gray cliff-face abruptly receded into the northeast. The road forked: the Central Kenderlan Road continued eastward; the left fork, the Central Memmin Road, which originated here, followed the base of the Malian Farn, ultimately to ford the Milwarn River into Farl Memmin. The travelers ignored the left branch and stuck with the Central Kenderlan Road, which ran for another six hundred kiloswords -- one thousand kilometers -- to Balt in the Holmish province of Camfolar.

Svensson noticed that Shondal still seemed deadly serious when the big man thought himself unobserved. The soldier's hand lingered habitually within twenty or thirty centimeters of his sword's hilt. There appeared to be more than instinctive caution in his manner, almost as if he anticipated trouble. He still limped slightly due to his arrow wound, but despite Svensson's initial misgivings, it was healing well.

Giving Svensson lessons in Oriental, the twins had been loquacious on the first day out from Ambell, but they became subject to greater and greater interludes of silence as time went by. Now, on the fourth day, they were inclined to speak only when spoken to, spending long hours presumably in introspection.

Late in the afternoon of that fourth day, a few kilometers east of the forking of the roads, the Central Kenderlan Road descended into a valley, before traversing an extraordinary natural stone bridge. Formed of extremely hard rock, Erlak Bridge was far broader than the road that crossed it. The span's underside had been worn into an arch by the stupendous force that had cut the narrow valley over which it passed.

An awe-inspiring volume of water, the Milwarn River coursed several meters beneath the travelers' feet. The Milwarn resulted from the melting of the glaciers that slowly made their way down the slopes of the mountain kingdom, Magon Vald. From here the mighty river flowed north, eventually to turn sharply eastward and cleave the forest, Jherdol Tay, thence to discharge its clear waters into the Endless Ocean in a small bay called The Mouth.

The company rested for a while on Erlak Bridge. They ate their dinner -- Svensson a food pill, the Argindells corned beef and cheese left over from their lunch -- watching and listening as the Milwarn roared and foamed and boiled in its frenzied passage.

The following day saw the character of the land transform. The western plains merged into hilly terrain, as the four reached the northernmost extensions of the Magon Highlands, though the really lofty peaks were perhaps three hundred kilometers -- roughly, five hundred kilometers -- to the southeast.

The hills of the northern Magon Highlands were a prime domain of animal life. Small, dusty-brown rodents and marsupials scampered or hopped away from swooping, ivory-colored hawks. Emitting tiny squeaks, dozens of rusty-throated swallows zipped about the travelers. Squawking indignantly at their presence, a black wagtail with miniature white eyebrows followed them for a time; a passing dragonfly diverted its attention, and with a flick of the tail, the little bird shot after the shiny, green finger-sized insect. Screeching stridently, several magpies chased a crow from the branches of a lone gum-tree. Orange eyes glowed in the darkness of burrows in the hillsides, looking down on the road as it twisted and turned. A slinking gray garl smelt the humans' scent and trotted into a hole containing two pairs of eyes; soon a third set burnt within the shadows.

Svensson was unaccustomed to such a diversity of living things. Thermos had had few examples of flora and fauna that had not been genetically engineered to suit its harsh conditions. Terra Nova, however, was abundant in life forms. It was an extremely Earth-like world, and many of the species were essentially unmodified from Old Earth standard; a few had been superficially altered to suit the long Terra Novan year -- just over twice the Imperial standard -- and some, such as the fox-like garl, were unique to this planet.

Yet as diverse as the biosphere was here, it was a pale, pale imitation of the panoply that had been life on Earth; the species that existed here were the ones that had best adapted to Terra Nova over the last two thousand years, a infinitesimal percentage of the range once existent on humanity's homeworld. But this was all that remained, and its preservation was of paramount importance.

The Thermosian was suddenly impatient. He had to find the Central Computer Complex. Frivolously he wandered the countryside, while the Enemy lurked in space, ready to pounce on Terra Nova. His time of blissful indolence, turning a blind eye to the responsibilities of his heritage, had to end. He needed to do something constructive to assist Terra Nova and its people. But how was he to locate the Complex? There were no responses to his signals, and he could detect no telltale signs of technology on the surface.

Svensson decided to take a chance. He would deactivate his psionic shield. Someone might be able to contact him telepathically. It was a long- shot, as it required there to be a psionically talented person actually trying to send him a message. There was also a danger the Enemy might "lock on" to such a signal. But a powerful psionic shield enveloped Terra Nova: it had obviously been sufficient to preclude the aliens wreaking havoc on the planet in the past. Svensson was not complacent, for he had badly underestimated the Enemy's psionic capacity once before. However, his desperation was such now that he was willing to take the risk.

Nothing transpired that day. But that night his plan paid dividends. He had a dream, in which he walked alone along a Terra-Novan-style road in the dark, little to be seen but the rough stones immediately before him. Suddenly a young woman materialized in front of him. Though it was utterly black about him, he perceived her clearly: skin as pale as milk, shoulder-length hair blond and silky; she was attired in simple, white, wrap-around clothing, almost an Ancient Roman toga style. There was something rather otherworldly about her.

"I have tried to contact you, Citizen Svensson," she said. "You must come to the Central Computer Complex." She glanced over her shoulder, and she appeared frightened by what she perceived, though Svensson could not discern anything behind her. "There is no time. You must come. Trust in Shondal."

"But -- " he began.

"Restore your psionic shield!" she ordered, interrupting him. "They are coming! And remember: trust Shondal."

With that she was gone, leaving Svensson alone again on that dark road of the mind. Something approached, however, something immense and swift. He could not ascertain what it was, but a tangible sense of menace emanated from it. He knew he did not want it to reach him.

He called to his personal computer: <'Computer: restore psionic shield.'>

The dream road evaporated instantly, along with whatever else roamed its route. Svensson lay in the dark beside a burnt-out campfire, hearing the sleeping Argindells. Something perturbed them as well, for he heard fitful, shifting sounds. Perhaps they were having dreams, too, though they should be secure from Enemy intrusion: his psionic shield protected an area centered on him of about ten meters in diameter.

The Thermosian was ecstatic. He had been in communication with someone in the Central Computer Complex! Someone, somewhere, still knew about psionics and modern technology. Someone knew about him. He could make no further contact, for the aliens would find it easier to track his psionic signature the next time; it certainly had not taken them too long even without advance warning. But it was enough to know that someone who understood his significance was out there.

"Trust in Shondal." That puzzled him. He was not really certain he *did* trust the man. Shondal was secretive and inscrutable; even the weak empathy Svensson gleaned during telepathy disclosed nothing about the soldier. It was not really charitable of the Thermosian, of course, for it seemed the warrior was working on Svensson's side. Could Shondal know about the Central Computer Complex? Svensson would not have thought so: the Skylords were a mystery to all the Argindells.

<'Shondal!'"> he called telepathically.

The Terra Novan's silhouette rose to a sitting position. <'What is it?'"> he asked.

Svensson was not sure where to start. <'Where...where are we going?'">

After a pause came the response: <'To Himberon.'>

<'No. After that.'>

There was an even longer pause, then: <'To the Oracle, of course.'> Svensson thought quickly. The Oracle! Many religions had such a concept, a site where one consulted a god and received the answers to one's dilemmas. He guessed that a Central Computer could duplicate the relevant god-like attributes of an oracle. Put a hidden microphone, or even holovision, in a remote cave, and there you had it: instant oracle. Were the Terra Novans in the Central Computer Complex manipulating the lives of the barbaric people who believed in the Goddess? If so, it did not sit well with him.

<'Whose orders do you follow?''> Svensson asked. Shondal picked up a pinch of dirt, rubbing it between his fingers. <'The Goddess's,'> he answered simply. Was there a trace of puzzlement in his manner? Perhaps not. Even his thoughts were guarded, despite his psionic inexperience.

Svensson considered Shondal's answers. The Thermosian's circumstances became more bizarre by the minute. Shondal was endeavoring to escort Svensson to a place the warrior believed was an oracle, because a person he believed to be a goddess wanted him to! These people in the Central Computer Complex certainly were meddling with affairs. Why could they not just come and pick Svensson up, without maliciously interfering with innocents like the Argindells?

* *

Wilfen dreamt. He was alongside Alvonne in a dim, featureless place. Before the twins was the esoteric levitating woman who had appeared in Wilfen's strangely significant dream in Nevanderlof: blond, robed in white, and haloed with light so she was hard to look at directly. "YOU MUST GO WITH THE SKYLORD!" she commanded in a booming voice.

At that point he woke in a sweat, his heart thudding. 'Another dream!' he thought. The first one he had almost forgotten, but this one brought back all his old doubts. Was it really the Goddess who had sent him the dream? Or, and this alarmed him, could it be the Goddess's Enemy?

Alvonne had been in the dream with him. Perhaps his brother had had the same dream. Wilfen would talk to Alvonne later, though he would have to broach the subject carefully: he might look very silly claiming he had had a message from the Goddess herself!

In the morning, after they had finished breakfast, it was actually Alvonne who whispered to Wilfen: "I'd like a word with you."

The twins drifted away from Svensson and Shondal, who were loading their backpacks for the day ahead. The Nevanders headed towards a stand of flooded gums fifty swords away from their campsite. A small creek gurgled in the midst of the copse, and the brothers went through the motions of washing their faces in cold, clear water.

Alvonne seemed in no hurry to speak, so Wilfen prompted him. "You wanted to say something?"

Alvonne grimaced. "Yes. I'm not sure how to start." He sighed and sat on a boulder around which the stream flowed. "I had a dream last night." Wilfen caught his breath. "So did I," he said.

His brother gaped at him. "With a woman...I mean, a woman who could be..."

"The Goddess!" Wilfen exclaimed. He reflexively picked up some of the damp reddish clay lining the creek, then, leaning against a tree trunk, slowly sieved it between his fingers. "I'm convinced it was the Goddess. She said, 'You must go with the Skylord!'"

"That's right!" agreed Alvonne. "We must have had the same dream."

They stared at each other for a minute. "Well, what do we do?" Wilfen demanded finally.

Alvonne shrugged, and unbelievably, Wilfen saw his brother's inimitable wry grin. "Do what we're told."

"By the Goddess..." Wilfen frowned. That was not a good curse in the prevailing circumstances. He kicked at the grassy, root-ridged embankment with his boot. "Alvonne, could it really be a command from below, from Anbridge herself?"

"Who knows? I had a dream once before that seemed meaningful, also concerned with the Skylord. Before he even arrived. He was flying, and he fell. I felt a compulsion to go to his assistance."

"But why us? We're not warriors. How can we help him? He's a Skylord, by the Goddess!"

"I don't know, Wilfen," Alvonne admitted, frowning. He brightened. "You saw how ignorant he was. He didn't even know where the Goddess's Enemy is supposed to abide. Perhaps we're just supposed to stop him making foolish mistakes. Perhaps Shondal is supposed to do the warrior stuff."

Wilfen considered this. "It's possible." His expression changed to one of frustration. "But what do we do?" he asked again.

"Just what she said. Accompany the Skylord. Help him. We're already doing that, anyway." Alvonne paused. "Let's not mention this to the others. We might be ridiculed."

Wilfen grinned, abruptly bending and cleansing his clay-stained fingers in the running water. He straightened. "They might have their own orders. But I'll keep quiet as well."

Immersed in thought, they headed back to camp. Wilfen considered the hand that had been dealt to him. He was the companion of a Skylord. Well, he had been for some time, but the full significance had not truly occurred to him. Of course, Mikael Svensson had a purpose on Terra Nova, a purpose on behalf of the Goddess. Did not the original Skylords defend the world from the Goddess's Enemy a thousand years ago? Now, Anbridge had sent Mikael Svensson to do her bidding; there must be some critical need. Wilfen felt a shiver. The forces of Evil must again be lurking in the sky above. He must do everything possible to bolster the Skylord's cause.

During the day they passed out of the hills. The countryside inclined downward to the north. According to Shondal, they were approaching the land-locked Kenderlan Sea. Two rivers supplied the sea after flowing down from the Magon Highlands. The road bridged the Glay River, which was on its last stretch before reaching Kenderlan Sea. The travelers came to Glam, a city on the eastern bank of the Glay.

Glam was a bustling river port. The Milwarn flowed northwest along the Adar Mutian border, and riverboats conveyed cargoes of Adar Mutian produce downstream to where the mighty river had a portion of its flow diverted into the channel of the Glay. Some of the boats transported their cargo onward into the Kenderlan Sea, but others stopped at Glam, where the goods were distributed throughout the Holmish Confederation.

A gatehouse was situated on the far side of the wooden bridge into the walled town. Men armed with crossbows stood in the numerous niches in the gatehouse's wall. One hailed the quartet as they approached the gate:

"Halt! For what purpose do you wish to enter Glam, our fair city?"

There were sniggers from the other guards.

"We are bound for Himberon and, with much regret, must pass through your town!" called back Shondal.

Laughter and jeers greeted his reply.

"Hmm," said the guard who had accosted the travelers. "Wait a minute!" He turned to a fellow guardsman. "Trilmef, go and see if they're the possessors of what we're looking for."

The young, acne-faced Holm called Trilmef descended stairs within the gatehouse to ground level. He advanced on the travelers. "I must inspect the palms of your hands," he explained. "And move slowly: my friends have you in their sights."

Wilfen looked upward. Gone was any sign of humor in the Glam guardsmen. They solemnly pointed loaded bows downward. The Nevander swallowed with difficulty.

Trilmef studied Alvonne's palm first, seemingly looking for some type of distinguishing feature. He found nothing, so he turned to Shondal, careful to keep himself out of his comrades' line of fire. The legionnaire checked him by raising an arm, tunic sleeve rolled back to expose the biceps. Trilmef peered closely at Shondal's arm, then he paled, eyes widening.

"Captain!" he shouted back to his superior. "He has the Paladin Mark!"

The Captain was instantly apologetic. "I am sorry, Lord Paladin. I did not know."

"Never mind." Shondal waved it off. "What's the search all about?"

"Someone attempted to assassinate Lord Lifax, Duke of Glam, in the early hours of this morning," said the Captain. "An inspection of all who enter or depart the city has been organized in order to catch the culprit or anyone who comes to his aid. We believe the assassin to be a member of a local cult."

The gate commander permitted them to pass without any subsequent delay. Those *leaving* Glam primarily interested him, he declared.

"What was that mark you showed them?" Alvonne asked Shondal after the travelers had proceeded into the crowded street leading from the gatehouse.

"It is the Paladin Mark, the symbol of the Holmish King's guards. It's said to be impossible to duplicate without the right tools. A Paladin gives a lifetime oath of fealty to the King."

Wilfen studied the tattoo on his uncle's arm. The design embodied a black circle within which crouched a white leopard. The Nevander thought its application to the skin must have been painful.

"Now," said Shondal, "I have somebody that I must see. I know I can trust you three to your own devices. Have a look around Glam, and I'll see you in the *Crown and Scepter* around sunset. Ask anyone you meet: they'll tell you where to find it. All right, then?"

<Right, we'll see you there,> Svensson acceded.

The soldier waved briefly and disappeared into the masses that filled the streets.

"Where shall we go first?" Wilfen asked.

"Let's investigate this street," Alvonne suggested, heading towards a lane on the east side.

The street was crammed with merchants and their customers. Wilfen remembered his encounter in

Bonvalur and kept well away from the hawkers and peddlers: he did not need any more trouble from that source.

A hundred yards along the street the three came to a sun-drenched square, also dense with people. In the center, on a raised, grassy platform, surrounded by a spellbound crowd, a pair of jugglers performed. The travelers hastened over to observe the display.

One of the jugglers was a short white man, possibly Arndish; the other was a taller black woman, probably Memmish. Dressed in garish red and yellow robes, the two faced each other, juggling five sharp stilettos apiece. The thin knives were a shiny streak in the jugglers' hands, hands moving so swiftly they blurred. The travelers looked at each other in amazement, but the duo had just begun its routine. To the gasps of the onlookers, the jugglers began to exchange the stilettos by alternately catching and casting them, and the ten knives flew through the air in a figure-eight pattern. Before long every second stiletto was pitched beneath a raised leg. The precision of the exhibition took the breath away.

The audience applauded enthusiastically as the demonstration ended with the jugglers catching five knives apiece behind their backs. They bowed in unison, as people tossed coins at their feet, silver and a gold coin or two among the pile of copper crowns. Wilfen felt guilty at having no money of his own to contribute.

"How do they do it?" Alvonne marveled, as the crowd started to disperse.

Svensson smiled to himself. How quaint it was to see people doing such things as juggling -- or making music like the man over there singing and playing the guitar or lute or whatever it was -- when humanity could not approach the perfection of machines and computers. Still, there was a certain primitive charm about being able to perform even such marginally imperfect feats. Was it not true that the very finest human-produced art was more popular than the perfect stuff produced by machine? Was it the inherent flaws, the very humanity, in the works of Da Vinci, Shakespeare, and Beethoven that had made them so loved down through the centuries?

Alvonne pretended to stumble, standing lightly on Wilfen's foot. "There are two men watching us. I saw them earlier, a short fellow in a black beret and a taller one. Follow me. I'll walk in the opposite direction."

Suddenly nervous, Wilfen and Svensson trailed Alvonne along a street exiting from the far side of the square. Wilfen had a peculiar feeling in that street, a sensation of being confined, though it was no narrower than any other street down which he had walked. He supposed the presence of darkened ground level windows on the tall adjoining buildings made him uneasy. That and the possibility someone followed them... He could hear no footsteps, but he dared not look back.

Shortly they emerged into another open, grassy square. Here, two dozen people -- mostly young men and women wearing loose black robes with white, tasseled girdles -- performed acts of astounding strength and agility. The robed people attacked each other with swift, dexterous -- though generally pulled -- kicks and punches. They blocked blows with extravagant defensive motions of arms and legs or avoided them altogether with clever leaps, dodges, dives, and rolls. A couple of them performed a series of handsprings, and one tough-looking fellow broke paving stones with his bare hands and feet.

"Who are these people?" Alvonne wondered curiously.

Wilfen shrugged expressively, shaking his head.

<I don't know,> Svensson answered.

Smiling warmly, a strongly built, middle-aged Holm, who appeared to be supervising the others, came over to the travelers. "Do you like our display of skills?"

"Very much," Alvonne replied.

"Impressive," said Wilfen.

Svensson shrugged, a standard reply to anything he did not fully comprehend.

The man grinned. "We spend much time honing our skills, but the people of Glam do not appreciate them." He gestured expansively, momentarily disclosing a black star tattooed on his right palm. "As you can observe for yourselves, you're our only audience."

Wilfen glanced around in surprise. Sure enough, apart from the robed people, only the three travelers were present. Unadorned stone walls bounded the square, unrelieved by the customary collection of street vendors and their customers. There was no sign of the two men Alvonne had seen watching them.

"Where is everybody?" Wilfen inquired politely.

"They're scared of us," declared the man with a growl. "Scared of our disciplined fighting techniques, frightened we will turn on them. If only they would stop and listen to what we have to say..." He chuckled suddenly. "Anyway, that's their problem."

Wilfen grinned back, wary nonetheless: this was a rather intimidating fellow.

"We must go now," announced Alvonne, noting that it neared sunset. "Could you direct us to the *Crown and Scepter*?" "Certainly!" replied the Holm, so friendly that Wilfen was ashamed of being unnerved by the man. "It's at the end of that street there; on the left side. You can't miss it."

"Thank you," said Alvonne, and the travelers proceeded in the indicated direction.

* *

Shondal ventured across town, ostensibly strolling idly, though surreptitiously watching for evidence of a shadow. No one appeared to be following him, but the Paladin was taking no chances. He walked past the entrance of the *Scarlet Man Inn*, then paused, pretending to re-tie a bootlace. He threw a covert look back the way he had come. This was the wealthier part of Glam, and the people in the street had no interest in what looked like a common soldier. Hardly noticing him, except in disdain, they stepped around Shondal, and he relaxed a fraction.

He sauntered back to the *Scarlet Man* and headed inside. Clean and well maintained, it was a more refined inn than most. Sipping wine and chatting amiably, well-dressed men and women sat sedately at lace-covered tables.

Shondal caught the eye of one of the wine drinkers, a fellow resplendently attired in a bright blue silk tunic and dark-blue trousers. The man nodded once, blond curls bobbing, and quickly took his leave of an attractive woman in a green gown. She appeared bewildered as the well-dressed fop strode after Shondal, who had turned on his heel and left the inn. The Paladin meandered slowly down the street, and the blue-clad man caught up with him at a cross street.

"Shondal," called the fop without preamble.

"Darrabin. What can you tell me?"

"No orders. But I've seen an old friend of yours a couple of times lately."

"Who?"

"The Skull."

Shondal nodded, expression sour. "Yes. I saw Waghel's bald head out in the Warldife. I nearly put an arrow through him."

"Pity you didn't. Anyway, he's taken to wearing a black beret. It's still easy enough to recognize his ugly face, but no one's been able to discover where he's hiding. I'm told he's associated with the Robed Ones, a cult interested in unarmed combat, though I haven't been able to confirm that rumor."

Shondal grunted. "Keep trying to track him down. Anything else?"

"Yes. Apparently all the Nulls in eastern Holmis are on the lookout for you."

"Is that right? I'll keep it in mind. I'll be leaving Glam tomorrow. See you."

"Take care, Shondal."

"Don't worry, Darrabin. I will."

Musing about his lot in life, the Paladin headed towards the *Crown and Scepter*. It was hard to balance two masters or, as in his case, a master and a mistress. His mistress had priority, of course, but his master thought *his* will was supreme.

'Goddess,' he thought with a sigh. 'Let all this be for a good reason.'

* *

Wilfen and the others quickly found the *Crown and Scepter Inn*. A deal of people were entering, proving the inn conducted brisk and much appreciated business. It was chaotic inside, but after a few minutes they found Shondal in a dim corner of the taproom.

"Hello!" the legionnaire greeted.

"Hello, Shondal!" the others returned. They sat down to a glass each of sundew.

"So what did you get up to?" Shondal queried them.

Alvonne took a sip of his drink. "We stopped to watch some jugglers. They had five knives each."

"We saw some other people in robes breaking wood with their fists," added Wilfen.

"Did you now?" Shondal asked with sudden interest. He threw a swift look around the inn and seemed satisfied with what he saw. "And you asked them the way here?" Wilfen sensed the soldier was troubled.

"Oh, yes!" Alvonne answered. "Their leader himself told us the way."

"Ahh, the Robed Ones..." Shondal mused. "Anyway, we shall not be staying here tonight."

"Why not?" demanded Alvonne.

Shondal hesitated fractionally. "The *Crown and Scepter* makes a good meeting place, but it is not safe at night."

Wilfen wondered what had disturbed the soldier. Obviously the twins had done the wrong thing in telling the robed fellow their destination, however indirectly. Shondal had altered his plans at the news. The

Nevander was intrigued, as he had little doubt that Shondal was not afraid to stay in any inn, whatever its reputation. Something else bothered the man.

They slipped out the rear exit of the inn. It was past twilight outside. Shondal led them for a long time, up and down many streets, until every rubbish-filled alley and lane looked the same to Wilfen. The Nevander was certain, however, the Paladin avoided the main, congested streets. Finally, on the other side of Glam, the legionnaire halted the company at a respectable-looking inn called the *Spirited Colt*. There the young man fell gratefully into a comfortable bed.

* *

As the travelers stepped outside the *Spirited Colt* into early morning light, the streets exhibited signs of chaos. Sober-faced city guards dashed through throngs of milling, gossiping townspeople towards the western side of town, where a great plume of black smoke rose high into the sky.

Shondal stopped a young guardsman. "What's happened?" he demanded, showing the Paladin Mark.

The guard was too distressed to react to the tattoo. "Someone raided the *Crown and Scepter*," he replied. "Everyone was killed or wounded. They burnt the whole thing down!" The Holm spoke venomously: "Tharmish or Nullish minions, no doubt!"

The young man stepped around Shondal and ran down the street in the direction of the burning *Crown and Scepter Inn*.

The quartet headed for the eastern gate, passed by guardsmen pursuing people dressed in black robes. If the citizens of Glam had been fearful of the skills of the Robed Ones (as Shondal had titled them), then they had overcome that fear: many townspeople helped chase the terrified cultists. Outraged at the burning of their favorite inn and tiring of the constant fear of the Robed Ones, the Glam had finally decided that this was the time to persecute those who practiced strange abilities. Using all their unique talents, the Robed Ones fought fiercely when cornered, but they went down under weight of numbers.

A man in black robes sprinted past the travelers. A squad of city guards rounded a corner in his line of flight. With a snarl, he leapt on one of the guards and lunged for the throat. In horror, Wilfen watched as a soldier shot the Robed One with a crossbow. But it took a second bolt to make the cultist release his grip.

As he found his feet, the attacked guard rubbed his neck. He looked supremely relieved, amazed at his good fortune at remaining among the living.

Wilfen witnessed these incidents with misgivings. He thought back on his encounter with the cultists, wondering if the current events were somehow connected.

Twenty men guarded the eastern gate. The guards' fingers were near the triggers of their crossbows, and for the second time Wilfen spent a long minute in a nervous state, gazing at the tips of steel bolts, as at least a dozen men came to search the travelers. Shondal showed the Paladin Mark, but it was quite some time before the gate commander chose to permit them to leave the city. He unbarred the gate, counseling them to "Beware those you meet on the road out of Glam."

The gate swung closed behind them, sealing Glam and its troubles. Wilfen possessed a guilt that the killing and chaos were the result of his visit to the robed cultists.

[CHAPTER 9: NIGHT FLIGHT](#)

On the day they departed Glam clouds started to darken the sky. Light drizzle tumbled down, moistening their clothes and dampening their spirits. The rain continued in short bursts for some time, and

conversation decreased to a minimum.

Dotted with the occasional tree, the grassy countryside rose marginally on his right and to his left sloped down to Kenderlan Sea, but Wilfen had no time for what was around him. Depressed by the irritating showers, he spent the morning trudging along, mostly staring at the ground before him.

After a long period of introspective thought, he raised his head and glanced to his immediate left. Alvonne, face hooded to keep out the rain, plodded forward one laborious step at a time.

"It's destined to be a long, long walk today," Wilfen remarked, breaking a silence.

"That it will seem a lengthy trek I have no doubt," Alvonne agreed ruefully. "I will be glad of a hot bath in some village tonight."

Wilfen chuckled, thinking of how many hours it was to nightfall with noon just gone.

It was quiet then: quiet, that is, aside from the continual soft patter of rain striking Shondal's armor and the road.

The saturated travelers arrived that evening in a village through which the road passed, stopping at a cozy inn set right on the Holmish highway, where they were provided with a welcome hot meal and bath. Afterwards they retired to warm, comfortable beds and strove to remove the chill constant rain had caused to settle in their bones.

The next day, to their relief, proved drier. Though the clouds in the sky were gray and ominous, they were widely dispersed. As a consequence, the sun shone brightly for much of the day, generating pleasant warmth.

The Central Kenderlan Road led to the shore of Kenderlan Sea on the third day out from Glam. Appearing to stretch forever, steel gray under the overcast sky, the inland sea dominated the scene to the north, the surface unbroken by even a single island. Unlike the Warldife Sea, the water was largely at rest, hardly a ripple to be seen. The beach was a thin, reddish strip, more mud than sand. Above, gulls, shags, and even a pelican or two wheeled in the wind, scanning the water for fish.

"Ahh," sighed Wilfen in delight. "The sea!"

"All we need is a forest, and it would be just like home," Alvonne said.

For the next few days they continued along the Central Kenderlan Road, which still skirted the vast Kenderlan Sea. In the afternoon of the sixth day out of Glam, they forded the Hine River close to where it discharged its icy waters into the sea. That night the four halted in a village located at the intersection of the Central Kenderlan and Western Roads.

At a table in the dingy, smoke-filled *Sun and Moon Inn* they chatted quietly among themselves, ignoring the babble of the other patrons. Shondal faced Wilfen. The Paladin's eyes examined the taproom beyond the Nevander even as they conversed. He stiffened suddenly, expression hardening.

"Call no attention to yourselves," the soldier instructed them softly.

"What's the matter?" Wilfen inquired, not turning his head.

"Several Nulls have just entered."

"What of them? Holmis is not at war with Null!" Wilfen was puzzled by his uncle's dismay.

"The Empire is not an ally of ours," said the Paladin. "These men are probably spies."

"Spies!"

Shondal nodded firmly to Wilfen's whispered exclamation. "Holmis has its own spies in the Empire. Who knows when war will come? We need that inside information. And so do they."

"How are we going to avoid their attention?" Alvonne asked. "You're a legionnaire, and Mikael Svensson looks like a Memm. There aren't that many Memm hereabouts."

Shondal appeared uncomfortable at Alvonne's words. "I know. I know!" He closed his eyes for a moment. "Right," he said decisively. "We'll sneak out the back way. We must keep the Skylord safe. His knowledge is invaluable, and I'd sooner see him in our hands than the Nulls'."

"Act naturally," the legionnaire added in a terse whisper. "They've seen us. Make them believe *we* haven't noticed *them*. They're not suspicious yet. Wait five minutes, and we'll retire to our rooms at the back of the inn. I just hope they don't try to talk to us."

It was exceptionally difficult to act naturally, when every instinct urged the age-old options of fight or flight. Wilfen made several unsuccessful attempts to initiate conversation but eventually gave up: the others would utter nothing, even Svensson. Alvonne stared at the back of his hands. The Skylord was at ease: he sat quietly in his chair, drinking the sundew Shondal had given him, casually glancing about the taproom. The soldier only occasionally dared look at the Nulls. The Paladin remained stone-faced, so Wilfen could not use his uncle's expression as a guide to the Westlanders' actions. Not knowing what transpired behind him made him edgy, and it took an effort of will not to turn and sneak a glimpse of the Nulls.

"All right," said Shondal finally. "Time we left."

Avoiding looking at the Nulls and striving to walk casually, the others trailed the legionnaire through the crowded taproom and up squeaky stairs. Shondal's size served to open a path through the raucous, milling villagers and traveling merchants, though Wilfen was uncertain whether or not this was a boon: surely, he reasoned, the Nulls would notice the ease of their passage and pay greater attention to them. Without being accosted, the travelers reached the back rooms on the second story of the inn, and Shondal moved them quickly. After closing the doors of their other rooms, the Paladin had announced that they would climb out of the window of Wilfen's room, then down a vine-covered trellis into a dark lane at the rear of the *Sun and Moon*.

The solidly built Alvonne made the first descent. He jumped the last few feet onto mossy cobblestones in the alley below, slipping but quickly righting himself. He peered around, found the lane to be clear, and beckoned the others.

They came down in increasing order of size. Expression bemused, Svensson was first, clambering awkwardly. Wilfen followed the Skylord, agitatedly pacing about on the ground as Shondal descended the creaky trellis. There was a sharp crack of breaking wood, and the soldier quickly dropped the last sword to the ground. He waved away the others' concern. "I'm all right," he muttered, picking trails of vine from his long hair. "But I suppose I'm too heavy for climbing."

"Run," said Svensson with a smile.

The Argindells jumped.

"He's learning," Shondal remarked. "Yes, Skylord, we're on the run from all of Null and probably Tharm

as well."

"Let's go!" Wilfen whispered anxiously, shifting his balance from foot to foot.

"Right," said Shondal, and he led them into the night.

CHAPTER 10: REFLECTION

Having sneaked away from the *Sun and Moon Inn*, with its attendant overspilt light and noise, the travelers discovered a quiet, moonless night. Shondal guided them through the darkness, past piles of empty bottles and reeking garbage, to the crossroads at the heart of the village, where a pair of unshaven, rather fat and scruffy-looking guards paced listlessly around a small fire. The Paladin deliberately kicked at a stone to catch their attention, but one had already turned in the quartet's direction.

"Good evening, gentleman," greeted Shondal.

"It's evening, sure enough," replied the shorter of the guards, eyeing the somewhat furtive-looking group with disfavor. "I'm not certain it's all that good."

"I hear some Nulls have just come into town," said Shondal.

The guard spat into the fire. "Bastards. I don't like Nulls, my friend. Or Nullish sympathizers." He stared at Shondal meaningfully.

Shondal withheld a grin at the fellow's posturing. He was probably a miller or a baker when it was not his turn to play at guard duty. "I'm not all that keen on Nulls, either. In fact, I choose to avoid them."

"I know what you mean. Me and Terl here, we don't like 'em. Do we, Terl?"

Terl grunted.

"Terl doesn't talk much, but he hates 'em, too."

'Ahh,' thought Shondal. 'Loyal subjects of the Confederation, hating the enemy without really knowing him.'

"Well, I can tell you," the short guard continued in a conspiratorial tone, "there's been a lot of them around here of late."

"Oh?" inquired Shondal, eyebrows raised.

"Yes. Merchants -- real Holmish ones -- tell us they've seen them all along the Central Kenderlan Road towards Balt. There are also a few on the Western Road south to Bodertun."

"Really? Well, thank you for your information. I might have to take the Western Road south."

"Good idea, my friend. There are not so many of them that way I'm told."

Shondal fished in his money pouch and withdrew a couple of silver crowns. The Paladin threw one to each of the guardsmen, who caught the coins with practiced proficiency. "Have yourselves a drink on...on Shondal."

"Thank you, Shondal," said the talkative guard, and even Terl mumbled his gratitude.

Shondal led the travelers away from the guards' bonfire, southward down the Western Road.

"Why did you tell them whom you are and where you are going?" Alvonne asked when the company had gone out of earshot of the two villagers.

"If they're loyal to Holmis, then it doesn't matter if I tell them whom I am."

"And if they're not?" Wilfen queried. "What if they're open to bribes?"

"Then they'll tell the Nulls we're going south, when in fact, very shortly we're going to circle the village and head *north*. I wasn't lying: I do want to elude the Nulls. We'll go to Kenderlan City and take a riverboat from there down the Milwarn to the Forest Road Bridge. The Forest Road will lead us south to Himberon."

<'Why don't we go cross-country?'> asked Svensson.

Shondal nodded. "I considered that. But I believe it would take longer crossing farms and hills and swamps. I'd rather stick to the well-worn routes."

The others accepted the plan without further dissension, though Shondal noticed Svensson's quizzical expression.

'Yes, you're right, Skylord,' Shondal thought. 'It doesn't make sense. It's almost as if they know, as if someone is telling them...' How *were* his earthly rivals managing to dog his footsteps so easily these days? It was irritating enough that the Tharm, Waghel, showed up everywhere, but now Nulls swarmed over Holmis. In Glam Darrabin had warned him of the Nulls' interest. He hoped there were no Nulls in Kenderlan City, but though aware Nulls were unwelcome in the Kender capital, he was sure the Westlanders would be represented in some way or other.

* *

Svensson was lost in thought as he walked, thinking about the long, arduous journey he had made to find himself in this predicament, pursued by half the barbarians on a backward world. He brooded on his past, two thousand years and more than a thousand light years beyond his grasp.

*

Thermos was hot and dry all year round, but mid-summer equatorial temperatures regularly peaked at more than 330 K. After spending mornings being tutored by computer, young Mikael Svensson was free to occupy sunny afternoons partaking in games with his friends.

Mikael was not a natural athlete. The strict Human Integrity Acts meant -- though his family's genetic code had been legally altered to suit Thermos' harsh climate (his black, melanin-enhanced skin would have made him appear outlandish to his blond, blue-eyed Earthly ancestors) -- he was small and slightly built. Dogged hard work had enabled him to gain reasonable proficiency in several sports. He occupied hours practicing skills some of his peers mastered in far less time. Sometimes Mikael would become depressed by his lack of sporting expertise, but he always recalled something his father, Jan, had once said: "No matter how good you are, there will always be someone who is better. Do your best, and above all, enjoy yourself."

When he was ten years of age, Mikael undertook the standard Psionic Proficiency Test. He was placed in a dark, soundproofed room and asked to perform a number of psionic techniques. His Communication talents were of average strength, but his Motion skills, especially teleportation, were phenomenal. The computer tester told the boy he was in the top one percent of teleports across the Empire.

Mikael was ecstatic. At last he had discovered something at which he was very adept. Abandoning his sporting pastimes, he instead devoted his spare hours to developing his teleportation talent, refining his

control and improving his "mental stamina."

His fifteenth birthday heralded the end of Mikael's compulsory computer tutoring. He was now one of billions within the ranks of the Citizenry. As a Citizen of the Empire he was entitled to all the privileges that came with the status. He received a set amount of credit each day, a sum that would increase if he deigned to be employed (due to the almost limitless scope of modern technology -- nourishing food, luxurious accommodation, and most leisure activities required negligible expenditure of power and resources -- full employment for the Imperial Citizenry was not obligatory nor even possible).

Mikael enjoyed his Citizenship. It enabled him to live freely, using his credit as he saw fit. He could use his apartment's in-built computer to "travel" in time and space throughout the Empire or entertain himself in any fashion he chose. And he chose, like most of the population, to lose himself in the alternative worlds offered by various drugs and stimulants, as well as pleasure simulators and other forms of virtual reality. Only his personal computer could remind him to eat or take some sort of artificial sustenance.

After a few years the young Citizen became disillusioned. His hedonistic life lacked something, some vital essence. He remembered his computer tutoring days with more affection than when he had endured them. Spending his waking hours in a virtual world seemed a purposeless existence. He started to venture from his apartment, undertaking real trips across Thermos, exploring its sights in the flesh, experiencing the planet with his true senses. He could, of course, have "seen" the same sights without abandoning the comfort of his quarters, but he felt the genuine event, difficulties notwithstanding, was a more rewarding thing. It made him feel tough, hardened.

But the challenge of existing in true reality ultimately proved as testing as avoiding plunging deeper into the void of synthetic existence. Even Mikael's "corporeal tourism" lost its charm. The Citizen's thoughts swirled along paths well worn by millions of people before him, asking the unanswerable questions of himself. What is the purpose of life? Why am I here, if only to die?

*

How naïve he had been! Svensson smiled to himself, but the expression soured. What was different now? He still did not know the answers to those questions. Why *had* humans evolved? For the Enemy to annihilate?

He snorted. Humanity was not done with yet. This planet still harbored a seed: a vigorous tree could yet flourish once more.

He despaired anew. He, Mikael Svensson, seemed to be Terra Nova's only hope. And what a pathetic hope it was.

*

There were few cities on Thermos. The reasons that had originally drawn people together no longer had relevance. Most conveniences were available within easy reach in one's home, and human acquaintances could be "visited" with a simple holo-vision projection. But the tradition of gathering in one place was a difficult habit to break, and cities such as New Cairo and Thermos Footfall still prospered.

On an October day in 2388, a suborbital spaceplane flight from Mikael's home city landed at New Cairo on Thermos' northern continent. He boarded a subtrain bound for Thermos Footfall. The slight sensation of motion he felt belied the subtrain's velocity of four kilometers per second, as it sped through a vacuum-filled tunnel deep beneath the surface of the planet. Within half-an-hour Mikael had arrived at his destination, the first point of human settlement on Thermos.

Mikael took the unusual option of walking to his intended destination. Dressed in a neat suit -- charcoal-colored with glittering specks -- he strolled along a largely deserted boulevard lined by

windowless plastic facades (with holovision who needed a view or natural light?), while automatic aerocars zipped overhead. It took him a few minutes to locate the government building he sought. Within the smooth, iridescent plastic of the wall was a notice announcing that this was the "DEPARTMENT OF IMPERIAL ARMED FORCES, THERMOS BRANCH." Beneath the notice was the symbol of the armed forces: a depiction of the planet Earth as a disk of blue and green, obsolete riveted armor plating.

A moving walkway led Mikael up to the main entrance, a silvery armored door. He paused on an opaque plastic plate about a meter square in size set before the door, experiencing a slight tingling as invisible probes thoroughly examined him. A chime sounded, and Mikael heard the familiar sound of a Central Computer's simulated voice: "Svensson, Mikael Anders. Citizen Number: 3 476 543 087 463. Computer records clean. Clearance: Class D. You may enter, Citizen Svensson. To guarantee your safety, please do not attempt to enter areas designated as accessible only to higher Clearance persons. You are warned that anti-personnel and anti-electronic defenses guard these areas. Have a nice day!"

Computer scans always made Mikael uneasy. He had nothing to hide, but he knew the probes could determine his emotional state. He wondered what would happen if he underwent a scan in an agitated frame of mind (not that personal computers would allow one to have such a mood for too long): "anti-personnel defenses" *might* involve electrical stunning, but they could just as easily be miniature heat-seeking missiles.

The armored door dissolved away, reforming after Mikael had entered the reception room behind it. Before him, in the middle of a shimmering, carpeted floor -- colored, depending on the angle of his gaze, red, green, blue, or yellow -- was a translucent hemisphere of plastic about a meter high: the receptionist. The Citizen placed a hand on the receptionist, and it lit up with a pale yellow internal glow.

"Yes, Citizen?" it asked in a pleasant, androgynous voice.

"I'm not sure where to go. I'm here about Navy recruiting."

"You're looking for the Imperial Navy Recruiting Office. Take the elevator on the west wall of this room to the third floor, and the receptionist there will direct you further." To ensure he understood, the receptionist produced a three-dimensional map within its glowing hemisphere.

"Thank you," said Mikael, indicating to the machine that he had no further need of its help.

"Thank you," replied the receptionist, and its light died.

The receptionist on the third floor directed him down a polished white corridor to a plastic door marked "IMPERIAL NAVY RECRUITING OFFICE." Outside was a row of form-fitting chairs, occupied by perhaps a dozen people of near Mikael's age.

"Come about the Navy's recruiting program?" a bearded, shaggy-haired man next to him asked.

"Yes," replied Mikael shortly, looking down the length of the line.

"So have a few others," the stranger remarked. "I'm Nikolai Titov, originally from Hibernus."

"Mikael Svensson. I'm a local."

"I thought so," declared Titov sagely. "Most of the others here are from off-world. We're the adventurous types who have tired of travel and artificial existence. When you've crossed light years of space, it's easy to succumb to ennui."

"Piss off!" said someone farther down the line, and Mikael could understand why. The Citizens not need

this Titov character to explain or justify their actions.

The Hibernusian said no more.

The candidates were summoned into the office one by one by an actual person, Mikael was intrigued to find, quite some time elapsing between each. The Citizen waited patiently, staring at his leather-look shoes, at the unadorned wall, at the other people sitting on either side of him. He shifted uncomfortably.

A few others had arrived after Mikael, making a total of seventeen people he had seen. The Citizen wondered how many recruits the Imperial Navy would employ, hoping at least ten but expecting three or four at the most. Only the most highly sought after jobs required an actual corporeal appearance by all applicants.

Eventually, Mikael was called into the office, where holovision screens on all four walls showed a strange, alien scene: a sun-soaked golden beach bordering a white-crested sapphire sea. It was a top quality set-up, for he could faintly sense the smell of the sea, the call of the gulls, and the touch of a breeze. He was asked to sit in a huge, comfortable armchair situated before a broad, glossy wood-look desk.

"Hello, Citizen Svensson. I'm Kay Marlow, Navy Recruitment Officer for Thermos," she said in introduction.

Citizen Marlow was a tall woman with flaming red hair and very pale skin. 'Late generation arrival,' Mikael guessed. (The descendants of early settlers possessed genetic codes that had been altered before the development of late-model personal computers; an albino possessing a modern PC, however, could survive skin-cancer-free on Thermos as readily as Svensson.)

Mikael shook the offered hand. "Hello, Citizen Marlow."

"I would like to ask you a few questions about yourself, Citizen," said Marlow. "Is that acceptable to you?"

Mikael nodded.

"All right, then... Sexual preference?"

Mikael blinked. Was it a 'come on'? If so, then it was remarkably subtle by modern standards. Far easier just to ask for sex outright. "Hetero," he answered finally.

"It's not important. It just dictates where you would be placed on a ship."

"Ahh, I understand."

"Now then: could I have a current bioscan readout?"

Mikael gave his personal computer a telepathic command, and a thumbnail-sized piece of its wristwatch-outlet popped out on the end of a spoke of plastic. Detaching the loosened component from the spoke, he handed it to Marlow. She placed it in a little depression that had appeared on her desktop. There was, of course, no need for worry, for his PC kept him perfectly fit and healthy.

The last time he had done a bioscan on himself, a week previously, the first few figures had been:

Height: 167.4 cm

Weight: 61.2 kg Heart Rate: 52 bpm

Blood Pressure: 113/68...

The questions after that followed a predictable path. "What do you know about the Navy?" "These are some possible duties: do you think you could perform them?" "What is the Navy's role in modern society?"

Then came the shock question: "What do you think of the Enemy?"

Mikael was startled. Scratching his arm nervously, he stared at Marlow. The Citizen had simply not anticipated such a question. What was the correct answer? Did they want a xenophobe?

"I'm not... I don't know any of them personally." He smiled without much amusement. "I suppose I don't like the popular image of the Enemy, but...but we don't even know what they look like, so how can we understand them?" Mikael thought for a moment. "If I thought they threatened the human race, I would certainly support removing that threat, even...even if it required *killing every* last alien." He wondered if he had gone too far and grinned, trying to take the intensity out of his previous statement. "However, as they have yet to invade our territory, I'm not sure racial extermination is all that likely."

"I see," said Marlow, but a faint smile gave Mikael more hope than her words.

The woman leant back in her chair and stared vacantly at the surrounding beach scene, apparently listening to voices inside her head. "Right," she said finally. "If you want it, the job's yours."

Mikael was momentarily surprised. "I want it," he declared vehemently on recovering.

"Welcome to the Navy, Citizen Svensson."

"Thank you, Citizen Marlow." He smiled. "This is great. Ice hot. I was sure, though, that the alien question had sunk me."

"You'd be amazed at just how many people *did* flunk on that question. This is the modern Navy. Our job is to preserve the peace. Yet our origins lie in war, and we may be called on to fight the Enemy. For this reason we need competent, intelligent people with the 'right' attitude. It is my instinct that ultimately makes the choice, though I do listen to what the computer has to say about everyone I see. And the computer had a high approval rating of your exceptional teleportation talent."

Marlow regarded him through her long ginger lashes and smiled seductively. "That's settled, then. Now, on a more personal note, can I interest you in a few rounds of sex?"

He smiled back. "I thought you'd never ask!"

Mikael was duly sworn in as a member of the Imperial Navy, pledging loyalty to the Empire and the defense of its Citizens. Along with four other recruits, he was assigned to the *INS Gorbachev*, an offensive battleship of the Fourth Imperial Fleet. Petty Officer Mik Sims -- a thick-set blond man -- escorted them to Thermos Footfall Spaceport, where they were to take a transporter to the spacecraft carrier *Gallant*.

The Hibernusian, Nikolai Titov, was one of the recruits. There were also: Louise Mars from Aquarius; Mary Tan from Old Earth; and Liam Van Allen, originally from the Asteroid Belt Colony.

Mik Sims led the silver-uniformed recruits to a dumpy spacecraft. They descended steps into the round, gray plastic concavity in which the spacecraft rested. They met Lieutenant Graeme Drake of the Star Marines, a dark-haired, delicately slender Martian who was to pilot them to the *INS Gallant*, far out on the Perimeter.

The Marine transporter had three levels: the pilot operated in the smallest, uppermost section, under a hemispherical canopy of glasstic; beneath the cockpit area was the personnel level, which had facilities for twenty people; the lowest level was a cargo hold.

Mikael had been off-world only twice before, and he did his best to appear unruffled in front of experienced space travelers. He settled back into a bulky acceleration chair, letting it shape itself to fit his body.

"We're about to lift off," Drake announced over the intercom.

A sudden sensation of weightlessness overtook Mikael, indicating the anti-gravity generator had been activated. The transporter was repelled skyward from the landing pad. The Citizen found himself trembling, though whether from fear or excitement he was not sure.

After a few moments had passed Sims said, "Computer: show holovision."

A rectangular section of wall became momentarily fuzzy, then a three-dimensional view of space appeared. The stars were hard white points of light scattered throughout a black realm. The transporter had left the Thermosian atmosphere and traveled through interplanetary space.

It was an eerie sight: six weightless people nestled into enveloping chairs, watching a scene of emptiness almost beyond human comprehension. Mikael supposed Sims *may* have known the gamut of emotions he evoked in the recruits, but the Thermosian rather doubted it. The Petty Officer scrutinized each of the recruits in turn, his dark eyes boring into them, as if testing their hardness.

"This is your home for the next two Standard Years," Sims said. "It's inhospitable, lethal. Humankind has not mastered space: it tolerates us. You must all learn to work as part of an efficient machine. Space has no mercy for those who make mistakes."

Though the transporter was under heavy acceleration, onboard gravity was maintained at about one Standard Grav. This was the most comfortable for all, for the gravities of the recruits' homeworlds ranged from the 0.91 gravs of Thermos to the 1.17 gravs of Hibernus.

Living conditions were tolerable, Spartan but not especially uncomfortable. The temperature of the personnel quarters was maintained at 295 K, belying the near Absolute Zero of interplanetary space. This was a little cool for a Thermosian's optimum comfort, a little warm for a Hibernusian's: it was, however, most agreeable to all. A similar balance was observed in the humidity of the transporter's atmosphere, kept midway between the levels standard on Thermos and Aquarius. There were separate sleep capsules and bathrooms. Yet Mikael thought it was fortunate their voyage was to last only ten days. You could never truly be alone on the transporter, as there was always someone within a few meters of you.

Lieutenant Graeme Drake had piloted the Marine transporter on a course to intercept the Fleet, decelerating so the spacecraft moved only fractionally faster than the *Gallant*. The transporter attached itself to one of the docking struts scattered like quills over the Fleet flagship's spherical hull. The passengers felt no jolt but heard the hiss of atmosphere filling the transporter's airlock.

The recruits were swiftly transferred to a small intra-fleet shuttle capable of docking with their assigned ship, the *Gorbachev*, unlike the comparatively big Marine transporter.

Mikael occupied six months in basic training, acquiring expertise in several key areas: astronavigation; gunnery and kinetic/missile weaponry deployment; defense shield operation; and human/military computer psionic interaction.

Following an analysis of his performance, as well as his psychological and psionic traits, it was decided that Mikael should be trained as a reconnaissance pilot in Eagle Eye spacecraft. He was reassigned to the spacecraft carrier *Gallant*.

It required only a few days for him to actually learn to "fly" in space. His control was purely mental, and he needed to accustom himself to what the Eagle Eye could and could not do, because while the "hands-free" approach meant his reflexes were lightning-fast, the spacecraft could not perform some maneuvers -- such as a tight turn -- on only a moment's notice.

Other skills, the more specialized techniques of his new profession, required much more effort to master. He had to combine with Ms Mary, the conscious intelligent computer, to regard her as a partner to interact and work with to an end, while she had to become familiar with relating to a human. He needed the confidence to trust the computer with his life. They developed methods of flying the Eagle Eye together, working out efficient defense shield operating procedures to offset the very little physical armor such a small vessel could carry. They practiced the classic combat maneuvers, how to escape swiftly when the standard twin atomic disrupters were insufficient to extricate them from a hazardous situation. In partnership, they became proficient in the operation of the spacecraft's sensors to garner the all-important intelligence.

The hyperspace jump was the most crucial skill of all. When properly executed it made a journey to a known star very simple; performed incorrectly, a hy-jump was almost always a disaster: a spacecraft could end up short of the destination or, worse, anywhere at all in the entire universe. Only a very experienced human/computer couple scouted new stars, for jumping to an unknown destination entailed great risk.

On August 14, 2389, Mikael graduated from his course and gained his "wings." He was accepted as a reconnaissance pilot aboard the *Gallant*, beginning a new career, surveying the known worlds of the Enemy.

*

How enthusiastic he had been! His life seemed to have meaning, a purpose, reconnoitering the Enemy, defending the human race. He had fallen in love with a machine! Yet in time it had all soured again: a miasma of cynicism and apathy had settled over him. His work seemed to lose its relevance. "What is the point of it all?" he asked himself as he had before.

Then the Enemy had unleashed its long-dreaded invasion, and -- what bitter, bitter irony -- he had not been able to carry out even his abject primary task, apprising Navy headquarters of the Enemy offensive, despite being one of the first humans attacked.

Svensson sneered in self-loathing. What a poor specimen of humanity he was. He had lost interest in his circumstances. He did not deserve this. Had he not suffered enough? He just wanted to be left alone, left to take some stimulants or use a pleasure simulator. There really did not appear to be anything constructive he could do here on Terra Nova. His hands were tied. So let the Terra Novans go where they would; let the people in the Central Computer Complex plot and scheme. At this point in time he, Mikael Svensson, could not care less.

CHAPTER 11: RISING FEAR

The road to Kenderlan City traversed kilowords of open sea, intercepting a scrubby island en route. This particular part of Kenderlan Sea was shallow, less than a few swords deep, making possible the road that penetrated deep into its realm. From the edge of the Western Road the travelers could observe the sandy, sun-dappled bed and the silvery fish that darted mere feet below the surface of the water.

It took them two days to reach Kenderlan City. Near the end of the eighth day out of Glam the four arrived at the outskirts of the provincial capital. There were no walls around the city (which, according to tradition, had no need of dividing walls), and they entered without challenge.

The company spent several days in Kenderlan City. Wilfen and Alvonne explored it together, discovering the northern Holmish town to be quite unlike either Glam or Bonvalur. The Kender capital was situated on an island in the midst of Kenderlan Sea, accessible only from the south, whence they had come. It consisted of several sectors, each divided by an invisible yet well defined border. Thus, the twins were able to distinguish a sector of predominantly small, specialized shops, a pocket of hawkers and peddlers, and areas where people of different ethnic backgrounds resided: Arnds in the east, Memm in the north, a few Magon and Adar Mutians in the southeast, and Holms everywhere else. There was also, around the docks, a shadier part of the city, and they did not need Shondal to tell them to stay away from that district.

On their second day in Kenderlan City, the Nevanders spotted Shondal and the Skylord across a crowded plaza, for the soldier was taller than most. Glancing at each other, the twins nodded at a mutual thought: they would shadow the men and see where they went.

It was not an easy task. The crowd, unconsciously perhaps, parted in the legionnaire's line of movement; the twins, on the other hand, had to battle their way through the noisy, jostling horde, many swords astern of Shondal and Svensson. Their task was compounded by the Skylord having abandoned his orange backpack and changed his distinctive clothes into less ostentatious Terra Novan things -- a freakish, literal transmutation of the very transiently fluid material of the attire (Shondal admitted that that was not what he had had in mind when he suggested Svensson "change" his clothes). With a deal of luck, they trailed the two men for what seemed like hours. Continually compelled to weave between clumps of passers-by, however, the Nevanders ultimately lost sight of their quarry.

"Where are they?" Wilfen asked worriedly.

"I don't know, Wilfen."

"We'd better find them," Wilfen said, staring around him. "I don't know where we are."

Alvonne nodded. His eyes widened. "There's Shondal!" He pointed down a side street, and sure enough, Wilfen discerned the back of their uncle's head bobbing above the crowd.

The Nevanders tracked the men with care after that, mindful that if the twins got too close they might be seen. It was a game, a challenge, rather than a deliberate attempt to spy on Shondal and Svensson. However, the farther they progressed, the thinner was the mass of humanity that filled the streets, and the brothers spent more time hiding behind things to avoid notice. Eventually the men ventured into an area where the number of pedestrians could be counted on one hand.

This part of town was composed of holdings surrounded by high, concealing stone walls. Signs posted on walls and gates proclaimed schools of carpentry, metalwork, pottery, glass blowing, dyeing, baking, candle-making, and other common trades. There were also some more obscure, anonymous properties; Shondal and Mikael Svensson paused at the gate of one of these estates.

The legionnaire knocked at the ironbound gate with a complex sequence of thuds and taps of his fist. A voice called to him, and he replied softly. The gate opened, and a red-robed figure beckoned the men. They passed through the gateway, and the gate closed after them.

Wilfen and Alvonne regarded each other with matching puzzled expressions. They waited a minute or so, then wandered over to the ten-foot-high wall. After a brief search they discovered what they sought: a

hole in the mortar a few swords away from the gate. They took it in turns to peer through the hole.

Shondal conversed with an attentive, slender, golden-haired woman in a red robe, imparting a concise version of the journey from Mardine to Kenderlan City, dwelling on Mikael Svensson in particular. Wilfen wondered whom this woman was that his uncle should inform her of all that had befallen the travelers; he thought it unwise of the soldier.

When the Paladin had completed his story, he turned to face the wall, very near to where Wilfen watched the scene. "You can come out now," the man called.

The Nevanders stared at each other in disbelief. How did he know? How *could* he know? Perhaps, they decided with a common accord, he had not been speaking to them at all. Both breathed a fraction more easily.

Shondal destroyed their supposition by calling out again: "Wilfen! Alvonne! Come to the gate! You shall be allowed to enter!"

The brothers shook their heads, thinking: 'He knew all along!' Wilfen wondered if they should run, for who knew what Shondal would do if they had stumbled on something he wished kept secret? Warily the Nevanders approached the opening gate, where a Memmishwoman -- attired in a red robe identical to the blond woman's -- beckoned them.

On the other side of the gate, Shondal and the golden-haired woman awaited the twins. Beyond that pair, a squat, granite-blocked building with mullioned windows filled the estate.

"Hello, Wilfen, Alvonne," Shondal said. "What's with the guarded expressions?"

"Just cautious," Alvonne replied tightly.

Shondal laughed. "Well, if you can ignore your unnecessary caution for a minute, I will introduce you to Nartrell, Mistress of the House of Orphaned Women."

Still uncertain, the twins nodded slightly.

"Welcome to our humble house," said Nartrell. "Now, Alvonne and Wilfen, you must meet she who will travel with you."

The brothers stared at Nartrell incredulously. Someone else to travel with them? A female? This was startling news!

Nartrell called behind her: "Haliann! Come and join your new companions! They're eager to meet you!" The woman smirked at the Nevanders, and Wilfen was sure his smile was as weak as Alvonne's. Even the Skylord struggled to hide a grin at the twins' discomfiture.

A door opened in the gray stone building, and Haliann glided into the grassy yard. She was slightly over a sword in height but slim and moved with a dancer's grace. Long and lustrous black hair framed a heart-shaped, delicate-featured face. Bright blue eyes sparkled as she smiled at the group of people awaiting her. Wilfen thought her very attractive in her girdled scarlet robe.

The girl hugged Shondal tightly. The twins adopted matching looks of distaste, for Haliann was about seven-years-old, their uncle twice that. "I'm the happiest girl in Terra Nova! I've missed you, Father."

Alvonne sniggered, while Wilfen just smiled. They had jumped to a hasty and erroneous conclusion.

"And who are these young men?" inquired Haliann, facing the others.

"This is Mikael Svensson," said Shondal.

The Skylord nodded to the girl.

"And these," continued the soldier, "are your cousins, Alvonne on the left, Wilfen on the right."

The three exchanged greetings, Haliann very graciously. 'What a girl!' Wilfen thought, warming to her.

"You are both from Nevanderlof?" Haliann asked the twins.

"Yes," replied Wilfen. "From Mardine."

"And Mister Svensson?" "He won't understand you," said Alvonne, grinning. "He's not from around here."

"Of course not," Haliann said. "He's from one of the Memm lands."

"Oh, no," Alvonne contradicted her. "He's come from a lot farther away than that."

Haliann stared at him, a frown on her face.

"Look after her well," said Nartrell to Shondal, who listened to the cousins' conversation with a grin. "Your daughter is a hard worker and a good girl. She will go far."

The Paladin inclined his head to the Mistress of Orphaned Women. "I shall look after her to the best of my ability."

The sun had set by the time they departed, and the company trekked through twilit, largely deserted streets. Wilfen recognized the route as the one they had followed earlier.

"How did you know we were outside the gate?" he asked his uncle.

Shondal laughed. "I *wanted* you to follow me. I made sure you saw me and took the bait. After that I saw you twice only...but I was told that two young men of disreputable appearance tracked me."

"Disreputable appearance!" exclaimed Wilfen.

"You do look sort of shifty," Alvonne opined.

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Wilfen asked him.

Shortly afterwards the company arrived at the *Friendly Highwayman Inn*, where they had taken three rooms. The twins had shared one room, while Shondal and Mikael Svensson had each had a room to themselves. Haliann would sleep in Shondal's room, which had a spare pallet.

They collected around the open fire in Shondal's room, where the journey from Mardine -- the attack of the Tharmish pirates somewhat understated -- was recounted to Haliann. The girl listened intently. She was amazed to learn that Svensson was a Skylord, especially when it became clear she could also communicate mind-to-mind with him. Throughout the story telling, she could hardly keep her eyes off the Thermosian.

"I wonder if the robed people really did burn the *Crown and Scepter Inn*," she mused. "Maybe they took the blame for another's deed."

"Speculation will not help them now," Wilfen remarked, a bleak expression on his face. "They're all dead."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

* *

Three days later Shondal and the twins made their way down to the Kenderlan City docks. The legionnaire sought a riverboat captain willing to transport the party down the Milwarn River.

Two captains refused immediately, citing they had enough to worry about without escorting passengers through the dangerous lower stretches of the Milwarn. Six others would only take them for an exorbitant fee.

The ninth captain acceded to Shondal's request, and it was clear why. His boat needed repairs: boards were warped and rotted, sails old and threadbare, and short, frayed lengths of rope were knotted together. Apparently convinced no one would hire the *Milwarn Queen*, the miserable crew toiled apathetically.

"We've had ill fortune," declared stout, silver-bearded Captain Scarm. "The boat ran aground a few months ago. We've re-floated it, but the stigma of being grounded once means people are less inclined to engage you, and times are hard. But it's a good boat, and the money you paid us should help us tidy it up a bit. The lads will be keen to be working again, even with low pay. Perhaps we will get a few more jobs."

"Perhaps," agreed Shondal, non-committal.

"Yes," Scarm added thoughtfully. "Anyway, we should be set the day after tomorrow."

"Good. The second day from now would be perfect."

"Done. Pleasure providing a service for you. See you at dawn two days from now."

The next day Shondal ventured out alone, and the twins were too slow (and too wary) to follow him. The Nevanders explored parts of Kenderlan City they had yet to see, returning to the *Friendly Highwayman* shortly before sunset, weary from hours of walking. Haliann and Svensson were there, but Shondal was still absent. The girl said she had not seen her father since the morning.

"And I don't know where he's gone," she added.

"Where he goes is his affair," Alvonne said. "He'd tell us if he wished us to know."

When the Paladin had not come back an hour later, they decided to get some sleep, retiring to their individual rooms.

Wilfen had not been asleep very long, when he felt an insistent hand shaking him. Waking with a start, he fumbled for a stout stick he kept beside his pallet.

"It's me: Alvonne," his brother hissed. "Shondal just came back in a real hurry. He says to gather your things quickly and meet him outside."

Wondering what was afoot, Wilfen grabbed a change of clothes from his backpack and dressed swiftly. He pulled on his boots, shrugged on the backpack, and strode from the room.

Outside the *Friendly Highwayman* Shondal and Svensson awaited his arrival. The legionnaire looked

hard and ready, the mien of a soldier; the Skylord seemed alert but perplexed. Alvonne turned up, tired and slightly disheveled. He started to speak, but Shondal silenced him with a short, sharp gesture.

Haliann strolled out of the inn. She had obviously spent time on her appearance, for her hair was neatly brushed, her red robe carefully arranged.

"Hurry, Haliann," Alvonne urged.

"All right!" snapped the girl. "Give me time."

"Come on!" exploded Shondal in a way that implied there were to be no more arguments. "Follow me, and do what I say!"

Without further ado, he headed into the shadows lining the street. Mystified by his behavior, the others trailed after him. He paused at a cross- street, peered both ways several times, then continued on down the street they were already in, impatiently beckoning the rest of them after him.

They passed down many narrow, stinking, dingy alleys, the Paladin frequently halting the company to search for signs of life in the night-shrouded city. The others tailed Shondal unquestioningly through back lanes dimly lit by a crescent moon. At first Wilfen had no idea of where he was; he concentrated on keeping his uncle's back in sight. After a while, however, he started to catch glimpses of landmarks he recognized: fountains, squares, distinctive buildings, the statue of Cale, Duke of Kenderlan City. His thorough exploration of the city convinced Wilfen that Shondal headed for the docks. Occasionally the soldier went out of his way, but he always steered back to the northeast.

For a long time they proceeded in a ghostly fashion through the moonlit streets. The younger people acquired the knack of striding silently, light on their feet, rendering them almost non-existent to anyone who might be listening. Despite the concealing qualities of the darkness, they remained visible, however: a cry of discovery rent the night quiet, startling Wilfen out of the mesmeric practice of watching Shondal's back.

"Run!" shouted Shondal. "Go for the *Milwarn Queen*!"

Things began to happen: *Findram* in hand, Shondal turned back in the direction whence they had come; spurred by the Paladin's cry, the others started to run forward. They stopped in confusion almost immediately, realizing they did not know which way to go. Haliann clutched a long dagger in a steady hand. Wilfen supposed she must have had it hidden within her voluminous red robe.

"Take it someone," she entreated the others. "I have a sword." And, sure enough, a short-sword promptly appeared in her hand.

"You take the dagger, Wilfen," Alvonne said. "You use weapons better than me." Wilfen was inclined to disagree, but he realized this was not the time and place to argue over whom was superior with a blade; he rather thought neither of them was especially proficient. He accepted Haliann's long knife. It felt strange in his hand, but he tightened his grip until his knuckles whitened.

Shouts echoed through the streets, calling out queries and answers. The four young travelers stood in motionless indecision, hearing a ring of steel striking steel somewhere behind them: Shondal fought to cover their escape.

"Follow me!" Alvonne cried suddenly, breaking into a run. His companions dashed after him. The young Nevander led them down several back streets at a sprint, until with a curse, he discovered one alley ended in a wall of limestone blocks.

"Turn back," he called urgently.

Svensson, who brought up the rear, abruptly froze in place. Entering the blind alley, about seventy or eighty swords away, were two swordsmen in steel-studded, hardened leather vests. They were Tharms: even in the feeble light there was no doubting their features. Wilfen remembered his last encounter with Tharms and felt fear transfix him.

Chuckling at the sight of those who opposed them, the swordsmen drew their long-swords. They were obviously accomplished warriors, more than a match for five of him, Wilfen knew with frightening conviction. He wondered why he was about to be killed by Tharms in northern Holmis. It all seemed terribly unfair.

The Nevander backed up against the obstructing wall. He felt its rough, unmortared surface through his clothes. With a shock, he realized the wall was climbable.

He grabbed Haliann's arm. "Climb the wall. Quickly, while you can."

She required no further encouragement, clambering up the stone wall, fingers and toes finding the cracks. At Wilfen's urging, Alvonne and Svensson were soon climbing after her. Awaiting an opportunity for his own scaling, Wilfen remained on the ground.

At the sight of their quarry escaping, the Tharms bellowed and surged forward. Wilfen made a desperate leap and grab for the top of the wall, missed it by mere inches, and fell back to the cobblestones. The swordsmen were too close for another attempt, so the Nevander snatched up Haliann's dagger -- which he had dropped in order to ascend the wall -- and brought it to bear, prepared to sell his life as expensively as he could.

Good humor restored, the Tharms chortled: they still had one potential victim, so not all was lost.

Wilfen lunged forward with Haliann's dagger and ducked long-swords that buzzed like angry bees over his head, producing a discernible breeze on the back of his neck. His own thrust fell well short.

The gap-toothed grin of one of the Tharms disappeared as a large rock rebounded from his head. Another fist-sized stone struck the other soldier's arm, causing him to drop his weapon by his fellow's unconscious body. Wilfen whirled to confront Alvonne and Svensson beckoning him from atop the wall. He scrambled up, and they seized his wrists and hoisted him between them.

"Thanks," he said after a few deep breaths, as they joined Haliann on the far side of the wall.

He squinted at his surroundings, a garden surrounded on three sides by stone walls. Meticulously kept flowerbeds lined a dark, silent house to his left. He could make out little else.

Listening to the thudding of their hearts, they rested for a minute. Unbelievably, Wilfen thought he detected the trace of a grin on Haliann's face. Svensson and Alvonne seemed nervous but not his cousin. 'She must be a tough young thing,' he thought. Alvonne abruptly realized the others awaited his lead. He sighed, then nodded his readiness to go on, and preceded them to a stone wall opposite the one they had surmounted to enter the garden. He climbed up and reported the street beyond to be clear.

When they were all on the other side of the garden wall, Alvonne ascertained their whereabouts with reassuring ease: they were in a street that led straight to the docks. He proposed advancing to the outskirts of the dock area and pausing to assess the situation.

"What do you think, Haliann?" he asked.

"Sounds good to me."

Wilfen reflected on this. In some subtle way, Haliann had almost usurped Alvonne's position as unofficial leader. Without really trying to, she oozed confidence and competence. There was much more to Haliann than met the eye. But he should not have been surprised, he supposed, that Shondal's daughter should be so capable in a desperate situation.

There was a scrabbling behind them, and a hairy hand appeared atop the wall, striving to pull up its possessor. Svensson, rashly perhaps, picked up a rock and, snarling in his own language, smashed the disembodied hand. There was a loud howl of pain. Voices behind the wall suggested there were several Tharms in the garden. They had no choice but to run.

Alvonne halted the company after several hundred swords. Puffing to recover their wind, the quartet gazed out over the harbor of Kenderlan City. Rocking gently on the swell, ships lay like ghostly hulks on the moonlit waters of the sea. They sighed in relief at the absence of Tharms. And, not too distant, the *Milwarn Queen* was lashed to the post at the end of a pier.

"All right," said Alvonne. "Svensson and I will see if it's safe to board the boat. The Captain will recognize me. Those Tharms will be over the wall by now, and they might find their way here. Wilfen and Haliann, wait near that stack of barrels over there. And be careful."

Alvonne and the Skylord headed to where the riverboat was docked. Wilfen saw them pause at the far end of the pier, and a minute later they boarded the *Milwarn Queen*. The pair was out of view for quite some time, and Wilfen became concerned. Should he have accompanied them? Had Tharms captured the boat?

"It's taking too long," he muttered to Haliann. "It's all right. Give them a little longer. There's no need to panic." She smiled up at him, and he abruptly felt surprisingly calmer.

Just then, Alvonne reemerged on the deck of the *Milwarn Queen*, beckoning his companions.

"Let's go," Wilfen said to his cousin, and they left the cover of the stack of barrels.

Alvonne hailed them: "It's all right. Captain Scarm said Shondal told him we might arrive early."

The pair climbed aboard, as bare-footed sailors scrambled about, readying the riverboat to sail.

Captain Scarm was on deck. "Where is Shondal?" he asked gruffly.

Wilfen stared at him. "Isn't he aboard?"

"I haven't seen him since this morning."

"Then he's still out there somewhere. He could be in trouble." Wilfen peered into the darkness towards the end of the pier.

A few minutes later there came the sounds of a commotion just beyond the limit of Wilfen's night vision. There were yells of command and fury from harsh throats. Sprinting hard with *Findram* in hand, Shondal came into sight. Beyond him were about a dozen dark-cloaked men, some bearing bows. The archers stopped and fired: their arrows missed the soldier or caught him glancing blows that did not penetrate his steel armor.

"Run, Shondal! Run!" shouted Alvonne.

The Paladin charged down the pier, the wooden planks protesting loudly as they bowed under his heavy footfalls. He vaulted the railing and landed on the *Milwarn Queen's* deck, staggering before he regained his balance.

Propelled by oar, the *Milwarn Queen* pulled away from the pier. Even in the darkness the Tharms could be observed cursing, shooting arrows that found no mark aboard the riverboat. The last seen of them was a hasty scattering, as sailors fired crossbow bolts into their midst.

"By the Goddess, Master Shondal!" roared Captain Scarm. "You didn't tell me this was going to happen!" Unexpectedly, he abruptly grinned. "I haven't had so much fun in years!"

"It certainly livened up those docks," said Shondal dryly. "Not much happens down there at night."

"You've got that right," agreed the Captain. "But it's going to cost you extra for that little fuss."

Shondal smiled. "You'll get double. You've earned it."

As the *Milwarn Queen* sailed out onto Kenderlan Sea, Wilfen grew tired. Excitement had previously kept him awake, but now his eyes constantly closed of their own accord. The Nevander tried to mull over the night's events, but sleep claimed him. He had time for only one distinct thought: tomorrow, Shondal was going to give him some answers.

CHAPTER 12: REVELATIONS

Wilfen found himself prostrate on the riverboat's deck, beneath a rough woolen blanket someone had arranged over him. The sun was already above the horizon and climbing into the sky. Several sailors called cheery greetings, smiling in a way he would have thought beyond them a couple of days earlier.

Lacking even a suggestion of streamlining, the *Milwarn Queen* was a blunt, rectangular shape, its deck not all that far above the waterline; riverboats were not designed for ocean voyages. Several cabins were set behind a short mast and the helm. There was a tiny cargo hold, but it was empty on this trip.

As Wilfen searched for his traveling companions, he noted that the *Milwarn Queen* was well advanced on its journey. Kenderlan Sea was gone: the riverboat sailed between the steep, grassy sides of the valley of a swift-flowing river. The Nevander judged, from the position of the sun, that they bore northeast and guessed the river to be the Jell, which drained Kenderlan Sea into the Milwarn.

The young man found Shondal perched on a barrel in the boat's bow, polishing *Findram* and inspecting the valley slopes with more than a passing interest. His uncle turned at his approach, regarding him inquiringly.

"I have some questions for you," Wilfen announced. "I would appreciate some straight answers."

The Paladin stared at him for a moment. "All right. I think you deserve some explanation. You'd better find the others: this affects them, too."

Alvonne and Svensson came readily, while Haliann turned up out of curiosity. When all had gathered, Shondal motioned them to sit on barrels and make themselves comfortable. It might, he opined, be a long discussion.

Shondal looked at each of them. "Who has the first question?"

Alvonne cleared his throat. "Why were we attacked in the Warldife Sea?"

Shondal frowned. "At first I thought they were real pirates, but now I know they were Tharmish agents.

Their boat was appreciably faster than any regular vessel."

"Explain Glam, then," Wilfen challenged the soldier.

The Paladin took a breath. "The Robed Ones of Glam were a band with either Nullish or Tharmish connections or sympathies. They were probably warned to be on the lookout for a Holmish Paladin with three companions. I'm not sure, though, how you happened to stumble across their corner of town."

"Those men!" blurted out Wilfen.

"What men?" Shondal demanded.

"I thought two men were watching us a bit too closely after the jugglers' audience dispersed," explained Alvonne. "We went away from them, down the street that led to the robed people. I didn't see them after that."

"Hmm," said the soldier. "Either they got lucky, or they'd been trailing you for a while. It wouldn't have been that difficult to find you: Svensson would have attracted notice." He paused, then appeared to think of something. "What did they look like?"

"One was tall and ordinary-looking," said Alvonne. "The other was shorter and wore a black beret."

"Now, that's interesting," remarked Shondal.

<'What is?> Svensson asked.

"It sounds like an old 'friend' of mine: Urgash Waghel, Tharm. He has been following me closely recently. We've 'met,' crossed swords a few times, and one day..." Shondal looked distant for a moment, then he focussed on the others again. "He's thought to be associated with the Robed Ones of Glam."

"And so they burnt down the *Crown and Scepter*, reasoning there might be significant people inside," Haliann said. "All because of the Paladin Mark."

"Why is your Paladinhood so important?" Alvonne wanted to know.

"Paladins are the King's bodyguards," Shondal said. "Sometimes one or more of us are dispatched to guard someone important to the Confederation."

"Let me enlighten you," Haliann put in, "and Father can preserve his modesty." She regarded Svensson and the twins. "There are just twelve Paladins. To become one you must be the very best. There are fifty-six legions of five thousand men apiece in the Holmish Army. Of these, only the finest dozen warriors can be Paladins at any one time; they are selected at an annual tournament. Paladins guard notable people when on duty, usually nobles."

"So," said Wilfen, "how do the events of the last few days relate to this?"

"It's likely the Western Alliance were aware we escaped the *Crown and Scepter*, but the Nulls in the *Sun and Moon* either missed us or, more likely, had not received orders relating to us." Shondal smiled faintly. "Our night escape from the *Sun and Moon* was connected with those orders, whether late or on time, and the Nulls did some thinking. A messenger pigeon must have been sent to Kenderlan City, in case we'd gone that way -- which we had.

"We were watched more closely than I had anticipated in Kenderlan City. Nullishmen are unwelcome in most Holmish cities (and conspicuous), so they sent Tharms to masquerade as neutral Adar Mutians.

They must have seen me early yesterday, for a Holmish contact of mine warned me that two Southlanders were on my tail. You know what happened from there."

"Oh, come on!" cried Haliann, slapping the side of the barrel on which she sat. "There's more to this than you've indicated. The Skylord is not here to deal with the Tharms and the Nulls! He's here for a much more meaningful purpose."

There was a long pause. "He is here to battle the Goddess's Enemy," said Shondal at last.

<'I was not sent here,'> Svensson told them. <'My...sky ship was damaged during a battle with my enemies and wrecked on Terra Nova. My enemies threaten Terra Nova, and I am doing what I can to avert that threat. Though what I can do... '>

"Where are the rest of your kind?" Haliann demanded. "A thousand years ago hundreds of Skylords fought in their sky ships in the skies above. Where are the rest of the Skylords now?"

Expression somewhat mournful, Svensson slowly shook his head. *<'There are no others of which I am aware. It's hopeless. I am the last...Skylord.'>*

"Goddess help us," Haliann said. "We have just one Skylord, and the Terra Novans fight among themselves in petty squabbles, while the forces of Evil wait to fall on us!" She turned to her father. "Why does the Western Alliance seek to thwart the will of the Goddess?"

"I don't know," Shondal admitted. "And I don't know why they seem able to anticipate our every move, either."

"Maybe the Goddess's Enemy is helping them in some way," Wilfen suggested.

<'That may be possible,'> Svensson concurred. <'They may think they are dealing with your Goddess.'>

"Maybe they are," muttered Alvonne.

"All right," said Haliann. "The Goddess's Enemy threatens Terra Nova again. We have just Mikael with no sky ship to fight back. The Western Alliance pursues us, attempting to seize or kill the Skylord. Does that sum up the situation?" "More or less," Shondal replied, mouth twisted.

"What are your plans, then? What are we going to do?"

"You aren't going to do anything. Lord Mikael and I will seek out the Oracle so he may communicate directly with the Goddess."

The twins glanced at each other. Alvonne shrugged, as if to say, "It is up to you, Wilfen." "Thanks very much," Wilfen thought sourly.

The Nevander cleared his throat. "Ahh... Alvonne and I have been given a...a quest you could call it. We are to accompany the Skylord wherever he goes."

Svensson stared at him. *<'Who gave you that charge? '>*

"The Goddess," said Alvonne matter-of-factly.

"What?" exclaimed Haliann. She turned on Svensson. "Is all of this true?"

<'I don't know what they've been told. I have had dreams featuring a blond woman who suggests I

follow Shondal's lead.'>

"That's her," declared Alvonne. "Wilfen and I have had the same figure in our dreams. She is so imposing and...divine. It must be Anbridge."

Haliann took a breath. "We *are* involved in momentous events! Do we know where the Oracle is? It's supposed to be somewhere in the Barbarian Lands and difficult to find, especially for the half-hearted."

"I don't know precisely where it is," Shondal admitted. He smiled thinly as Haliann rolled her eyes. "I do, however, know someone who does."

<'Who is it?> Svensson asked. <'Is it someone you can trust? Too many people appear to know our business already.'>

"It's Garest Ethrin, a Paladin who grew up in the Barbarian Lands."

"And where can you find Garest Ethrin?" Wilfen wanted to know.

Shondal grinned openly. "This is the part I like. He's in Himberon. I can exchange him for you three youngsters."

"We won't be left behind," Alvonne vowed. "It's our quest, too."

"We shall see."

Wilfen noticed that Haliann looked as resolute as Alvonne. There was going to be a showdown eventually. He was determined to follow the Skylord himself, but it was hard to imagine Shondal backing down; the Paladin was as inflexible as a steel rod.

<'It is not your quest,'> Svensson told them. <'It is mine. I would do it single-handedly if I could.'>

The meeting broke up shortly afterwards. The immediate plan was to reach Himberon. After that, they would split the company in two: Shondal and the Skylord would seek the Oracle with Garest Ethrin's help; the others would stay in Himberon. That was Shondal's version, anyway. Wilfen was sure Alvonne and Haliann would ally with him in a bid to continue the quest.

'After all,' he told himself, 'Anbridge herself set me this task.'

Many hours later the riverboat steered sharply eastward into the Milwarn River, leaving the Jell behind. The weak, yellowish light of the moon glimmered on rushing water for perhaps two hundred swords on either side of the *Milwarn Queen*.

Kiloswords downstream, the stars just above the eastern horizon vanished as something blocked them from view. Tall trees were silhouetted on both banks of the river. The Milwarn had entered the bounds of the forest, Jherdol Tay. Soon the trees were too multitudinous to distinguish individually.

Enjoying the gentle motion of the *Milwarn Queen* -- no seasickness on the river -- Wilfen leant against the deck railing in appreciative contemplation of the forest. The odd bat or barn owl flapped overhead. Frogs croaked and warbled, the sound carrying clearly from the shore. Insects, especially whining mosquitoes, hovered over the river, plaguing him unmercifully. He slapped at them, cursing.

"Bad, aren't they?"

Wilfen jumped. Haliann was behind him. "I didn't hear you," he confessed.

The girl smiled. "It's one of my skills. It's hard to get out of the habit of skulking around."

Wilfen laughed for a few moments, then he fell silent. She really was very attractive, and he felt at a loss for words. "So," he said finally, "you're Shondal's daughter."

"That's right."

"How come you don't live with him?"

"I lived with my mother. You met her at the House of Orphaned Women: Nartrell."

"She was your mother! She didn't seem especially fond of Shondal. You wouldn't think they were husband and wife."

"They're not," Haliann said, bright blue eyes watching intently for any reaction from Wilfen. "I am a bastard child." Her expression was proud, daring him to pass comment.

Wilfen felt out of his depth. "It doesn't make any difference to me. My parents are dead. At least yours are available to you. In a way."

"Yes," Haliann agreed. "Mother always said Father was never going to be a family man. She wanted to marry him, but she knew his first love was the Army. They're not in love any more."

"Sad," murmured Wilfen.

"Not as sad as it would be if they had stayed together and started to hate each other."

"That's true," Wilfen conceded. "So now you're going to live with your father?"

"No. I've trained to be a...servant, and Father is escorting me so I can find work in Himberon. He loves me in his own way. But he can't do it on a long- term basis. I don't see him for months on end. He wasn't due back yet. Your encounter with the Nulls forced him to detour north. He'd promised that on his next visit he would take me to Himberon, so...so here I am."

"My brother and I did not see him often," Wilfen said slowly. "He promised to return for *us* one day, but it took years!"

"That sounds like Father. I don't think he's deliberately cruel and cold. He just doesn't have the normal...family skills. I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but I believe your father and he had an unusually intense rivalry. My mother says Father speaks of Uncle Tannash as if he were someone Father respected rather than loved: a fellow soldier, not a brother."

Wilfen was uncertain of the facts, so he changed the subject. "What is your family name?"

"Argindell. Same as you. It's traditional in Holmis for children to take their father's name. It doesn't matter if your parents aren't married."

* *

By daylight: random wooden columns, the trunks -- mottled and smooth -- of thousands of trees, lined the Milwarn River. The eucalypti of Jherdol Tay were bare of foliage for half their height, developing several crowns on widely spaced limbs. Several types of bushes and shrubs, particularly banksias -- with their bulbous flower clusters -- and grass-trees -- charcoal-barked beneath their "head" of hair-like leaves -- crouched between the great gum- trees, amid the litter of the forest floor.

Wilfen found Shondal polishing the Paladin's sword. "Where's your shield?" the Nevander asked.

The legionnaire grimaced. "It was smashed. I tried to save old *Findram* the discomfort of blocking six or seven swords simultaneously. Unfortunately they were strong Tharms, and I had to hurl what remained of the shield at them to escape."

"It was not something I expected," declared Wilfen. "Being attacked by armed foreign men in the streets of a Holmish city."

Shondal regarded him seriously. "These affairs are more important than the mere machinations of nations. The Western Alliance thinks it is in the right; I think...*know* that we are. We can't discuss this business with anyone except our own company. I'm not sure I should have even told you, though you seem to have become involved."

"I'm glad it's all in the open between us," said Wilfen. "Alvonne and I have been worried for days. We weren't sure whom we could tell or trust. It's not a comfortable situation."

Shondal snorted. "Tell me about it," he said. "I've been doing the Goddess's work for years."

Wilfen glanced at him in surprise. Solemn-faced, his uncle was apparently not joking, and the Paladin did not look as if he were about to elaborate on his statement.

Around sunset on the following day the Milwarn surged through a region of adamantine rock. The channel had narrowed, the river valley grown deeper. Captain Scarm relayed frequent commands to the helm, steering the *Milwarn Queen* through the rapids created by a succession of rounded, foam-blanketed outcrops.

After they had passed through the worst of the rapids, Scarm called: "Steer to the port bank!" The riverboat journey was over. The *Milwarn Queen* had completed its assignment, depositing the travelers at a primitive landing stage constructed on a thin strip of muddy beach.

With a hearty farewell, the crew and their Captain (who clutched a generous bag of coins) departed, as the riverboat, its oars now dipping into the river, turned and fought its way back upstream.

CHAPTER 13: SIGHT AND SOUND

Lofty, white-trunked trees were on one side, frothy, rushing river on the other. It was becoming dark now the sun had descended below the level of the treetops, and the forest, which had previously seemed indifferent, almost friendly, felt suddenly forbidding. Svensson and the others did not argue when Shondal suggested they find the Forest Road before nightfall.

Slipping and sliding, the travelers ascended a rude, vaguely defined path up the mud of the beach, until they reached the tree line of Jherdol Tay. They skirted the edge of the forest, about fifteen meters above the tumultuous waters of the Milwarn.

They were actually in Arndlund on this northern side of the river, Shondal revealed. A few hundred meters from their landing point they came on the Forest Road. The highway of ancient stones vanished into the depths of Jherdol Tay, eventually to reach Arndlund City, 150 kiloswords -- 250 kilometers -- to the northeast. The Forest Road had been cleared of vegetation for about seventy or eighty meters on either side.

"Arndish soldiers keep it cleared on this side of the border," Shondal explained. "Travelers on the road are safer from bandit archers."

The Forest Road bridged the Milwarn where the river's channel was narrowest. The gap was about half a kilometer, and a three-meter-wide bridge of close fitting, tightly bound tree trunks linked the two sides,

connecting Arndlund to the Holmish province of Camfolar.

Svensson was not very comfortable about crossing over the river with just natural wood supporting him. Sweating, he trod gingerly down the middle of the bridge, wincing at creaks that accompanied his every step. Below, spray flew into the air as the Milwarn's raging waters crashed into the exposed rocks at the sides of the channel. To the west, highlighted by the sun's orange afterglow, he saw the silhouette of the *Milwarn Queen* laboring against the powerful current.

Soon the old stones of the road were beneath him again, reassuringly more solid beneath the feet, despite the ample stability of the bridge. The Forest Road stretched ahead with proverbial Holmish directness: according to Shondal, from the bridge to Balt the road did not deviate.

No one spoke. There was no sound from Jherdol Tay. Not a bird sang at this time after dusk. To make a noise in such quiet seemed a terrible thing, and the five trod as silently as they could, the lighter Svensson and Haliann almost inaudible.

They walked in the deepening darkness, their path illuminated by Svensson's hands-free torch; a plastic, fist-sized sphere, the hovering device generated light in a six- or eight-meter radius. A light breeze occasionally gusted, blowing gum leaves across their path. Outside the torch's sphere of radiance it soon became impenetrably black, and moths fluttered about them, seeking the light. After they had hiked for about two hours, Shondal called a halt to camp for the night.

As they set up their sleeping area, Alvonne asked Shondal if a guard was wise under the circumstances, and the Paladin asserted a sentry was essential in a dangerous forest like Jherdol Tay.

"You, Svensson, Wilfen, and I shall keep watch," the legionnaire told the Nevander. "Two hours each." He brought an hourglass out of his backpack. "When the sands flow from top to bottom an hour has elapsed. Now, sit, or preferably stand, about three swords from the fire I build. That way you won't be too cold or inclined to drowsiness brought on by warmth. Alvonne, you're first. Wilfen is second, then I'll watch, and Svensson can take the last two hours before dawn."

The twins gathered firewood from near the edge of the road. Oblivious to the others' stares, Shondal disappeared into the forest and returned with larger branches. Haliann, using the contents of her father's tinder box, set the wood alight, and a bright fire burnt, its dancing flames lighting the surrounds and discouraging any animals that might lurk within the forest.

Alvonne took up his post as sentry, while the rest of the party settled down to sleep. Arms folded, the Nevander stood stiffly. He reminded Svensson of a statue, possessing an air of strength and invulnerability, as if earthly fears were beneath notice.

The fire was comfortably warm. Svensson had long since gotten over an initial aversion to camping out, and sleep quickly overcame him. When he was awakened the fire had died down considerably; it was cold in the pre-dawn darkness. He nodded resignedly to Shondal as the soldier gazed down at him. The Thermosian stood up, pulling his "Terra Novan cloak" -- the metamorphosed climate suit -- about himself.

Svensson crouched down in the position where the guard had been posted. In flickering firelight, he stared at the encompassing forest with eyes partly closed with sleepiness. He squeezed them shut, and tears washed away the sand that stuck his lashes and lids together. Blinking, he stood up straight, thinking this would help him stay alert.

Ever so slowly the sands flowed through the short gap between the bulbs. Nothing stirred in the forest. As he turned the hourglass to begin the second hour of his watch, the sky had begun to turn gray.

Svensson was bored, but he realized the forest made him uneasy. It was certainly impressive if intimidating, quite unlike the plantations of stunted trees found on Thermos.

Shondal woke before sunrise. He glanced at Svensson, nodding to indicate the Thermosian could cease his watch. Svensson shifted gladly, restoring circulation to numb limbs, and helped Shondal roast some food -- corned beef, onions, and potatoes -- the Paladin had procured in Kenderlan City.

The smell of the cooking breakfast roused the others, and everyone gathered around the remains of the fire to obtain something to eat, even Svensson.

The food pills were all gone. His nuclear converter could have made more, but he had taken to native food. His personal computer was concerned by his intake of the local diet -- every couple of days a mild warning would flash on the wristwatch's small data screen -- but the miniature machines swimming in his blood and moving through his flesh were coping well with the challenge of eliminating unwanted chemicals. The Thermosian thought dried fruit would do him little harm, and the PC would protect him from any diseases to which he was not already immune (actually, no contagious diseases should be present on Terra Nova, but -- as he had seen among the native people -- they were, evolved or mutated from something or other). He refrained from consuming meat most of the time, for it felt a terrible crime to eat something so precious as an animal -- it was hard to believe animals were once so lowly regarded his recent ancestors on Earth had raised them purely for food -- but the practice had a certain allure. And, in its unsophisticated way, roasted meat tasted marvelous.

He was not in any actual physical danger so far as he was aware. His PC could deal with most potential problems, including that of his unorthodox diet. Living among the Terra Novans had been something of a shock for someone who had thought he roughed it by engaging in "live" tourism on Thermos. He was acquiring new muscles, muscles born of living in an environment where one had to do virtually everything for oneself: Svensson was not suffering from the absence of modern, formulaic exercise programs.

All he had to watch out for were Terra Novans trying to kill him.

The day progressed uneventfully, and they were a long way into the forest by nightfall. Shondal collected more firewood, but this time Svensson ignited the wood with a diffuse beam from his laser cutter. They adopted the same watch pattern as the night before, Alvonne first, the others sleeping until it was their stint.

Svensson had a disconcerting nightmare about Tharms pursuing him, never quite catching him yet never falling behind. Arrows were fired at him, never striking yet always providing an extreme fear of impending death.

Shondal's prodding hand enabled the Thermosian's mind to escape the nightmare. He woke immediately, his body covered in a thin layer of sweat. It could not have been, he was sure, a dream from an external source. It had to have been contrived by his tortured subconscious. He found he was more than willing to undertake sentry duty.

Time progressed slowly. He saw nothing; he heard nothing. His eyelids grew heavy, and he struggled to stay awake. He moved away from the fire, where the chill of the night washed over him like a pitcher of icy water, rousing him to alertness.

After an eternity, the first hour still not lapsed, he studied Shondal's hourglass, watching the flowing sand. It was interminably slow, almost as if the individual grains fell one by one. He sighed and concentrated on the forest, barely noticing the fire as it burnt out.

He thought he heard a sound. He cocked his head, striving to hear something else. Had it been a forest

creature? No, something had been unnatural about the sound, sort of...metallic? After a moment's hesitation, he hastened to awaken Shondal. He tapped the legionnaire lightly once, and the Paladin woke immediately.

"What is it?" Shondal whispered.

<I heard something down that way,'> Svensson replied, pointing northward, the direction from which the travelers had come.

"All right," said Shondal. The soldier told Svensson to arouse the other three as quietly as possible. The Thermosian was then to quickly escort them away from the source of the sound.

Svensson set about waking the others, as Shondal quickly but quietly strapped on his cuirass -- in the dark! -- then slunk away, drawing *Findram*. He chose to wake Wilfen first, for he considered the young man to be the most sensible of the three, picking out the youth's slender form in the near total blackness. Wilfen's eyes were quick to flutter open. He regarded Svensson questioningly and started to speak, but the Thermosian put a hand over his mouth. <There may be someone coming towards us. Shondal is investigating. Wake Alvonne quietly. I'll wake Haliann.'>

Svensson glanced down the road. Shondal's indistinct silhouette advanced on the Thermosian knew not what. If the soldier were headed for a Tharmish or Nullish scouting party, he would be spotted shortly, and a chaotic skirmish might begin. The legionnaire had the advantages of surprise, darkness, and (probably) superior skill, but these might be balanced by having several opponents. It was crucial, Svensson realized, that the rest of the travelers decamped swiftly.

Wilfen was in the process of rousing Alvonne, when a cry and a clash of steel rent the black silence. The Nevander was struck by indecision. Should he aid Shondal or escape? What would Alvonne do? Help? Yes! He grabbed his short, heavy stick, and the feeling of it in his hand caused him to run to his uncle's assistance, calling to the others: "Run! Escape!"

<Shondal wants us all to escape!> Svensson told him telepathically, but Wilfen was oblivious.

Shondal was badly outnumbered. Even as Wilfen arrived to offer what help he could, the Paladin was borne to the ground and dealt a vicious, incapacitating blow by one of at least a dozen armed figures. The Nevander had barely begun to lay about with his makeshift club, when something hard hit him on the back of the head, and he lost interest in proceedings.

The others stood still in confusion, as a flurry of seven or eight shapes started in their direction. They faced the same dilemma as Wilfen: help fight; or escape safely.

After a few moments' deliberation, Alvonne made the choice. He and Svensson had no weapons, and there was no way the three of them could overpower so many men. Feeling traitorous nevertheless, they dashed away, fleeing lumbering soldiers, who were weighed down by armor and weapons.

Wilfen heard a man curse the fleetness of foot of the escapees. That fellow and his comrades decided to take out their frustrations on their two captives.

CHAPTER 14: IN CAPTIVITY

Wilfen groaned at the pain. No part of him seemed free of it; even his toes were stiff and bruised. He could focus on nothing but the throbbing of his protesting body. Perhaps, he decided, that his head and stomach felt worst, because they were the objects of initial submission blows. Afterward, he had been kicked and punched all over, but those parts first struck stood out painfully from some very tender cuts and bruises.

"Our masters want you alive," the Tharmish leader had explained in slightly accented Oriental, dark eyes glinting strangely in the light of lanterns his men bore. "But they don't expect you in perfect condition!" At that the man had smirked at his cleverness. Wilfen and Shondal had merely glared at him, and soon after the beating began.

Their hands were tied behind their backs. Then, with almost a drummer's rhythm, a pair of Tharms slapped either side of their faces with strength enough to sting. Subsequently, they were cuffed and booted from man to man. Shondal's face became severely swollen, his eyes nearly closed and his visible skin blotchy with bruising. Wilfen presumed he himself appeared much the same, and he suspected his nose had been broken.

After a while the Tharms ceased the battery of their own accord, weary of their sport. Wilfen decided, later, they were wary of going too far with prisoners meant to be kept alive. But at the time he had another theory: the Tharms wanted the prisoners to recover a little, rather than trying to break something already broken.

It was mid-morning now. The two Argindells had been captive for just a few hours, but it seemed a far, far longer time. At sword tip they were force marched at a rapid pace; if they faltered a superficial cut was inflicted on their backs, stinging more with the knowledge the blade could go deeper than with the wound itself.

It had been a dismayed Wilfen who had first realized their captors were Tharmish. Of all the nations in the known world it had had to be soldiers of the country he most feared. It made sense, of course, for Tharms had pursued the travelers for quite some time. But he felt Nulls would have treated their prisoners much better -- not beaten them, anyway.

When the ache of his injuries lessened a fraction, enabling him to concentrate on more than the simple act of putting one foot before the other, Wilfen's mind incessantly repeated the sequence of events that preceded his abduction. Every recollection concluded with a speculative, alternative means of avoiding his fate, each quite implausible, and he wished he had thought of something before it was too late.

Once, he stumbled and fell, unable to arrest his fall with bound hands. He scrambled to his feet but, nonetheless, received a kick in the ribs that almost knocked him back down.

"Moof!" the man who had kicked him commanded in barely comprehensible Oriental. "Or next I strike with sword."

Wilfen complied, momentarily peeping at his uncle. The Paladin's bloody, bruised face was hard and cold, and he seemed to be thinking furiously.

And he had killed two men.

Through a semiconscious haze of pain, Wilfen had seen some of the Tharms burying their comrades. The soldiers had shown scant reverence, but they were wrathful, and Wilfen feared Shondal had suffered far worse than he had.

It was disconcerting to realize his uncle had killed: that Shondal was a killer. Wilfen knew that as a soldier the man had had to kill -- kill or be killed, as an old saying went -- but to be presented with direct evidence of his martial skills was to have the fact forced on the Nevander. It was in the forefront of his mind: Shondal has killed. It made him look at his uncle in a new light, a frightening light. It made the Holm appear almost inhuman somehow.

The youth thought about his own actions. Had he intended to kill anyone when he went to Shondal's aid?

His deeds might have suggested so, but he did not believe the idea had crossed his mind. In Wilfen's opinion few circumstances could justify killing someone. To take someone's life was to take something that could not be restored. The killing of the Robed Ones in Glam had reinforced that truth for the Nevander.

Originally twenty Tharms (far more than Wilfen had thought in the darkness and confusion of the fight) had been assigned the task of seizing the travelers, and only eleven remained to escort the captives. Three were so badly wounded they could do little more than hobble along. Six, all with at least a few bruises, guarded the Argindells. The two officers, the Captain and his Lieutenant, gave the orders.

The Nevander realized, after a time, he had heard of Captain Waghel before. The name had nagged at him. When the Captain removed his black beret to scratch a hairless scalp, the Nevander recalled Shondal mentioning that a bald, beret-wearing Tharm had dogged the Paladin over the last few months. Of course! Waghel had been one of the fellows Alvonne had seen spying on the travelers in Glam! The short man's weird baldness was not confined to his scalp: there was no hair visible anywhere on his body; even his brows and lashes were missing.

Wilfen did not delude himself: he was fortunate to be alive. Despite their motley appearance -- some wore hardened leather, some chain mail or even steel scale armor under their dark cloaks -- these were no ordinary soldiers. They had tattoos of an open hand on their biceps, an unclenched version of their nation's traditional device, the Fist of Tharm. The men were members of the elite *Sharene* -- "fingers of the fist" in an obscure Tharmish dialect. *Sharene* were the fanatical defenders of the Tharmish King, the Fist. They were Tharm's greatest warriors. The open hand symbol had a simple meaning: a *Sharene*'s skill was such that he might look down on an enemy, as striking with a contemptuous open-handed slap. That Shondal had killed two of them proved the combination of surprise and his skill was a force with which to be reckoned.

Previously Wilfen had been under the impression that Tharms were all alike, that each and every Southlander had thick features, dark hair, and was of less than average height. Now he was not so certain. One of his guards, Dremni, was blond and very tall, while the Tharms' leader was shorter than Svensson and, of course, had no hair at all. Captain Waghel was an irritable man who spoke Oriental with almost a Holmish accent; on the other hand, Dremni was very calm and articulated his Oriental badly with an extremely incoherent accent.

Dremni's composure annoyed his Captain. "Don't you hate this stinking forest, Dremni?" Waghel demanded once, hawking and spitting theatrically towards the tree line.

"It burrers me not," Dremni replied, and Wilfen assumed he meant he was not bothered.

But Dremni was lying. He was jittery about traveling through Jherdol Tay. All the Tharms seemed unnerved. On no occasion did Wilfen see one of them venture more than a few steps from the road. He supposed it was the instinctive fear of a plains-dwelling people.

The party had marched quite some way along the Forest Road, when they came on a lone man, who wandered in a daze. His legs and arms were bruised and gashed. Dried blood matted his hair. He clutched a sword whose blade had been snapped. His steel-scaled armor was badly battered. This was one of the *Sharene*, broken in defeat.

Captain Waghel caught him by the shoulder. "Yure, what happened?"

Yure did not answer. Attempting to get away, he muttered to himself. He stared about with wild eyes and alternately clenched and relaxed his grip on the broken sword. Wilfen judged him insane.

"Who did this, Yure?" Waghel persisted.

Yure mumbled incoherently for a moment, then Wilfen heard the word "forest." The man lapsed back into aimless muttering, and his eyes loosely surveyed his surroundings.

"Tell me, Yure," Waghel almost pleaded. "What happened to Galf, your friend? Where is Galf?"

Yure stiffened. He struggled in his Captain's grip, but Waghel was too strong. Giving up, the mad *Sharene* twisted and stared into the shorter man's eyes. "The Forest Ones," he said softly. "They got Galf. And all the others. The Holms, too, perhaps. They caught us unawares. You keep away from the forest, Captain, because they'll get you, too."

Yure fidgeted convulsively, and Waghel released him. The man staggered away down the road towards the north.

Waghel was strangely reflective. "They're all gone," Wilfen heard him muse. "All seven, except Yure, who remains in body only." His face hardened into its characteristic expression. "And the Holms may have escaped. We must catch them before they leave this accursed forest -- if they survive. Let's go."

Past the endless trees of Jherdol Tay and along the monotonously straight Forest Road the party continued the forced march. Despite his predicament, Wilfen started to tire of the scenery. He began to count the number of steps he took but gave up when he had reached three thousand, convinced of the enormity of the task.

And still they walked.

It was now the middle of the night, and Jherdol Tay was a world of shadows and movement just on the limit of the light given out by the Tharms' hooded lanterns. It was not the shadows themselves that concerned everyone: it was what they might conceal. All the *Sharene* bore somber faces.

Wilfen was hungry. He had not eaten since early the previous morning and then only some bread Dremni deigned to toss him. It required all his willpower to prevent his daydreaming of an enormous feast. He was pleased when Waghel called a halt a few hours before sunrise.

One of the Nevander's hands was released so he could eat some of the now extremely dry bread and drink some tepid water. Shondal was isolated from him to forestall any schemes they might hatch between them.

Wilfen found his uncle watching him. Risking accusations of conspiracy, the Paladin winked and smiled; his guards failed to notice his gestures, however. Wilfen winked back but was unable to match Shondal's grin.

Too soon Waghel bawled the order to march on. Dremni commanded Wilfen to his feet. The Nevander did as bid, hobbling at first because of a large purple bruise on his left calf. After a few moments the muscle grew warm, and Wilfen proceeded more freely before Dremni's sword.

Onward past the never-ending trees they advanced. In the vanguard of the column were Captain Waghel and Lieutenant Frol. Behind that pair came the three wounded men, and next followed Shondal and his trio of guards. Wilfen and his guards brought up the rear, Dremni at the very tail.

Wilfen was exhausted. He had not slept since the day before and then only a few hours in total. His eyes burnt. His strength ebbed. Muscles responded sluggishly to commands from a weary mind. It required most of his concentration just to keep his feet moving. All he wanted to do was lie down and rest. He had had enough of this fatiguing forced march.

The trek continued on into the light of day. Despite the soft insoles of his boots, Wilfen's feet were now thoroughly blistered. His mind was numb with tiredness and boredom, yet still conscious of an overriding fear of the Tharms.

He was, for some time, unaware they had passed out of Jherdol Tay.

A gradual feeling of relief, a release of an invisible yet weighty load finally permeated through into his awareness. He glanced up from the cobblestones, breathing a sigh of mixed emotions. The forest was gone, replaced by a scrubby hillside descending to a broad, grassy plain. He felt less tense, no longer subject to an irrational fear of the forest. They were out in the open once more, bathed by the sun's undiluted radiance, breathing air untainted by woodland scents. But there were other sensations, among them dread. Free of Jherdol Tay the Tharms were also less inhibited; they, too, were assailed by a wave of comfort and would find the long journey to Tharm easier to endure on the benign plains of Holmis.

Every kilosword brought the captives closer to Tharm (if indeed they were going that far). Every kilosword traversed gave the Argindells a little less time. They had to escape soon, Wilfen knew, very soon.

* *

The Nevander made the most of his night's rest. The party had reached the outskirts of Balt, at which point Waghel had called a halt for the imminent night. The *Sharene* Captain had sent two of his soldiers into the city with orders to find information on the whereabouts of the remainder of the "Holmish company still at large." Waghel was convinced they would be staying in an inn, conscious of "how weak Holms are when it comes to feats of endurance."

Dremni and another *Sharene* had loped into the darkness, heading into the city of Balt, and had not returned by midnight. While the Tharms awaited their comrades, Wilfen slept on the ground exhaustedly, so spent the discomfort of his bonds did not affect his rest.

The Nevander was kicked awake. He sprang to his feet in a learned reflex almost before he had opened his eyes. It was late morning, perhaps an hour shy of noon. The two Tharms had returned from their mission and were reporting to Captain Waghel. Neither spoke very good Oriental, but they repeated themselves loudly enough twice that Wilfen could gather the gist of what they were saying.

Fooling the guards into believing they were neutral Adar Mutians, they had entered Balt through the northern gate. The streets were bare, as it was after sunset, and they had a deal of trouble finding anyone to question, let alone someone who had seen the Holms (if that company had, indeed, survived the forest and passed through Balt). Then the *Sharene* had encountered a drunken man who remembered seeing three people wearing tattered clothes. He would not have recalled them except one was a girl with long dark hair. She had caught his eye, the drunkard explained, and he had witnessed the trio leaving the city through the eastern gate.

The Tharms had gone to several farms east of the town in search of the Holms but had found no sign of them. At dawn the two *Sharene* were still looking, so they decided to make for the Balt Road in the hope of catching their quarry leaving the city. This plan came to naught, but news came from a different source. A farmer entering the city had passed three people answering the right descriptions two or three hours earlier. Those they sought were thus, Dremni concluded, on their way to Himberon but within easy reach.

The *Sharene* gave a mild cheer. They were heartily sick of this hunt through enemy lands; that was plain. But they appeared reserved, perhaps remembering their comrades' attempt to capture Wilfen's companions in Jherdol Tay: that attempt had ended in a dismal failure. Wilfen did not know if he should

hope the "Holms" the Tharms had tracked were Alvonne's company or not (only one of them actually was a Holm, he realized with just the barest hint of amusement). It was encouraging to think they were alive, but it seemed probable the *Sharene* would soon catch them.

Wilfen and Shondal were propelled into motion, and the column made a detour around the walls of Balt, distant enough to avoid the notice of any guards atop the walls. A few kilowords south of the town they took to the Balt Road, only a matter of hours behind the people the Tharms supposed were Alvonne and friends. The Southlanders ignored the inquisitive looks of passers-by: they apparently did not perceive a need for prudent inconspicuousness. They were so near their goal now that they cared little whether half of Camfoliar saw them.

Shortly before sunset they forded the Cam River, the waters a twinkling ruby spray as their boots splashed in the shallows. Captain Waghel nodded. "They won't be far away now," he declared. "If we don't find them tonight, then we will tomorrow."

His men murmured cautious agreement, not sharing his total conviction.

Waghel stopped the party a short distance from the Cam, a hundred swords east of the road. He was in a jovial mood, allowing Wilfen and Shondal to share some of the fresh bread and cheese Dremni had brought back from Balt. The *Sharene* Captain sent half of his able-bodied men to find the "three Holms and finish this foul journey through stinking Holmis."

Though the soldiers returned empty-handedly at sunrise, reporting no evidence of the sought trio, Waghel retained his optimism. "Today, we'll get them."

The other Tharms appeared pessimistic, Frol in particular.

The land hereabouts was flat, barely a hillock to be seen. Extending from Glastor to Camfoliar and from Smares to Kenderlan, the Central Plain covered much of the Holmish Confederation. It was a mark of Holmis; mountains, ocean, and forest formed the boundaries of the vast grassland. The plain was sparsely treed, for this was a warm, dry part of Terra Nova, but with the coming of winter more frequent rain had coated the land with thicker, greener grass.

The day was bright, the deep blue sky free of cloud. It contrasted with Wilfen's dark melancholy. He had been captive for a few days now, yet there still seemed no chance of him ever escaping the dreadful Tharms. If only he could think up something, but the determined men, sharp swords conspicuous, looked proof against any possibility of his achieving freedom. He gritted his teeth in frustration, but the circumstances remained unchanged.

Shondal appeared as calm as ever, patiently awaiting a mistake from the Tharms. Wilfen sensed the man watching and analyzing all that took place around him. If either of them could think of a way out of their predicament, Wilfen was sure it would be the Paladin.

During the afternoon a rider approached them from the south. His black cloak streamed behind him, and he was attired in a shiny breastplate. A red-plumed helmet adorned his head. The warrior's horse was huge and black, covered in chain mail barding.

The rider slowed as he passed the column, and Wilfen could see a sword at his side. The stranger glanced curiously at the Tharmish party before galloping off in the direction of Balt.

The *Sharene* took scant notice of the rider, even though he was astride an obviously trained war-horse.

They were more perturbed, however, when an hour later the same rider thundered past in the opposite

direction.

"He's a Holmish legionnaire," the men told each other.

"He's just an ordinary man," Waghel assured them.

The men muttered dangerously. Even Lieutenant Frol looked concerned.

Meanwhile, the armored man rode the black war-horse into the horizon.

CHAPTER 15: ANCIENT ENMITY

Strides long and flowing, Alvonne sprinted towards Svensson. The Thermosian and Haliann were in flight before the Nevander drew abreast of them. Svensson employed an even, economical technique, while the girl was a flurry of loose limbs.

They ran hard. Cobblestones blurred beneath their feet. Unable to match their pace, their pursuers faded into the darkness behind, as sweat soaked bodies, dampened hair, and stung eyes. Their calves and thighs started to burn, breath grew short and labored, hearts battered against sternums.

After six or seven kilometers, Svensson saw Haliann was hard pressed to keep up: her breathing was wheezy and arrhythmic, and her stride no longer flowed smoothly but seemed jerky with obvious pain.

Alvonne called a halt, and Haliann nearly fell over in relief. Her cousin regarded her with misgivings, but she waved weakly, trying to assure him she was all right.

Svensson took control, making Haliann lie down and drink from a skin of Milwarn River water. He carefully removed her light slippers. Some of the blisters on her feet were oozing, so he used his medikit to heal them (as he had used it on blisters of his own many times in the previous few weeks); the instancy of this amazed the Terra Novans.

"There!" said the Thermosian in Oriental. "You should live!"

Haliann stared at him sharply, and he laughed shortly. "I am joking. You are safe."

Frequently peering into the gloom towards the north, the travelers rested for a few minutes, until Alvonne declared they must continue. There was no sign of those who had followed them, but Svensson was certain their pursuers were still on the trail. The trio began to run again, but Haliann's body balked, inflicting on her such discomfort she could only go half a kilometer before coming to a halt.

They set off at a brisk walk. A gray, indistinct wall of trees faced them on either side of the Forest Road. Spreading branches overhung the road, blocking much of the wan, pre-dawn light. A few early rising birds chirped their morning songs, but it remained a relatively quiet environment. As tranquil as it seemed, however, the forest still radiated menace.

It was shortly afterwards that their ears perceived a new sound, a rhythmic pounding. It took Svensson a few seconds to realize that he heard running footsteps. Their hunters were on them!

"Run!" Alvonne shouted. "They are coming!"

They sprinted about a hundred meters. Haliann came to a stand, unable to run any farther. Anxious, Svensson and Alvonne stopped alongside her.

"What are we going to do?" Haliann despaired. "They'll catch us!"

There was a sudden shout, a harsh cry of triumph.

"Come!" ordered Svensson, taking Haliann's forearm and beckoning Alvonne.

Dragging Haliann after him, the Thermosian dashed from the road and plunged through thick undergrowth into Jherdol Tay. Alvonne chased the pair, as Svensson tugged the girl deeper into the regular forest, where the trees grew taller and straighter.

They paused a moment to ascertain their bearings, but there was nothing to guide them. Tree trunks surrounded them, broad bars of shadow in the darkness of the forest. There were ominous rustlings in the undergrowth. With the aid of his electronic surveyor, Svensson quickly determined the bearing of south -- the rough direction of Himberon -- and proceeded to lead them deep into the midst of the trees.

A crashing in the bushes behind them heralded the arrival of the pursuit. The hunted band tried to run, but after blundering over too many bushes, fallen branches, and exposed roots they slowed to a walk. Around, they could hear their pursuers searching for them, crying reports in harsh voices.

'Oh, hell, what have I got myself into?' Svensson thought with mounting apprehension, feeling sweat forming on his forehead once more. Trying to elude the searchers, they wove among the trees, bearing roughly southward. They edged around a two-meter-high rocky outcrop, and Svensson, who led the way, almost walked into the back of a stationary figure. The figure was a man, Svensson realized, short and powerful, cloaked in black. It was one of the hunters -- a soldier of some sort -- and he started to turn towards the travelers. Quickly the Thermosian restrained the others with a raised hand, then, with eyes half-closed, focussed his psionics. He concentrated on illusion and deception, camouflaging himself with a beguiling vista of shadows and phantom trees. Now peering in Svensson's direction, the soldier was so close the Thermosian could tell, even in the dim light, he was a Tharm. For an eternal instant the Tharm seemed to stare straight at Svensson, then he shook his head in apparent puzzlement and abruptly walked away around the other side of the rocky outcrop.

<All right, we're safe for the moment,> Svensson told the others when the Tharm had gone.

"Who was it? Was it a Tharm?" Alvonne asked.

<Yes.>

"How did he not see you?" Haliann inquired.

<I made him...miss seeing me,> Svensson explained. <Luckily I saw him before he saw me. I convinced him that I was not there. It worked because he was not really expecting me to be there.>

"You can influence minds?" Alvonne asked incredulously.

<No. Not really. All I did was make myself inconspicuous. He already anticipated seeing nothing but trees and shadows, so he did not notice me in their midst.>

They proceeded cautiously after that. Listening to the Tharms' calls, Svensson tried to guide them on a path through the encircling soldiers. It was not easy, as he had to be wary of striding around one man into the arms of another. Fortunately the Tharms made plenty of noise. Once or twice the trio cowered behind bushes as a searcher passed nearby. But then they ran out of luck.

A movement among the trees drew Svensson's eye. Another Tharm was headed in their direction, and he had already beheld them; it was too late for the Thermosian to attempt his psionic technique again.

He saw Haliann draw her short-sword from its secret sheath within her red robe. Her normally steady hand trembled a fraction, as the brutish Tharm advanced threateningly on the trio.

'Oh, noooooooooo!' Svensson thought, wishing, not for the first time, a weapon had been part of his survival equipment.

Haliann took up a competent-looking stance, weight equally distributed between spread feet. Not really knowing what they were going to do, Svensson and Alvonne veered away from either side of the girl. The Tharm grinned, confident he could handle the sorry-looking group that opposed him.

"All right, you bastard!" Haliann called suddenly. "Come and get it!"

"Certainly, girlie," he replied with a gravelly voice, drawing a long-sword with a practiced action.

Svensson's heart thudded, threatening to burst from his chest. Sweat trickled down his body inside his climate suit. Alarm drove his mind to desperate thought. This fellow had the manner of a master of the sword: the Thermosian needed to come up with something quickly.

Vaulting the moss- and lichen-covered trunk of a fallen jarrah tree, the Tharm advanced on Haliann. Watching him like a hawk, she waited in the faint light. The soldier went into a crouch, sword held before him.

"Come, girlie," he taunted. "What are you waiting for?"

She snarled and lunged forward with her short-sword, aiming for his stomach. Svensson had chosen his moment and darted in from the side, but the Tharm used one arm to effortlessly fend off the Thermosian, while blocking Haliann's blade with his own sword. The Tharm twisted cruelly, and Haliann's weapon flew from her hand and out into darkness.

She glanced about in panic, but there was nowhere to run. Svensson eyed her from where he lay dazed, sprawled across a banksia bush. He did not know where Alvonne was. The girl pulled a long dagger from somewhere within her robe and brought it to bear.

"All right, girlie," rasped the Tharm. "We're going to have some fun now."

He slashed at her, and she leapt aside. The long-sword tore through her red robe with a terrible, ripping sound, though it momentarily caught up in her backpack's straps. She stabbed at him, but she was too off-balance to genuinely threaten him, and his leather armor turned aside the knife. He smiled his awful smile and freed his blade, brandishing it menacingly once more.

The Southlander suddenly turned with incredible swiftness. But he was not quick enough. Alvonne had charged out of the shadows, swinging a wrist-thick branch with all his might. The branch clanged off the Tharm's helmet, and he fell unconscious or, perhaps, dead.

"Are you badly hurt?" the Nevander asked Haliann in trepidation.

"No. My backpack caught his blade. I don't think it touched me. Check on the Skylord."

Svensson straightened slowly. <That bush is covered in prickles,> he complained.

"You're all right, then?" Alvonne asked.

<Yes.> Svensson smiled grimly. <I'll live.>

"Let's get out of here," Haliann said, peering down at the Tharm, who had not stirred. "This fellow might wake up."

<Good idea,> agreed Svensson

Haliann quickly found her sword, and Svensson again led the company through the eucalyptus forest, heading vaguely southward. Honey-eaters, magpies, and even a kookaburra or two whirred overhead. Possums and other small nocturnal creatures scampered through the trees and bushes, perhaps heading for a dark burrow in which to sleep away the coming day. The trio was on edge, eyes darting at every movement or sound.

"These animals and insects keep alarming me," Alvonne commented.

"Keep alert," Haliann told him.

In the end the still dark forest and the Tharms' reluctance to spread very far apart enabled Svensson and friends to evade the Southlanders. They saw no more evidence of the pursuit and breathed more freely. But, it needed to be kept in mind, Jherdol Tay was reputed to be dangerous to intruders.

After a long silence, Haliann said, "I wonder why the Tharms were so nervous in this forest."

"I'm not sure," Alvonne admitted. "But it does have a fearsome reputation, and I've never heard why."

They meandered their way through the undergrowth. Svensson felt numerous fine scratches inflicted on his exposed face and hands by thorns and prickles. He hoped they were not significantly poisonous: he was not sure how his personal computer would cope with some new form of toxin.

As he stepped into a clearing, Svensson was unexpectedly grabbed from behind. He swore and struggled but found himself in a gentle yet unbreakable grip. Startled cries from Alvonne and Haliann proved they, too, had been caught. A quick glance around confirmed his fearful suspicions: they were held by two men apiece.

"Why you here?" asked a strangely accented voice from somewhere out of his sight. Haliann automatically translated for the Thermosian.

"We escape those who chase us," Alvonne enunciated carefully.

Their captors were not the soldiers who had pursued them. The odd fellows broke into some language Alvonne and Haliann did not appear to understand; Svensson's companions seemed as puzzled as he was by the intriguing men. The strange men were short but obviously very strong, and the fingers that clutched Svensson's arms were abnormally long. Their exposed, presumably white skin was evenly smeared with some sort of green pigment. They were clad in simple, animal-hide shirts and trousers, and shod in moccasins; all of the garments were dyed various shades of green. Bone and crystal bead necklaces hung around their necks.

"Why they chase you?" asked the first voice, which belonged to a fierce-looking individual of middle years who sported a towering, green-feathered headdress.

"They wish to capture us," Alvonne explained.

"And who they?"

"They are Tharms!" blurted Haliann. "They hate Holms."

The forest people looked confused. "We know Holms, but who Tharms?" asked the fellow -- the Chief? -- who spoke Oriental.

Alvonne unleashed a storm. "They are the ancient enemies of the Holms, the subjects of The Treaty."

There was a sharp, collective intake of breath. "The Treaty!" the forest dwellers cried in unison.

The Chief spoke again: "We remember The Treaty, Holms. We remember pact with your King Andor. We destroy Tharms."

There was a shout in the language of the forest people, a rallying cry. More of the green-clad men emerged from the undergrowth (though they had been only meters away, Svensson had not even suspected their presence), each one bearing a massive club. The three travelers were promised safe passage out of Jherdol Tay. With something akin to humor, the spokesman told them the Tharms would not receive the same hospitality.

"Goddess, don't kill them!" Alvonne cried, horrified by what had been set in sequence. "Just hold them for a day or two."

The forest dwellers made no response.

"I've done it again," Alvonne muttered to himself.

"Is one of you Lord of Sky?" asked the Chief suddenly.

"I am," declared Svensson, after Haliann had relayed the question.

The strange fellow dubiously contemplated the Thermosian. "Goddess send message to our High Priest for Lord of Sky."

Svensson was intrigued. "What is it?"

"She say: 'Beware the Enemy, for it walks and talks in a body not its own.' Understand, Lord of Sky?"

"Yes. Thank you."

The forest man nodded, causing his headdress to flutter and his necklaces to rattle. "Goodbye," he said. "Now we hunt."

The inhabitants of Jherdol Tay filed out of the clearing and dissolved into the forest in search of Tharms. One, a lean young man, stayed behind, and he led the travelers to the Forest Road, before forsaking them to rejoin his companions.

The trio gladly stepped out onto the road in early morning sunlight, feeling more self-assured now they were out of the midst of the frightening forest. The road stretched ahead, inviting them to journey to its destination. They accepted the offer, walking through the day until the sun had set and the already dim light had weakened into a dark twilight.

Expression melancholic, Alvonne stared at the worn, cracked stones before him, rarely looking around.

<*It wasn't your fault,*> Svensson told him at last.

Alvonne was silent for several seconds, then he said slowly, "I was the cause, whether or not I meant it."

<*Why?*>

"I remembered Filgen telling me something about a treaty between the forest men of Jherdol Tay and King Andor. But it was signed so long ago, I didn't expect them to remember themselves. All I really wanted them to do was let us go."

<It was their choice to do more than set us free,'> pointed out Svensson.

"Yes," he agreed with a sigh. "But it's just like Glam, can't you see? Wilfen and I happened to mention we were going to a certain inn, and Shondal panicked and moved us. On the very same night the whole inn was burnt to the ground, and those cultists were hunted into extinction. It's a weighty thing to have on your conscience."

<They brought it on themselves,'> Svensson replied. <We must be free to act. The fate of this world might well rest on us.'>

Even as he uttered them, Svensson recognized the irony of his words: Mikael Svensson, the shattered man, was trying to repair a hairline crack in the awesome self-confidence of Alvonne Argindell! It was enough to make him laugh; it was enough to make him cry. Mood swings still afflicted him: sometimes he did not care about affairs; sometimes he did -- though never with a great passion either way. His recent experiences had numbed him: he had, after all, survived the very fall of the human empire and the genocide of its citizens. Such events were bound to have deeply and irrevocably changed him, probably for the worse. His situation had seemed bearable with the comforting presence of Shondal. Now, there was a very real doubt in his mind: it was not a foregone conclusion that he would reach the Central Computer Complex. And, if he was honest with himself, locating that supposed sanctuary -- and not the possibility of helping these people -- was the true and selfish motive still driving him on in this quest.

He saw that Alvonne's expression was less troubled and smiled inwardly. How different the twins were. The sensitive Wilfen would still be blaming himself. Alvonne had a conscience, but he did not damn himself for every little thing. Alvonne's was the more resilient, though Svensson could not decide which twin had the superior personality. Just different, he concluded. And that was why humanity was worth preserving, so all these varied, wonderful personalities could exist. He knew, on the whole, very little about the Enemy, but he doubted the galaxy would be better for the aliens being the only intelligent creatures existing within it.

What he needed was the motivation to do something, not just mouth platitudes, but to actually follow through and make a worthwhile bid to oust the Enemy from its siege of Terra Nova. Yet finding that motivation might well be the hardest task of all.

Dusk passed, drawing night in its wake. The birds that had flitted about and above them all day were gone, but annoying insects took their place. Svensson lit their path with his hands-free torch. It floated over their heads, providing a degree of comfort as well as illumination.

Towards midnight the trees thinned noticeably. Larger and larger breaks appeared between groves of hardwoods, until they spent more time in open country, the moon and stars overhead.

Svensson studied the sky for a moment. Even after all the weeks he had spent on Terra Nova -- with its greenery and animals, its clouds and rivers and seas -- it was the night sky that most brought it home to him that he was on an exotic alien world. Though scattered as randomly as those he had once observed from Thermos, the stars were unfamiliar; no doubt the Terra Novans had identified constellations, but Svensson perceived no pictures in the star patterns. The moon was certainly bigger and brighter than the two captured asteroids that had orbited Thermos; he had been told it was smaller and more yellow than Earth's moon and so gave off a fraction less reflected light.

Shortly the trees failed altogether, and the trio gazed out across a plain that gradually sloped down and away. Jherdol Tay was behind them, the Central Plain of Holmis ahead.

Haliann cheered with feeling. Svensson was pleased himself: he had felt a claustrophobic unease ever since they entered the forest. Even Alvonne, who had grown up in woodlands, did not appear to miss it.

Haliann happily led the others down the Forest Road onto the grassland below.

CHAPTER 16: THAT TERRIBLE SONG

Svensson felt conspicuous. He strove to ignore the inquisitive and disgusted looks people passing by conferred on the travelers. It was true the people of this town of Balt had good reason to stare, for the three of them surely made an untidy sight: filthy with the stains of leaves and red earth, wearing clothes that were ripped and torn, haggard from weariness and lack of sleep. Of course, the Thermosian had not suffered from dirt and wear and tear on his transformed climate suit, but his fatigue was quite genuine.

"Unfriendly place, this Balt," Alvonne commented.

Haliann leapt to the town's defense: "It's not like this normally. They're just surprised by our appearance. Clean and clothed in decent attire, we would be welcomed with warmth."

"How do you know?"

"I used to live in Balt."

"Oh," said Alvonne, momentarily nonplussed, as Haliann and Svensson laughed.

Following an exhausting walk of many kilometers, they had reached Balt early in the afternoon. Though they constantly peered back northward, they saw no sign of the Tharms. But Svensson was certain some of the determined Southlanders still sought them: he was not sure the forest tribe would have been able to thwart such a force. Alvonne agreed with the Thermosian's sentiments, but as all of them were spent, the Nevander had decided to find somewhere to lodge for the impending night: a good night's sleep would enable them to travel more swiftly the next day.

Finding an inn where several dozen bystanders would not witness their entrance proved a problem, and Alvonne grew frustrated. "The Tharms are certain to find us. If only we knew someone who dwelt in Balt."

"I know someone," said Haliann.

"What?" Alvonne demanded, stopping dead in his tracks.

"I know someone who lives in Balt," she elaborated.

"Why didn't you say so before?" Alvonne asked in exasperation.

"I was hoping we wouldn't have to endanger them. But it seems we have no real alternative."

"They wouldn't be in any danger," Alvonne quickly assured her. "Can you trust them?"

Haliann nodded. "Absolutely. They are friends of my mother who fostered me for a time. My father took me from them to the House of Orphaned Women in Kenderlan City a couple of years ago." Shondal had been unable to deny his daughter learning her mother's profession any longer; until that point he had thought she might "grow out" of the notion, hoping her foster parents would inspire her to a more mundane vocation.

"We need sleep and a bath," said Alvonne. "We must reach Himberon and contact this Garest Ethrin, and there are another 150 kiloswords to go. Do you think your friends will let us lodge for the night? I have money that Shondal gave me to use in dire need."

Haliann took a breath. "Yes. But, please, only for one night."

"That's all we need."

The travelers left Balt through its eastern gate, ensuring people they passed took heed of them. About two kilometers east of the city they changed direction, bearing circuitously around to their true destination, a farm southwest of Balt.

A middle-aged, dark-haired woman in a plain, gray woolen dress answered their knock on the squat stone farmhouse's front door. Her face suggested a long, hard day, but its expression abruptly brightened. "Haliann! Is it really you? You've finally come home. How you've grown! Are you staying long?"

"Hello, Aunt Flede," Haliann said. "I'm afraid we can only stay for tonight."

"Oh, well, never mind. I shall make you feel right at home. I'll organize everything. Don't you worry about a thing." She paused in her chatter. "Now: who are these handsome young men?"

Haliann was a trifle embarrassed. "This is Alvonne, my cousin -- half- cousin, actually. And this is Mikael, a friend."

"One is more than a friend or cousin, perhaps?" the woman suggested, winking. "Anyway, I'm Flede, a good friend of Haliann's mother. You're welcome to tarry as long as you like."

"Thank you," said Alvonne simply.

Svensson nodded politely.

Flede turned back to Haliann. "I must call Wonef in, and we can talk about things. I have so much to tell you. But first: you and the men must have baths. You look terrible. Where have you been?"

Haliann hesitated a moment. "In the wilderness. It's a long story, so please don't ask."

Flede accepted this, sensing the girl's reluctance to explain further. "Do you need new clothes?"

"Well...yes!" Haliann replied, reddening. Svensson appreciated her embarrassment. Her crimson robe was ruined, slashed by sword and undergrowth. Filled with leaf litter and twigs, her hair was a tangled mess, and a smear of dirt streaked one cheek.

When it was Svensson's turn to bathe, Flede led him to a hollowed-out stone tub in a bathing and laundry room at the rear of the farmhouse. They both ladled hot water into it. After laying out a fresh set of clothes, the woman left him alone, and the Thermosian stripped off his Terra Novan backpack and native-look garb -- the metamorphosed climate suit. He altered the suit back into its original plastic cube form and put it in the drab-colored backpack. Settling into the tub, he lay back and shut his eyes, letting the warmth soak into his body, rinsing away the dirt and cares of the previous couple of days. He scrubbed himself with a block of primitive soap. For the first time in a long time, he felt truly clean.

Evening dinner was a simple affair that night, made up of the various products of Wonef and Flede's farm. There was much talk, for Haliann's erstwhile foster family had not seen her in some time. Staid, weather-beaten Wonef said little except to make soft comment every now and then. His look- alike sons, Thilf and Gaber, spoke more, but like their father the boys were somewhat reserved around strangers. Flede and Haliann more than made up for their reticence, however, by conversing animatedly for a long time until the girl yawned unavoidably.

"Oh dear, I'm sorry," said Flede. "I rather forgot how tired you looked earlier. The men don't have the option of sleeping in late, so perhaps an early bed is a good idea."

Svensson and Alvonne were given Thilf and Gaber's beds.

"I insist," Flede said when Alvonne protested. "Thilf and Gaber sleep in the barn every chance they get. I don't let them do it often, so they won't mind."

Svensson collapsed in exhaustion on the feather bed and lay his head on the fat, fluffy pillow. Even his personal computer could not keep him going indefinitely. And this exhaustion was partly due to severe stress, something his life had always been free of -- until the last few subjective weeks, anyway. He worried about Shondal and Wilfen in the hands of the Tharms; he really feared the worst. His thoughts swirled for a while, but the sheer comfort of the bed enticed his weary mind and body into irresistible sleep.

* *

Though it was only just after sunrise, her husband and sons had already gone to work in the fields when Flede had breakfast with Svensson and the others. The woman happily fussed over them, satisfying their hunger and thirst. Flede's own fare was neglected as a result.

When she finally sat down at the table, Haliann's former guardian was silent for a moment. "Are you leaving?" she asked finally.

"Well..." Haliann trailed away, glancing at Alvonne.

Feeling uncomfortable, the Nevander shot a quick look at Svensson, who nodded reluctantly.

Flede drooped, but she went on to discuss more pleasant personal matters. She did not seem too surprised when Alvonne stood up decisively half an hour later.

"We must go now," the Nevander announced.

Flede rose to her feet and fiercely hugged Haliann. "Make sure you come and see me again," she said, brushing away a few tears.

"I will," the girl promised, wiping her own eyes. "I will."

Before they left, Flede gave them several days' worth of food and water. Alvonne offered to pay her. The woman refused vehemently, saying she would not dream of accepting the money.

"Some food and a few old clothes are nothing!"

Alvonne desisted at this point, fearing he was close to insulting Flede: she had her own well-developed code of ethics.

Svensson had previously pondered the concept of money. It was not easy to understand. In his world if you had desired something that was possible to have, you got it -- or you obtained or experienced it in VR, which was almost as good. Here...here, it seemed that if one supplied goods or performed services one was compensated for them, whether by exchange of other goods and services -- which was simple enough to grasp -- or the dispensing of gold or silver or copper coins -- which was not. He supposed the coinage might be considered roughly equivalent to an Imperial Citizen's automatic daily credit, yet it did not seem to be equally distributed among the populace. Merchants, for instance, appeared to earn excessive money by acting as intermediaries to real producers and service-providers. Shondal also seemed to have a ready supply of currency when compared to other Terra Novans; he had apparently had no problem purchasing all the accommodation and food the travelers had required over the last few weeks. Of course, Svensson himself had received supplementary credit for consenting to employment as a warrior -- this meant he could acquire superior, though not additional goods and services to those

available to the average Citizen -- but he did not think that soldiers were especially rare or highly prized on Terra Nova. It was something of a mystery, though of course, Shondal was no ordinary soldier.

Flede accompanied the travelers along the short, fenced-off track that led from the farmhouse to the Balt Road. Closing the gate after them, she waved as they set out on the last leg of the journey to Himberon.

They were dressed in Eastlander clothes Flede had found for them, even Svensson (his climate suit, in standard, white body suit form, was underneath the native attire). A few additional articles of clothing were carefully folded away in their backpacks. Svensson and Alvonne wore white linen tunics and pale gray trousers with broad leather belts. Alvonne retained his green Nevander cloak and dog's-head belt buckle. The Thermosian sported a black cloak he enjoyed swirling theatrically for the others' benefit. Haliann's dress was more practical than the robe she had previously worn: a dark blue cloak, white tunic, black trousers, and light boots lined with soft fur. On her head she had placed a black cap with a pale blue feather. There was no concealing her short-sword and dagger, so she had produced a weapon belt from her backpack and bore them on either hip. Flede had been unable to completely mask her disquiet at the sight of them but made no comment.

The sky was filled with wooly clouds -- tinged with pink for the moment -- which did not seem to threaten rain (though Svensson was not very experienced at predicting rain and its vagaries). The swiftly rising sun had not yet begun to heat the earth, and they clutched their cloaks about themselves. Around him Svensson beheld flat, neatly fenced farmlands: pastures dotted with sheep, cows or goats; and fields filled with rows of mature cabbage, lettuce, pea, or potato plants; and orchards of ripe oranges, lemons, apples, and other less easily identified fruits. Occasionally farmers drove carts past them, heading for Balt. It looked altogether a promising day, a contrast to the nightmarish time spent in Jherdol Tay.

They forded the Cam River that morning. It proved, Svensson realized later, a point at which they felt an easing of the mental strain to which they had been subjected. The river was a psychological barrier between the travelers and the Tharms who, in all likelihood, still pursued them. In spite of the openness of the plain, the Thermosian found himself in a far calmer state of mind during the afternoon.

Just how far the Tharms might be behind the travelers he could not know. But Svensson was certain the Tharms would still be out there somewhere in pursuit -- unless prevented by a greater force. The inhabitants of the Central Computer Complex had sent him a message through the strange forest tribe: "Beware the Enemy, for it walks and talks in a body not its own." It was clear enough: the Enemy could, in some way, control people on Terra Nova. It had to be limited control, due to the psionic shield between the aliens and the planet, perhaps a dream or subliminal suggestion. But it was still undue influence, and the Tharms were obvious candidates for such influence. Yet with the river between the Tharms and him, Svensson knew his anxiety was not as oppressive as it had been.

The trio ate its evening meal by a small stream running close to the road, sheltering under a weeping willow that overhung the brook. They slept with their backs against a boulder the tree's branches draped over protectively.

* *

Svensson woke only slightly refreshed from a poor night's sleep. He blinked gritty eyes, then splashed his face with the cold waters of the brook. Alvonne and Haliann were still asleep, and in their slumber they looked so young and vulnerable. The Thermosian felt insecure himself, in this green, green land peopled with barbarians. He found himself wishing Shondal were present. But the three of them were isolated in the wilderness; the Paladin and Wilfen captives -- or victims -- of Tharmish troops. It was up to those who remained to do what was required -- if they could.

"We must press on to the Andor border," Alvonne said half an hour later, as they shared a meal of crusty

bread and cheddar cheese.

Tharms were barred from Andor province under pain of death, the Nevander explained. Svensson was privately certain, however, the men pursuing them would defy the edict to capture the travelers: the Tharms had proven extremely persistent thus far.

Shortly after noon they came to a gate of two wooden poles set horizontally, one above the other, and attached to opposite steel posts. The gate was a token barrier, as were the three-meter-high walls that stretched a few hundred meters or more on either side of the road, for they might easily be breached or avoided... As Alvonne had explained, a more abstract aspect to the flimsy barrier turned the simple gate into an imposing obstacle: Tharms and Nulls were not permitted to pass.

A dozen soldiers guarded the Andor provincial border. One, a stern-faced, reddish-brown-haired legionnaire on a black horse, opened the gate to the travelers, initially motioning them onward with a wave of his lance. He started, peering closely at them. "Take off the hat, girl," he ordered peremptorily.

Startled by the directive, Haliann removed the feathered cap and shook out her long black hair.

Contemplating action, Alvonne shifted slightly, but the legionnaire saw him. "Freeze, man! You're in no danger. I am Morellin. I've recognized Haliann of Kenderlan City. Her father introduced me to her when she was much younger. And with that hair and those eyes you look so much like him, Haliann."

Haliann relaxed visibly, but Alvonne still looked suspicious. "How do we know we can trust you?"

The soldier raised his lance and dismounted. He handed the lance and the reins of his horse to one of the other legionnaires, then approached the travelers, left arm outstretched. On his tanned biceps, clearly discernible, was a tattoo of a white leopard in a black circle: the Paladin Mark.

Alvonne slumped in relief. "At last," he breathed. "At last. Your interception of us is timely, Lord Paladin."

Morellin smiled faintly. "Lord Shondal sent word to me that he would be coming this way with his daughter and a few companions." The Paladin's face hardened. "Where is Shondal?"

Alvonne shrugged helplessly. "Shondal and my brother, Wilfen, were captured by Tharmish soldiers in Jherdol Tay. We three escaped, making our way here over the last few days. A group of seven or eight Tharms chased us, but we haven't seen *them* since we left the forest. The rest still trail us, I presume. I have no idea of how far they are behind us, a kilosword, ten kiloswords, but I'm sure they would have tracked us as far as Balt; it's conceivable they guessed we would head for Himberon from there."

Morellin nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, I think you're right. Tharms aren't as stupid as people think." He shook himself. "Anyway, let's see if I can get you into safe surroundings. Then I'll try to get a look at these Tharms."

The Paladin led them to the border garrison, which straddled the road a few hundred meters beyond the border post. He took them through huge, braced iron gates, then past stabled war-horses and a courtyard where men engaged in archery practice. He deposited the trio in the garrison's kitchen, where to Svensson's distaste, a fat cook and his assistants prepared a pig for roasting.

"These young people will be safe in here, will they not?" Morellin inquired.

"That they will, Master Morellin," replied the cook, brandishing a meat cleaver. "This little knife shall ably protect all of us."

"That's good," said Morellin. "Now: I must see a few Tharms about a certain matter."

The travelers lingered in the kitchen for a while, watching the cooks as they went about their work. There seemed no end to the kitchen hands' work, whether it was chopping up and otherwise preparing various fruits and vegetables; sprinkling herbs or pouring sauces on meat; rolling and kneading dough into assorted shapes; decorating cakes and pastries; emptying and loading wood-fired ovens; or scrubbing pots and cutlery.

After a time the head cook came over to them. "I know you're bored," he said. "Go outside and have a look around."

"But aren't we supposed to remain here?" Haliann asked politely.

The ruddy-faced man winked extravagantly. "Master Morellin won't know if we don't tell him. Besides, you're safe enough within the walls of the garrison town. You have the men of an entire legion around you."

"That's five thousand men!" Haliann exclaimed.

The cook winked again. "Certainly enough for one pretty lady!"

Haliann smiled, blushing.

The border garrison was virtually a small town. There were gateways in the center of each of the four, five-sword-high granite block walls that surrounded the garrison, permanently guarded by five men apiece. Within the walls the soldiers of this legion, the Forty-seventh, and their families could enjoy the comforts of a real town, for merchants were enterprising enough to come from all over Holmis to sell them goods.

Garrison towns were located every hundred kiloswords or so along the frontiers of Andor: this totaled thirteen legions. Including the four internal Andorian legions, eighty-five thousand soldiers defended the ruling province of the Holmish Confederation.

A friendly young centurion -- his rank denoted by the red double band on his tunic's right sleeve -- had explained the system to the travelers. He broke off conversation and looked beyond Svensson. The Thermosian turned and saw Morellin beckoning them. The centurion led the way to the Paladin, who waited in an open courtyard, where a dozen sweating, bare-chested men sparred with meter-long staves.

Morellin introduced himself to the centurion. "I am Morellin Falaspin, Third Paladin of King Salifin. Do you know where I might find an Archer Centurion?"

"You need look no farther, Lord Morellin," said the centurion, revealing the bowstring calluses on the index and middle fingers of his right hand. "I am Rallentand Majholin, Centurion of the Fourth Archer Century."

"Ahh, good. Centurion, would your men care for some live target practice?"

"I am sure they would, Lord Paladin."

"Would you gather them? Your legion commander told me to take a century for a short stroll."

"All right, I'm game," Rallentand declared. He looked about, identifying one of the sparring soldiers. "Hey! Zindle! Come here!"

The soldier approached. "Yes, sir?" he asked breathlessly.

"Tell the boys to get ready to march. I want them outside the barracks right now."

"Sir," said Zindle, and he sped away.

"What's up?" Rallentand asked Morellin.

"I'll tell you and your men when the century is assembled." Within half an hour the men of the Fourth Archer Century -- each armored in studded, hardened leather and equipped with a short-sword and the famed Holmish recurved bow -- had gathered outside the garrison's north gate. Arrayed in battle ranks, they listened as Morellin spoke:

"Men, we live in quiet times. No one has invaded Holmis in a hundred years, and only a few of the legions have fought in other lands.

"But times are about to change. The Tharms and Nulls have started to mass near their common border. Our spies say it is invasion. Within a few years some of you will be veterans, some of you will be dead. War is coming."

There was a loud murmuring from the ranks of the Archer Century. Sobered by Morellin's words, men stared at each other.

"Many of you may recognize me as the Third Paladin. One of my companions, the Seventh Paladin, and his nephew have been captured by Tharmish troops.

"The Southlanders seek to question them and extract valuable information. The Tharms' methods, you may be sure, will not be in the prisoners' best interests. As far as they are concerned, *they are already at war!*

"The Tharms are so arrogant they still advance on Andor to capture the rest of the Seventh Paladin's party. *They will enter Andor itself to further that aim!*"

The legionnaires erupted into an outraged roar at Morellin's speech. Svensson was amazed that mere words could incite such a passionate outburst, but it was clear the bowmen were angry with Tharms in general and Shondal and Wilfen's captors in particular. "It is my proposal," Morellin continued when the century had quieted down, "that the Fourth Archer Century marches on these Tharms. What do you say?"

"Yes, Paladin!" cried a hundred voices. "Yes, Paladin!"

Singing songs of war, the soldiers of the century marched northward along the Balt Road. Squeezed into the center of their five-wide by twenty-long formation were Svensson, Haliann, and Alvonne. Despite the frivolity of their songs, it was clear the legionnaires were tense, and many a hand unconsciously strayed to finger a bow or sword. The fiery disc of the sun descended on their left, sinking below the slightly undulating horizon. It was, thus, near dark when the century came on the ragged line of the Tharms and their prisoners.

Pandemonium reigned. The archers set about encircling the *Sharene*, while the Southlanders rushed about, striving to form some sort of defensive line. Shouts rang in the still air, barks of command, query, threat, and fear. In the confusion a solitary figure detached itself from the band of Tharms and slipped away into the encroaching darkness.

The *Sharene* suddenly realized the hopelessness of their circumstances. Slowly, one at a time, the

Tharms dropped their weapons and allowed themselves to be apprehended. All but one tall, nondescript fellow.

"Cowards!" he berated his comrades. He drew a sword, for what purpose Svensson could not guess.

A score of bows sang in unison, a terrible, harmonious choir. A rain of arrows fell on the *Sharene*, and the man wilted under the storm.

Later, Svensson did not suppose anyone bothered to count how many arrows struck the man, but he was certain not one archer who fired missed his target.

* *

Urgash Waghel was not a gambler. Many of his acquaintances thought he was, confusing calculated daring with recklessness. When Waghel made a move, it was with aforethought to an ultimate outcome, not the immediate result. This was why, when his company was intercepted by the Holmish century, Waghel decided to steal away into the night. It was not a deficiency of courage -- he had plenty of that -- but a simple assessment of the inherent risks: his few tired, injured men were no match for a fresh archer century.

"You're reckless, Waghel," Frol had told him earlier that day. "We're nearing the Andor border, and still you chase after shadows."

Frol was a fool. He should have known Waghel better. Who was reckless now? Who drew the ruby-pommeled sword -- Shondal Argindell's confiscated weapon -- in full view of a hundred trigger-happy Holmish archers?

Waghel shook his head. There were some good men out there. But they had known the risks and dared to follow him, anyway. They knew how he played the game: he would willingly sacrifice something small if it could gain him a greater thing. Still, it was possible they might eventually be released unharmed: the Holms were sometimes weak and squeamish about executing enemy spies.

Shondal Argindell was someone whose activities he had often been very interested in. When the Paladin had gone to Nevanderlof and come away with three young men, Waghel had grown curious. After abortive attempts to take them out in the Warldife Sea and in Glam, he had chosen to follow and capture Argindell's company instead. He had seized the Paladin and one youth, but the *Sharene* Captain suspected that having them all in his possession would be more to his advantage. He was not certain who was the most significant member of the Paladin's party, though with Shondal Argindell involved, Waghel was positive someone was *very* important. The Tharm was unswervingly loyal to his King and country, and he was aware of certain instruments in the dungeons of the Tharmish capital that could compel a person to tell what he knew -- even Shondal Argindell.

His ploy had come unstuck: Argindell had escaped from him. But there would be another opportunity, for Waghel was still free himself. Noting that the Holmish archers were starting to scout off the road, the *Sharene* reckoned it was time to leave. He sneaked off into the shadows, already planning for the next time he came across Shondal Argindell and company.

[CHAPTER 17: THE WEIGHT OF THE CROWN](#)

Escorted by two full dragoon centuries from the Forty-seventh Legion, the reunited travelers journeyed southward through rolling farmlands to Himberon. The safety of Svensson, it seemed, was suddenly of paramount importance to the Confederation.

Svensson was fascinated by the act of horse-riding. Never before had he done such a thing in real life. His back ached, his inner thighs and fingers were raw and chafed. He was sneezing with some sort of

allergy to horses (his personal computer had also yet to adapt to this new experience), yet he enjoyed himself immensely. His mount -- a barrel-chested bay gelding with four white socks -- possessed a personality all its own, more than most machines he had come across, even those with in-built intelligence. He had traveled between the stars at phenomenal speeds, but this experience of riding an animal, feeling the play of its powerful muscles beneath him, was novel and exhilarating. He was not certain that he was in total control of the horse -- it might well bolt with him at any time -- but in any event, he was likely to have one hell of a ride.

Wilfen rode alongside Svensson. Like the Thermosian, he was still learning to ride, and his style was awkward. But the war-horse was trained to respond to any rider, and there was no shortage of encouragement from the legionnaires.

Svensson asked the slender Nevander about his time in captivity. Wilfen scowled and replied in scant detail, pretending to be devoting most of his attention to controlling his mount.

Even Shondal refused to elaborate on their experience. "We had a rough time of it," he told the Thermosian shortly. "Wilfen especially."

Svensson appreciated their point of view. The pair had looked totally run-down when released from the Tharms' subjugation. He had despaired on seeing them, gaunt, fatigued, and thoroughly bruised: a personal computer would never allow a Citizen of the Empire to remain in such a state. Eagerly they had devoured the meal the cooks of the Forty-seventh had prepared for them.

It took three days to reach Himberon. On the first day the sky was overcast, though fortunately it did not rain. The second day was marred by drizzle that forced Svensson to huddle in his Terra Novan cloak, glad he wore the climate suit underneath. The third day was worse.

Just before noon the heavens unleashed a thunderous downpour. Fat raindrops lashed everything in view, stinging exposed skin and horseflesh. The wind-driven rain battered the armor of the two hundred legionnaires and their war-horses, and a ringing of steel pervaded the air, overwhelming the usual sounds of soft conversation, jingling harness, and clopping hooves.

The rainfall soon faded away. Everyone was dripping wet, soaked more thoroughly in the downpour than they had been during the entire previous day.

"Rain is one of a legionnaire's greatest foes," Svensson heard a dragoon inform Wilfen.

He was rather proud of his knowledge of Oriental; it was the most difficult thing he had ever learned without machine aid (hmm, had he not once derided the Terra Novans for learning skills that could be done better by machine?). It helped, he realized, to hear someone actually verbalizing when they transmitted a telepathic signal: it reinforced the correct words in his mind. He had discovered the Argindells were the only ones among the barbaric peoples of this planet who could send or receive psionic messages; happily, it seemed his rapid acquirement of the native tongue would soon enable him to overcome any communication difficulties.

The procession reached Himberon late in the afternoon of that third day, confronted by the black, twenty-meter-high stone wall that encircled the city. The archers atop the wall were nothing more than tiny silhouettes. The formidable wall both inspired and discouraged: inspired those within its protection, discouraged those who would seek to breach it.

There was a lengthy delay in entering Himberon. On noticing the two dragoon centuries, the Himberon archers had apparently grown alarmed and summoned assistance. Shortly a few hundred bowmen lined the high wall, loaded bows pointed down at the mustered cavalrymen. The potentially explosive situation

might readily have been ignited by one wrong move from a single dragoon. Unnerved by the archers, Svensson sat perfectly still: an arrow would kill him just as thoroughly and easily as any Terra Novan.

The sounds of shouted commands and queries reached his ears. The Himberon archers remained in place, prepared to fire; the dragoons gathered up reins and placed booted toes in stirrups, ready to gallop to safety.

After a few tense minutes the bowmen abruptly lowered their weapons: someone had recognized the two Paladins, Shondal and Morellin. Svensson let out a huge sigh of relief. He closed his eyes for a moment. With a conscious effort he unlocked his clamped jaw, separating teeth set with strain. A trickle of sweat ran into his left eye, stinging him into action: through a lately opened gateway he guided his horse after the dragoons into the city.

Himberon was a city of beauty. Shining from regular polishing, many of its buildings were built of gray-veined white or pink marble. In the richer districts of the Holmish capital he observed elaborate houses -- many-storied towers were especially popular -- all constructed of the ubiquitous marble. Even the wide streets and single-story stone or wooden houses of the lower class citizens were proudly maintained, free of the dirt and stinks found in the other Holmish cities Svensson had visited. He admired a fine bronze statue of the Confederation's founder, King Andor the Great, atop a fluted, clear crystal column. He marveled at the crowded, mosaic-tiled central city plaza, where a ring of five fountains -- to symbolize the five provinces of the Holmish Confederation -- jetted water several meters into the air. He saw no evidence of hawkers and their shabby, semi-permanent stalls clogging the streets of Himberon. The shops that were to be beheld traded only in quality merchandise; the proprietors did not hover outside their establishments accosting customers: the customers evidently came to *them*. He felt out of place among the silk-robed people -- bureaucrats? -- who hurried about on apparently pressing business. This, Svensson decided, was a city fit to be the capital of a fairytale kingdom.

Not wanting to miss a thing, the Thermosian turned his head this way and that. Shortly, however, his attention was completely captivated by what could only be a palace at the end of the broad, eucalypti-lined avenue down which the dragoon column rode. The palace was situated on an island in the middle of the Himberon River, connected to this avenue on the city's north side by an arched stone bridge, the only bridge connected to Palace Island.

Gleaming even on this dull, overcast day, the royal palace was an elegant affair constructed of the whitest of the city's renowned polished marble. Ending in tall, flag-bearing watchtowers, four wings extended from a central hub in symmetry, creating four courtyards. Separate buildings were situated within the courtyards, housing the palace stables, kennel, granary, smithy, armory, barracks, servants' quarters, and other facilities. An impressive, thirty-meter-high granite-block wall that took in the entirety of the island on which the palace was built, leaving no place on which an enemy might gain a foothold, enclosed the whole estate.

The dragoons rode directly towards the Royal Gateway. Palace guards -- who bore a device of five white crowns on their royal blue tabards -- eyed the approaching legionnaires, and Morellin halted the dragoons on the bridge.

"You have well completed your task," he told the two centurions. "Take your men to the barracks of the Second Holmish Legion, south of the city. They know you are here and will host your men and stable your horses tonight."

The centurions nodded and saluted. They gave their men sharp commands. The travelers dismounted from their borrowed horses, allowing dragoons to take the reins. Haliann waved to the legionnaires as they rode away.

From the other side of the Royal Gateway the palace guards watched the company, awaiting their next move with no apparent enthusiasm.

Shondal and Morellin approached the iron-barred gate. The Captain of the Guard hailed them. "What business do you have in advancing on the Royal Gateway of the Palace of the Holmish King, His Majesty, King Salifin the Third of the Holmish Confederation?"

"I am Lord Morellin Falaspin of the First Century of the First Holmish Legion, otherwise known as the Third Paladin," the legionnaire replied in ritual phrasing. "I come to speak with His Majesty, King Salifin the Third. I bring Lord Mikael Svensson and his protectors, Lord Shondal Argindell, also known as the Seventh Paladin, and his family."

Svensson had trouble following the exchange, but Haliann translated telepathically for him.

The gate into the palace grounds was unbarred without further challenge. After passing guards alternately saluting and calling greetings, the traveling company was ushered into a vast, grassy courtyard. Two wings extended to either side, the white palace towered over the travelers, but immediately before them waited a stooped, grizzled man in a fine, blue silk robe.

"I am Jharon Hile," he introduced himself in a surprisingly strong voice. "Welcome to the Palace of the Holmish King. His Majesty, King Salifin, bid me to request your presence at an audience with him. Do you accept the King's invitation?"

"We do," Morellin replied.

"Good!" said Jharon Hile. "That gets the formalities out of the way. The King will meet with you later today. For now, I shall escort you to private quarters."

They followed Jharon Hile across grass dotted with clover, as well as orange and yellow gazania flowers. He led them into the palace through an open set of ornately carved, jarrah double doors guarded by a soldier who raised his pike at their approach. Inside they crossed a floor covered with lush carpet -- royal blue and stippled with golden crowns -- and proceeded down a tiled corridor flanked with paintings and tapestries of battles and coronations and sober-faced men and women. At the end of the passage was a ballroom. A set of carpeted stairs on the opposite wall led diagonally up to a wide balcony that overhung the polished, red hardwood floor. It was luxury unheard of in the plastic age of the twenty-fourth century, and Svensson admired the primitive magnificence of it all.

"Try not to scuff the floor too much," Hile said. "The servants take pride in it." He winked roguishly to show what he thought of the servants' pedantry.

Hands trailing along the smoothly polished railing, the others followed the chamberlain up the staircase and onto the balcony. Hile opened a brass-handled door that led deeper into the palace and gestured them through the portal.

The corridor in which they discovered themselves was floored with shiny black tiles and embellished with alabaster busts of proud, noble people set in several niches. Torches placed above the alcoves burnt without much smoke, lighting the way.

"The guest rooms are just a short distance along here," Jharon Hile informed them.

Svensson's room was the second one. He opened the door to a luxurious bedroom. At one end of the chamber was a large four-poster bed, veiled by diaphanous, yellow silk curtains. Thick, mustard-colored carpet covered the floor, and in one corner, amid colorful mosaics, was a pink marble bath. A barred

window overlooked a courtyard and the Himberon River beyond.

In surprise Svensson noticed a manservant waiting near the bath. "Hurry now, sir," the man urged. "You're having an audience with the King himself soon."

Svensson had a bath in scented water and vigorously dried himself with an enormous soft towel. The servant had laid out some clothes for the Thermosian to wear: baggy, white trousers, pale green, short-sleeved tunic, and a dark green, velvet-trimmed cloak with a golden, emerald-set clasp.

The attendant ushered Svensson out of the room and back into the passage, where Shondal and Morellin waited. They were, he was intrigued to find, clean yet still armed and armored.

Haliann made a grand entrance, resplendent in a white, sleeveless silk dress and jeweled high-heeled shoes. A flashing diamond pendant on a fine golden chain hung around her neck. Black gloves sheathed her hands and slender forearms, and a brass circlet held back her long hair.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Very nice," Shondal replied warmly.

Alvonne was the next of the others to appear. He was dressed similarly to Svensson though in blue, with a sapphire clasp on his borrowed cloak.

"Well, well, well, who is this?" asked Shondal. "Some prince from a foreign country?"

"I do believe," said Morellin, peering closely, "it might be the Lord Alvonne. I could be mistaken, of course."

"All right, all right," Alvonne said, as the Paladins chuckled. "I know I look silly, but the man insisted."

"Not silly, Alvonne. Noble," explained his uncle. "There's a difference."

"Not much."

"Not much!" Shondal agreed with a snort.

Wilfen emerged from his room, looking uncomfortable in his new yellow clothes. He was muttering that yellow was a "girls' color," much to the amusement of everyone else, when he saw Haliann and abruptly ran out of words. "Goddess," he said shortly.

Haliann dropped her eyes and blushed. Svensson smiled to himself; it was the first time he had seen the girl look flustered.

Jharon Hile reappeared. "His Majesty is ready to receive you," he announced.

The grand throne room of the monarchs of Holmis was immense. A high, domed ceiling consisted entirely of mullioned glass, and there was sufficient light to see by, despite the gray skies without. The floor alternated between squares of veined pink marble and mosaics depicting scenes of Holmish history. On one wall was a tapestry of the Holmish flag: five, white stylized crowns arranged in a circle on a royal blue background. Pennants and banners, ancient ones frayed and faded, others newer and still vividly colored, adorned the other walls, alongside assorted primitive weapons of varying kind, age, and condition. Overlooking all, on a stepped dais, was an ornate throne sculpted from a single aquamarine crystal, its arm rests fashioned in the likeness of a lion's paws.

They crossed the floor and paused at a door discreetly concealed by blue drapes behind the massive

throne. Two palace guards awaited them. Without speaking, the guards swept the drapes aside and pounded on the door, and there came the sound of unbolting from the other side. A third guard waited in the opening doorway, beckoning Jharon Hile and his charges to enter. Beyond the door was a simply furnished room, lit by a small window high on the right-side wall. A man awaited them, seated behind a circular, polished jarrah table.

King Salifin the Third of the Holmish Confederation was a thin young man of solemn demeanor. His hair was bright red, his skin pale, and his eyes a disconcerting, nearly colorless blue. He was dressed in plain though finely tailored clothing: a royal blue satin and velvet cloak, white silk shirt, and black leather breeches and boots. He sat rigidly atop a carved wooden chair padded with blue velvet, and a golden, gem-encrusted -- five thumb-nail-sized sapphires amid smaller diamonds -- though not especially ostentatious crown rested on his head. Nodding gravely as his audience paid him tribute, he invited them to sit in the other seats arranged around the table.

"Thank you, my Third Paladin and Lord Jharon: you have well discharged your duties." He spoke softly, without any obvious enthusiasm.

He looked at Shondal. "And thank you, Seventh Paladin. Your escort of our visitor was an important act."

The King turned to the other travelers. "Welcome, Alvonne. Welcome, Wilfen. And welcome also, Haliann. I hope you enjoy your sojourn in my palace."

The three young cousins nodded respectfully. "Your Majesty," they said, uncomfortable.

"You, too?" asked Salifin, as if he already knew the answer to an unvoiced question. "I am an ordinary man, yet people are uneasy in my presence. Even my own brothers avoid me much of the time. All because of this ring of gold." He rapped his crown with his knuckles.

The melancholic monarch switched his gaze to Svensson. "Welcome to Terra Nova, Skylord. Perhaps you are just the person I seek. My rank would mean naught to you."

Svensson dipped his head in an awkward bow. "Greetings, Your Majesty. I am pleased to be here in your country."

King Salifin smiled slightly. "I am sure, Skylord," he said, "we could find you a position in the Palace in some sort of advisory capacity."

"I am sure you could," Svensson agreed dryly. "But I must decline."

"It is unfortunate," sighed the King regretfully. "War comes. I am ready for it. I am ready to challenge the Western Alliance for supremacy in Terra Nova. We can co-exist no longer."

"I think you could," Svensson muttered.

"No. There has been dispute for too long."

Svensson appeared immutable, and Salifin sighed again. He stared at the Thermosian for several seconds, a measuring stare. At last the King seemed to sense the resolution in Svensson. "You will not help us?"

"Your battles are not mine to fight. I have...other important matters to which I must attend." Svensson's determination to do what he must had returned, if temporarily and dispassionately, and he would not be turned aside in his purpose, his quest -- not to help wage barbaric warfare, anyway.

"Why are you here on Terra Nova?" inquired King Salifin. "To where do you wish to go?"

"I have a place I must visit in the North. I am here...to do the will of the Goddess."

"All right," the King said, accepting Svensson's stand. He looked at Shondal ruefully. "When I received word you had a Skylord with you, I naturally thought... well, I thought he might be beneficial to Holmis in some way." He turned his attention back to Svensson. "Are you allowed to take anyone with you?"

"Yes. I will need guides in the North. But no more than five."

"Done!" cried Salifin. "You will have five of my Paladins. I can provide no less for so distinguished a visitor."

"Yes...no...I am not sure." The Thermosian clutched his head, his mind suddenly roiling in confusion. He remembered the dreams of the Argindells, the dreams sent by the "Goddess." Should he do what those in the Central Computer Complex apparently wanted and take the twins? The Complex's inhabitants seemed to see a need for the Nevanders' presence, though Svensson could not think why. But it was the way to go, he decided. It would be on their heads if things went amiss. "Please," he said to Salifin, "would you let me pick the five?"

The King shrugged. "If you so desire."

"I would like the Argindells to come with me. That is, if they wish to come."

Haliann and Wilfen gaped at him in surprise. Alvonne grinned openly, and even Shondal smirked, despite his earlier opposition to the young people's continuation of the quest.

Pursing his lips, the Holmish King scrutinized the Argindell family. "It is up to you, Shondal and family. Two of you I could not thwart, because you are Nevanders. Shondal, I would have chosen, as he is acquainted with Lord Mikael Svensson." He stared directly at Haliann. "It is you, Haliann, I am concerned about. Is it wise for you to travel in dangerous foreign lands, do you think?"

"I...I'm not sure," the girl began, momentarily lost for words. She stared at her gloved hands for a few moments, then looked back at the King. "But it is in Holmis where I have been endangered," she continued finally. "And I'm not going to be separated from my father just yet, Your Majesty."

'Or Wilfen,' Svensson thought. He had noticed one or two significant glances at the Nevander by the Holmish girl. And vice versa.

"So be it!" declared the King. "I am sure you would be safest with Lord Shondal, anyway." He looked to the others. "What are *your* decisions?"

"I will go," said Shondal without hesitation.

"Me, too!" put in Alvonne, green eyes glinting.

"I wouldn't miss this," Wilfen agreed.

"Then it is settled," announced King Salifin. "And your fifth, Lord Mikael Svensson: whom will you have?"

"Shondal has told me of Garest Ethrin. I believe he knows the Northlands."

"Good choice." The King beckoned one of the guards. "Chadge: please summon Lord Garest Ethrin."

The Paladin arrived within minutes. He was a big man, only slightly shorter than Shondal. His hair was bleached blond and closely cropped. Hazel eyes shone out of his rugged, darkly tanned face. His tabard bore a device of a grass green tree silhouette on a white background. He bowed to King Salifin. "Your Majesty," he rumbled in a bass voice. "You summoned me?"

"I did. Lord Mikael Svensson, friend of the Confederation, has requested a man to guide him through the northern deserts. Will you take this charge?"

Garest Ethrin did not hesitate. "I will."

CHAPTER 18: THE UNTAMED SEA

The Third Holmish Legion's Fourth and Seventh Dragoon Centuries escorted the questers to the border of the province of Andor. From there two centuries of the Thirty-eighth accompanied them on the 150-kilosword march to the city of Narden. After a day's rest, men from Narden's Seventeenth Legion guarded the travelers on the 270-kilosword journey to the port of Bramdan.

In spite of the frequent changes of escort, one man remained steadfastly at their side, determinedly riding as a personal bodyguard. He was the newly adopted member of the company, the Tenth Paladin, Garest Ethrin.

Garest took his task seriously, ensuring they slept in a safe place each night by scouring the countryside before allowing them to settle. He remained an enigma, for he seldom spoke, even when spoken to: when possible, he answered with a nod or shake of his head.

On the afternoon of the twelfth day of the expedition they neared Bramdan. Haliann smelt a curious scent from a kilosword or two out of the port; a quiet inquiry to her father revealed the odor to be that of the ocean, something she had never seen. Wilfen and Alvonne, by contrast, had dwelt near the sea for most of their lives, and the girl sensed an improvement in their respective moods the closer they came to the coast.

They were accommodated that night in the garrison of the Thirty-second Legion, sobered by Garest's announcement that in the morning a ship would be waiting to carry them north to the Barbarian Lands. The trek to the Goddess's Oracle would begin in earnest.

Haliann squatted before the fireplace in the barracks where the travelers were billeted. The others tarried in the garrison's dining hall; she had come here alone to think.

After much prompting -- he was an extremely laconic character -- Garest had told her that the Oracle lay deep in the Barbarian Lands, hidden from casual view in the rugged Angart Hills.

Haliann recalled the Tharms who had pursued her company to Himberon. Would the *Sharene* abandon the chase now that some of their number had been put off the trail? Could they find the questers again? And what about the Barbarians: would they let the sextet trespass in their territory? Her mind was obsessed with unanswerable questions.

It would not be an easy quest; she knew that. But she believed her companions were up to the task: she thought everyone else had sufficient measures of physical or mental strength. She was not sure her unique training in the House of Orphaned Women had adequately prepared her for a quest of this nature.

However, she would follow Wilfen wherever he ventured. She pictured his serious face, with its soft, gray-green eyes. Of course, those eyes were black with bruising at the moment, the legacy of the injury to his now slightly twisted nose. But it was still a noble and handsome face -- in Haliann's eyes, anyway.

The two Paladins roused the others before dawn. Yawning and shivering in the cold, the company made its way to the Bramdan docks. The city was fog-bound, but the slight brightening of the eastern sky lit their path, casting faint shadows behind them. The streets were desolate, and they reached the harbor apparently unobserved. Shondal halted them at the end of a jetty that extended a long way out into the water; its end was lost in fog.

"Alvonne and I will find out if our boat's waiting," Shondal said. "As for the rest of you: stay here."

The other four nodded.

"And keep your sword at hand," the Seventh Paladin added to Garest Ethrin. "Tharms aren't unknown in Smares province. Neither are Nulls, for that matter."

Garest nodded firmly. His companions had experienced sufficient of the behavior of Tharms abroad, and so they gathered closely behind the Paladin.

Nose wrinkling at the fishy stink that hovered over the docks, Wilfen waited tensely, peering through the shifting gray plumes of fog, alert for anything out of the ordinary.

Shondal and Alvonne returned within minutes. They reported that the anticipated longboat awaited the questers. Wilfen relaxed a fraction.

No one spoke, as they all stepped into the longboat. Two sailors already in the boat lightly dipped oars into the slate waves and swiftly but silently rowed towards an anchored ship.

The Captain of the *Trident* assured them of their safety. "Ain't anything, man-made or natural, that can sink my boat," he declared. "Barbarians have tried: they couldn't. Even the big storms off the south coast do nothing but fill sails and water barrels. And don't worry about the Barbarians. As I said: they can't sink us; and we're going to land on a quiet part of their coastline."

* *

Westward the low, level, yellow-green coast of Camfolar rose marginally above the ocean. But in every other direction sun-flecked indigo water tumbled and tossed, unbroken by land.

Wilfen and Haliann crouched among coils of rope in the prow of the *Trident*, each resting a hand on the deck railing. Though their eyes were frequently dazzled, they nevertheless relished the spectacle of the sun glittering off the restless surface of the Endless Ocean. As the ship crashed through the waves, dampening them with salty spray, they watched the *Trident's* ram, trailing foamy water, rising clear of the sea. Wilfen concentrated on keeping his stomach settled, so that he could remain with Haliann. The girl was stunned by the experience: how she adored the sea!

A stiff breeze inflated *Trident's* mainsail, propelling the ship on its northward voyage. So far the wind had howled relentlessly. The wind had not delivered the storm it promised, though a short shower had fallen around noon on the first day out of port. Today, the third day of the voyage, was warm and sunny, rain seemingly out of the question.

Wilfen considered himself reasonably secure. The *Sharene* who had pursued his company were captive in Andor, their fate uncertain. He was hundreds of kiloswords from Tharm and headed farther away. The *Trident* was nearly two kiloswords from shore, far beyond the range of Tharmish eyes or arrows.

Yet he was forced to remind himself his situation was far from completely safe. For one thing, though it was traversed by people, the sea was not under human control: besides violent storms capable of sinking even the largest of ships, the ocean was known to be frequented by huge creatures, which had been

sighted close to shore on occasion.

And the possibility of attack by other ships could not be dismissed. The evidence was before Wilfen: the three-pronged ram that had given the ship its name was dented and scored, proving it had seen use for its intended purpose. The massive steel points reminded the Nevander of the intrinsic hazards of sea travel: he could well imagine the effect of a similar ram striking the *Trident* amidships.

But Wilfen shook aside negative thoughts, appreciating the time spent with his cousin.

During the morning the *Trident* had passed the point where the border between the provinces of Smares and Camfolar reached the coast. The warship sailed north at more than five kiloswords each hour. Wilfen was in no hurry to reach the Barbarian Lands, however, and indeed, the ship progressed much too briskly for his liking.

By the end of the day they had thoroughly explored *Trident*. The warship, a trireme, was about forty swords long and eight swords in beam. Situated below deck, oarsmen sat on benches arranged in three distinct levels; fifty men worked the oars for most of the time, but a total of 150 could be called on if needed. Marine soldiers were housed in the forecastle, just behind the prow. In the ship's waist were the quarters of off-duty sailors and rowers. The Captain, officers, and steersman resided in the stern castle. Guided from the high castle before the poop, two long oars steered the *Trident*. In the center of the deck, just before the steersman's post, the mainmast housed a white sail emblazoned with a black stylized trident.

Wilfen and Haliann found Alvonne in the twins' cabin, polishing a short- sword he had acquired from somewhere. The younger Nevander studied the pair closely as they conversed with him, and his eyes widened in sudden comprehension when they left together.

The cousins could find neither the Paladins nor the Skylord. Alvonne had not seen them, either, even at meal times. Wilfen could only guess that they were making plans somewhere, perhaps in the officers' high castle.

* *

Scudding clouds fled across the night sky, further diluting the already weak light of the moon. Alone, Haliann leant on the railing in the prow of the ship (Wilfen had long since given up fighting his nausea and returned to the cabin he shared with Alvonne), unable to see much farther than the end of *Trident's* ram.

The warship was now a day nearer the Barbarian Lands and Goddess knew what hazards that lurked there. A sailor had shown Haliann a map of the route Holmish ships followed up the eastern coast of Terra Nova. If the *Trident* progressed at the same rate, the ship would reach the Barbarians' southeast shore at some time on the sixth day out of Bramdan.

Haliann was beginning to dread the quest. From what she had heard, the Barbarian Lands were harsh territory that had bred the tough people who inhabited them: not a place for the half-hearted quester like herself. 'I must strengthen my resolve,' the girl told herself fiercely.

Something registered itself at the very limit of her night vision. She squinted eastward, straining to make out what had caught her eye. There! Was that...? Yes! A black shape, slightly darker than the sky at the horizon, appeared to be off *Trident's* right side; the *starboard* side, she corrected herself.

'What is it?' she wondered, peering up towards the top of the mast where the ship's lookout was posted. The sailor abruptly slumped in a heap even as her eyes focussed on him. On the forecastle roof, ten swords away from her position, stood another sailor, a crossbow in his hands. As she watched, the crossbower put down the weapon and picked up a lit lantern, which he proceeded to swing vigorously

back and forth; a radiant orange arc, like a fiery smile, assailed her eyes.

'Oh, Goddess!' she thought. 'He shot the lookout!' Haliann's teeth clicked together in panic. Her heart fluttered against a suddenly constricting chest. Then her thoughts cleared suddenly, enabling her to decipher the confusing events: the dark shape was another ship, which approached the *Trident* in stealth; a traitor had shot the lookout and waved a lantern to guide the stealthy ship. It all added up to an attempted surprise attack.

She grew angry. What could she do? She looked around, and her eyes came to rest on a brass bell that hung from a ringbolt sticking out of one of the railing posts. She reached over and furiously shook the clapper.

"Ship to starboard! Ship to starboard!" she shouted. "Traitor! Enemy ship!"

There were answering shouts from sailors at nearby posts: they had spied the approaching ship and were raising the alarm. Out of the corner of her eye, Haliann saw marines beginning to pour out of the forecastle. Someone halfway up the mast lit a bull's-eye lantern, and a strong, steady light was projected on the girl and the sea beyond. Haliann realized her error of remaining in the open when she discerned the silhouette of the traitor aiming his crossbow at her. After flinging his lantern into the sea, he had picked up the weapon. He had loaded it too quickly. There was no time for her to move...

Luck was on her side: the traitor had only partly wound the mechanism that drew back the bowstring, and the bolt had little velocity and fell short. The assassin was not daunted, however, for he swiftly whipped a knife from a belt-sheath and cast it with an efficient, practiced flick of the wrist. Fortune continued to favor her cause, as the traitor stood off-center on the forecastle roof, and the lantern light behind and above him made the black-handled knife stand out in stark contrast.

Things seemed to go into slow motion. Frozen in fearful fascination, Haliann watched as the traitor's knife tumbled down at her. To her everlasting surprise, she felt learned reflexes taking control. Her eyes tracked the path of the knife. Hands came together. Her mind analyzed the dagger's arc, then she lowered her hands slightly to the left, fingers bent and downcast, palms directed at the knife. The steel point slammed into her left hand, and she gave at the impact, absorbing some of the momentum with her right hand and deflecting the point farther away from her vulnerable torso. The fingers of her right hand instinctively curled around the knife's handle, even as fierce, burning pain lanced through her pierced left hand. But she had literally caught the knife!

Almost without thinking, the girl briefly tested the knife's balance, then hurled it straight back at the traitor. Long hours of training meant that it was an instinctive act. She had a knife in her hand and an enemy threatening her: it was an automatic reaction to cast the man's weapon back at him. Aware her throw had been lethally accurate, Haliann staggered across the oakum- striped deck, cradling her wounded hand to her chest, only vaguely conscious of the traitor pitching off the other side of the forecastle roof, the knife's black handle protruding from his neck.

The girl found herself hugging the ship's starboard-side railing, panting with fear and sickness; below her, she discerned the pale strips of *Trident's* oars swiftly rising and dipping in unison, as the oarsmen toiled to gain maneuvering speed. 'I've killed someone,' she thought. And she had done it without deliberation, without forethought. It did not matter that the fellow had been traitorous, had perhaps deserved to die. *She* had been the one who had passed judgement and administered the punishment; *she* had been the one who had killed him. She leant over the railing and vomited convulsively over the circulating oars, retching long after she had emptied her stomach. Finally she stopped, breathing deeply to regain her breath.

"You all right, miss?" asked a passing, wild-eyed sailor.

"Yes, yes," she replied faintly, wiping her mouth. He nodded absently and hurried away, bare feet slapping on the deck. Haliann suddenly realized her left hand dripped blood, and it stung anew. 'By the Goddess,' she thought. She tore a strip from her tunic sleeve and wrapped it tightly about the wounded palm. Feeling rather sorry for herself, she stood idly for a moment.

Around her sailors and soldiers rushed about, and she recalled the stealthy ship. 'Put your feelings aside,' she told herself. 'I must watch this.' The outcome of this sea battle was likely to be indicative of her future, greatly indicative of whether she lived...or did not.

After ensuring no one paid especial attention to her (they were sure to thwart her), Haliann clambered onto the forecandle roof. She lay on her stomach, chin propped up on clasped hands, and watched the *Trident* go to battle.

The enemy ship advanced into the lucid, orange-yellow illumination of the many lanterns that had been mounted all over the *Trident*. It was a galley, rows of oars readily perceived, perhaps propelled by slave rowers; the beat of a drum and the crack of whips carried clearly across the water. She imagined the slaves, chained to their benches below decks, exerting their bodies to the limit for fear of the lash. Straining her eyes, Haliann could just make out the flag that fluttered from the ship's mast: it was the Fist of Tharm. An eye, but a parody of one, adorned the sail, blood-red and evil. The name of the ship was below the eye: *Bloody Cutlass*.

Impelled by wind and whip, the *Bloody Cutlass* sped towards *Trident*. The Tharmish vessel's colossal ram grew apparent to Haliann's eye, flame-tinted black and pointed like a stiletto. The girl heard the harsh voice of burly Captain Themer, roaring for the steersman to bear to starboard. *Trident* responded sluggishly; not quickly enough. The Captain had realized collision was inevitable and guided his warship so its port anti-ram might block *Bloody Cutlass*'s ram while *Trident*'s own ram struck home.

Both ships had two anti-rams projecting from their prows, located on either side of the centrally positioned rams. An anti-ram was a heavily braced circular piece of thick, concave steel a sword across; it was designed to stop or slow the penetration of a ram.

There were minute deviations of course, as the captains of both ships strove to accurately position ram and anti-ram. Haliann saw the black point of *Bloody Cutlass* close, apparently about to smash a hole through a place to the right of *Trident*'s port anti-ram. At the last instant the Holmish warship lurched to starboard. Noting neither ship had quite placed its anti-rams, the girl tensed in anticipation of the impact.

Bloody Cutlass's ram struck *Trident*'s port anti-ram with a screech of metal. The air was rent with the sound of stressed steel as the right tine of *Trident*'s three-pronged ram hit *Bloody Cutlass*'s port anti-ram. For an eternal instant the two warships pressed against each other, kept apart by the precariously positioned rams.

But a warship was an exceedingly heavy thing, and not even the strong steel of the anti-rams could withstand two ships colliding virtually head-on. With ear-splitting screams, the rams bypassed the anti-rams: the stiletto of *Bloody Cutlass* broke away steel several inches thick from the corner of *Trident*'s anti-ram, skewing the Holmish ship a fraction, and struck the hull; simultaneously the right prong of *Trident*'s ram shattered with a resounding metallic crack, and the remaining two tines smashed into *Bloody Cutlass*, dashing in its hull, effortlessly splintering wood as the main shaft crashed through. The shock of impact flung screaming men from the rigging of both ships into the sea or onto deck planking. With the sound of snapping steel and cracking wood, the two warships came together and finally halted perhaps five swords apart.

Ears ringing, Haliann watched as the rowers of *Bloody Cutlass* started to back-paddle, churning the fire-lit waters. They endeavored to withdraw the Tharmish ship in preparation for another strike. But the soldiers aboard *Trident* had foreseen this. A half-dozen of them produced a boarding raven -- several thick logs bound in iron in a raft-like fashion -- the near end of which they chained to a steel post purposefully located in the prow. Already attached to the other end of the raven was another short length of chain: this chain was ringbolted to a weighted, beak-like hook. The Holmish marines upended the raven, then heaved it over so that it descended on the enemy warship like a bird of prey, smashing through the railing of both ships, and dug its pointed hook into the deck of *Bloody Cutlass*.

A cry of dismay arose from the Tharmish vessel. When a boarding raven successfully struck a ship, it prevented the vessel from withdrawing and created a bridge over which soldiers could cross onto the enemy's deck. The *Trident* did not have a full complement of soldiers, but they were Holmish marines, trained to fight at sea.

It would be a fierce battle. The Holms' opponents were mostly Tharmish marines, and each of them would fight to the death: Tharmish warriors often faced cruel torture and execution if they lost a battle.

While the raven was securely attached to the *Bloody Cutlass*'s deck -- marines hammered down double-pointed, horse-shoe-shaped iron bars around and between its individual logs -- *Trident*'s sailors rained crossbow bolts on the Tharms. The Southlanders shot back without discipline. The Holms picked out targets with scant fear of being shot themselves. Soon the enemy ceased to fire back; instead they kept their heads down.

With the accuracy of the covering crossbow fire, the *Bloody Cutlass*'s soldiers could not attempt to board *Trident*. They waited behind cover on their own deck as, under the aegis of fizzing bolts, Holmish marines -- bearing cutlasses and armored with studded, toughened leather -- stormed over the drawbridge created by the boarding raven. With loud battle cries the men leapt down and attacked a formation of Tharms, and a chaotic melee, involving perhaps a hundred men altogether, erupted in the bow of *Bloody Cutlass*.

Haliann lost the direction of the fight in the resultant dazzling assault on the senses: cacophonous screaming, clashing steel, crackling flames, pounding footsteps, splashing oars, hissing bolts, choking smoke, burning oil, shuddering deck. Fire arrows roared over her head in either direction, starting mad scrambles aboard both ships to put out blazes that the arrows ignited. Sailors relayed buckets of water and sand to where they were required, even up into the sails. The girl had no way of telling whom prevailed in the battle overall, merely able to judge whom was victorious in any number of minor skirmishes. The deck was soon slippery with blood, and men started to lose their footing on the slick wood. Several times Haliann hid her eyes or covered her ears to shield her senses, glad distance and darkness and smoke obscured most of the gruesome details.

It was clear, after a time, that the Holms were being driven back towards *Trident*. Their initial thrust had weakened and was now being turned back by the *Bloody Cutlass*'s superior numbers. It seemed to a despairing Haliann that the battle was lost.

But a concentrated volley of crossbow fire cleared Tharmish sailors from the rigging of *Bloody Cutlass*, and its mainsail began to burn unchecked. Other fires started up at various places on the Tharmish warship, and the tide of the battle abruptly changed direction.

The Tharms' formations were cloven into small, isolated pockets that could be attacked one by one. The Southlanders fought on fiercely but against increasingly greater odds. Their numbers dwindled, but they would not surrender and were slaughtered to a man.

The Captain of the *Bloody Cutlass* chose to fall on his sword rather than face the disgrace of being captured.

CHAPTER 19: CONSCIENCE

Having been previously occupied with the grievously wounded, it was some time after the battle when the *Trident's* healer briefly examined Haliann's injured hand. He bandaged the injury, stressing there was little more he could do. There was damage to the tendons in the palm, he explained, but the extent to which they had been affected could not yet be gauged. The healer made it plain that it was important for Haliann not to use her hand until it had healed, reinforcing the point by splinting her fingers so she could not move them.

After availing herself of some breakfast -- beef stew, cheese, and fruit juice -- prepared by the *Trident's* cook, Haliann returned to her assigned cabin. There she tidied herself up as best she could: a sponge-bath in salty water; a scrubbing of teeth with a brush of pig bristles designed for the task; a fierce brushing of wind-tangled hair; then a change into her remaining set of traveling garments.

Using a silver hand-mirror she kept in her backpack, Haliann contemplated her appearance. "Goddess, I still look a mess," she said aloud, vainly trying to flatten her frizzy hair. She decided to don her feathered beret. "It doesn't do much for the red eyes, but it will have to do," she told herself. "He'll have to accept me as I am."

Striding purposefully from the cabin, displaying self-assurance she did not genuinely feel, Haliann went hunting for Wilfen. She found him alone in his cabin (Alvonne had departed in search of some breakfast). Wilfen had recovered from his bout of seasickness and welcomed receiving someone with whom he could discuss the battle. Hands on knees and feet placed on the deck, he sat up on the blankets in his pallet bed, eyes on a suddenly self-conscious Haliann.

She sat opposite him on Alvonne's bed (which, like all furniture aboard the ship, was bolted to the deck to stop it sliding about in high seas) and related what had transpired during the night, lightly passing over particulars of casualties and horrific sights she had observed. She told Wilfen how she had raised the alarm but did *not* mention whom had slain the traitor.

"You were very brave," he said admiringly.

"Oh, not really," she replied, blushing. "You'd have done the same if you were there."

Haliann *was* pleased, however, by the praise and found herself leaning towards Wilfen. He froze, but she ascribed it to shyness. 'It had better be shyness,' she thought fiercely. And she kissed him spontaneously, full on the lips.

It was Wilfen's turn to blush. "I liked that," he said after a pause. "I...like you, Haliann."

"Good!" she said. "I don't give out kisses to just anyone." With a wink, she added, "Only to people I like a great deal!"

"I thought it was Alvonne you favored," he admitted. "All the girls like Alvonne. Back home in Mardine, anyway."

"I can understand why," Haliann said. "Alvonne is fun. He seems to be someone with whom you would have a good time."

"Thanks!" Wilfen exclaimed, smiling.

"Oh, no!" put in the girl. "Don't be silly. I like *you*. You're more serious. And more...emotional

and...sensitive, I think."

Wilfen had a silly sort of smile on his face. There was no telling what notions he was having, so she decided to change the subject. "The Tharms do not tolerate failure from their people."

Wilfen shook himself. "It's a bizarre affair," he said. "That man killing himself."

"I suppose he feared worse treatment. There were many other men who died, including some of our own."

"Yes," Wilfen said soberly. "Some have made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation."

"There can be no doubt," Haliann declared, "the Tharms consider themselves at war with the Eastern Alliance. There was no attempt to conceal the ship's origin."

The girl told her cousin about what had occurred subsequent to the battle. The Barbarian slaves who, shackled to benches and dressed only in loincloths, had rowed the Tharmish ship had been taken aboard *Trident*. Captain Themer insisted they be chained below decks, but the Barbarians were not reluctant to be locked up again: they were elated to be free of the Tharmish whips. When the blazing *Bloody Cutlass* had been cleared of slaves, it was allowed to drift free, presumably to burn down to the waterline. *Trident*, Haliann concluded, would reach the coast of the Barbarian Lands in two days' time.

After another kiss, one that lingered, she left Wilfen in his cabin, a dreamy expression on his face. 'Let him dream,' she thought. 'He'll find out whom is in charge, soon enough.'

She came across her father in the stern of the ship. He was watching the foamy, v-shaped wake that trailed *Trident's* passage across the surface of the Endless Ocean. The Paladin smiled, then frowned at the sight of her bandaged hand, but she assured him it was already on the mend.

"They found a sailor with a knife in his throat near the forecabin, you know," Shondal said, ostensibly idly glancing out over the choppy waves.

"Oh?" said Haliann, suddenly nervous.

"Yes. Apparently he was the one who had killed the lookout. A few of the crew had been wary if not suspicious of him for a while. He kept to himself, which is unusual on a ship."

"What about him?"

Shondal smiled slightly, still gazing out over the waves. "It's a strange thing. It was one of his own knives sticking out of his neck. Most of the men had seen him with them: black-handled things. The men couldn't work out why he had them. They were too light for most shipboard activities." The Paladin's mouth twisted quirkily. "That's because they were throwing knives."

"Why are you telling me about this?" asked Haliann defensively.

"The sailors who were on duty nearby report that they heard a young boy -- a cabin boy, they thought -- yelling before the attack. This cabin boy apparently warned them about the approaching Tharmish ship."

"So?"

"Well, I believe they might have been mistaken. They thought a youth called, because the voice wasn't deep like a man's. However, it could also have been a *woman's* voice they heard." Shondal turned to look at Haliann then, shrewd eyes drilling into her.

His daughter sighed suddenly. "It was me," she confessed. "I was sitting in the prow when I noticed a dark shape out on the water. I saw the lookout falling and a man with a lantern. then I suddenly realized what was happening. I ran for the ship's alarm bell and shouted a warning."

"That is how it was told to me," agreed Shondal. "What I couldn't establish was whom had killed this Garvick -- the traitor -- because none of the men on duty had done it. They didn't discover his body until after the battle. Near Garvick they found a crossbow and a quiver full of bolts similar to the one sticking out of the lookout's body. They also found another crossbow bolt in the prow of the boat."

Trying to stop tears running from her eyes, Haliann was blinking rapidly.

"Have you got something to tell me?" Shondal asked gently. He regarded her with a degree of compassion, and she suddenly felt a peculiar sensation: strong, stubbled jaw notwithstanding, the familiar blue eyes and long black hair before her made it suddenly seem as if she looked at herself... Then she perceived the fine wrinkles around the eyes, the odd thread of silver in the hair, and the spell was broken, and once again it was her father watching her.

She swallowed. "Yes, Father," she replied in a tiny voice. "It was me. I killed him."

Shondal shifted closer to her, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "I guessed it was," he admitted. "It is a painful thing to live with, killing someone. It took me a long time to get over my first."

"Oh, Father, I'm beside myself with worry and fear and sickness. What have I become?"

"You're still yourself. You did what you did for a reason. A *good* reason. There is no shame in defending yourself or others. Many people kill for a much lesser reason."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No. In fact, I think the King would award you a medal."

She cringed. "Oh, no. That would be terrible. Can't we keep this a secret somehow?"

Shondal nodded. "Of course. It will remain a mystery." The girl sighed. "It's such a heavy load on my mind."

"That's to be expected. You'll be wrestling with your conscience for a long time. It's one of the reasons I warned you against going into your mother's line of work. It had to happen at some stage. It's come sooner than I expected, though." He smiled encouragingly. "It'll make you rethink your opinions of yourself. It might stop you from ever killing again. Whatever you do, this has changed you, perhaps for the better. Think about it, but don't brood. I can't offer you anything else. Some people try alcohol, but I think it just postpones the pain."

"Thanks," said Haliann, smiling through her tears. She hugged him fiercely. "I think I need to be left alone now."

Shondal nodded in acquiescence. "Talk to me any time you feel the need."

* *

On the afternoon of the second day after the battle, *Trident's* marines released some of the Barbarians from their chains. Watched closely, the muscular former slaves helped row the warship. The Barbarians made no trouble, however, even worked hard at their task. They were happy to aid the Holms, whom they referred to as their "rescuers" rather than captors.

Trident was well advanced on its voyage up the coast of Arndlund, the ship's navigator explained to Wilfen that evening. The night before the ship had rounded Cape Estron and passed The Mouth, into which the mighty Milwarn River discharged its waters. At that very moment, however, they were close to the mouth of the Livenine River. Early the following morning the *Trident's* longboat would be able to land the questers on the Barbarians' southeastern coast.

Night passed, and shortly after dawn the Holmish warship lowered a longboat, in which were: the two Paladins, Skylord Mikael Svensson, the twin Nevanders, Haliann, and two sailors. The questers waved a solemn farewell to Captain Themer and his crew.

Stark, reddish-brown in color, land was about two kiloswords away. Wilfen's broad view of the coast shrank in scope as they drew nearer to shore. The longboat entered a sheltered cove amid rocky headlands, beaching itself on coarse sand. Before the travelers a cliff rose about twenty swords to a plateau above. A steep ravine dissecting the cliff-face was filled with loose, broken rock that made it appear dangerously difficult to climb.

After helping the two departing oarsmen push the longboat afloat once more, the questers took stock of their situation. It was quickly decided that to make the plateau they had to climb up by way of the ravine.

Garest Ethrin made the first ascent, for he was lighter and more agile than Shondal. Rust-red rocks kept dislodging under his feet, but after one or two slips he made the top. He took a six-inch iron spike from his backpack and used a small mallet to hammer the spike into solid rock. Next, he tied one end of a rope to the spike and tossed the other end down to the others. Shondal caught the rope and used his full weight to test its tension.

"All right, it's steady," the Seventh Paladin announced to the others. "You go first," he instructed Alvonne. "If the rope takes your weight, then it will take everyone else's."

Alvonne stepped back from the ravine, considering the ascent. He checked that all his equipment was secure on his person, firmly sheathing his new sword. He tugged on the rope and found no slackness. Without mishap, he climbed to where Garest waited to help him up onto the plateau.

Wilfen and Svensson followed Alvonne, the Nevander twin first. Wilfen slipped once, grazing his knee, but both made the top safely.

"It's our turn now," said Shondal to Haliann. "I know you can't climb with that hand, so can you sit on my shoulders and hold the rope with your good hand?"

"I think so."

"We'll do it that way, then."

Shondal copied an inspiration that Garest had had before him: he securely hooked the handle of a plain, rectangular legionnaire's shield -- a poor replacement for its well-crafted predecessor -- over *Findram's* pommel to ensure the shield did not fall as he climbed. Then he helped his daughter to sit on his shoulders, legs twined loosely about his neck.

"Hold on," Shondal said. "If you lose your grip with your legs, take a good hold with your uninjured hand: you should be able to hang on long enough for me to assist you."

"Yes, Father."

Wilfen looked on anxiously as the Paladin climbed rapidly. Haliann allowed the rope to slide through her loose fingers. Shondal did not falter, and the pair attained the crest of the ravine without incident. Haliann

dismounted from her awkward position and gratefully stood on solid ground.

"We're up!" she announced delightedly, and Wilfen smiled in relief.

Garest made a grunt of exertion: he was attempting to retrieve the iron spike he had hammered into the rock. The Tenth Paladin displayed one of his rare smiles. "It's stuck fast. That is a good spike gone to waste."

There were a few moments' silence, then everyone laughed, for he *was* joking.

From this new vantage point Wilfen could see for kiloswords out to sea. Halfway to the horizon he discerned a dark shape: the southwesterly wind blowing off the plateau expedited *Trident* on its voyage to patrol the northern coast of Terra Nova.

If the blue sea behind looked serene and smooth, then the scene before them was markedly different. All was irregularity. For as far as the eye could see, tumbled, broken rocks littered the landscape, ranging from marble-sized pebbles to boulders more than a foot in diameter.

The land of the Barbarians was a harsh one. Though the season meant the sting had been taken out of the desert sun, it was still very warm (compared to the colder Nevander winter Wilfen was accustomed to, anyway). But it was not the heat that was the most hostile characteristic of the Barbarian Lands: it was the limited moisture. Living things could endure heat, but water was essential to all life. Accordingly, the flora and fauna of the area were adapted to surviving in dry conditions.

The plants of the Stonelands, as Garest termed the region, varied little: mostly around a foot high, rarely exceeding a half-sword in height, with very tough bark and small leaves that were sometimes succulent and spiked.

The travelers caught the odd glimpse of native animals at either end of each day. During the heat of the late morning and early afternoon the animals hid in burrows among the rocks; come the relative coolness of dawn or dusk, they surfaced to go about their instinctive activities.

Garest was generally the first to spot any particular animal; he would point it out to the others, as every creature had some form of camouflage that made it hard to make out in the rocky environment. The stripes that broke up the shape of lizards and snakes made them especially difficult to distinguish from the shadows.

Other than the many reptilian species, the most common examples of animal life were the small rust- or dust-colored marsupials that scuttled or hopped at the questers' approach.

"I'm amazed at the quantity of life to be found in this forbidding land," Wilfen commented.

"That's the beauty of life," said Garest. "It can create an animal or plant suitable for any environment. To find living things you just have to open your eyes."

Garest exhibited a flicker of emotion. Wilfen guessed that the Paladin preferred the wilderness to civilization.

"I don't see any birds," Haliann observed.

"They're about somewhere," the Tenth Paladin assured her. "There aren't many smaller birds because of the heat, but there are birds of prey -- and scavengers -- which are probably too high in the sky for you to spy."

Occasionally stumbling, the travelers made slow progress through the scattered rocks and stones. Garest strode freely, however, seemingly able to tread only on stable stones, instantly recovering if gravel slid beneath his feet. In the same poised way he failed to put his boots into holes and cracks. He was the only one of them without badly scraped legs and hands by the end of the second day.

The Tenth Paladin cut a striking figure, Wilfen had to admit. His cuirass of steel scales protectively overlapped the torso of his white, short-sleeved tunic. A legionnaires' white cloak was fastened about his neck. A leather belt at his waist supported a scabbarded broadsword, which swung against his black legionnaires' trousers. On his left arm he bore a long, rectangular shield painted with his bright green tree device. His keen eyes took in the Stonelands with wary respect. Shondal was dressed similarly, but he could not match Garest Ethrin's aura of confidence among the rocky lands of the Barbarians.

After the sun sank it swiftly became cold under the clear desert sky. Scant encouragement was required from Garest to have everyone searching for certain plants that burnt slowly when ignited: the first night had convinced them of the need for a warming campfire.

The questers gathered around the sizeable blaze, intent on consuming some of the salted meat and fruit juice the cook of the *Trident* had provided them. Garest produced a map of the Barbarian Lands. "We are here," he declared in his deep voice, pointing to a place a short map distance from the ocean.

The map showed surprisingly few details. The coastline was well mapped, but not much was disclosed of the interior, apart from the Angart Hills towards the center. Only three cities were marked: Saff in the south, Nondra on the eastcoast, and Dabon in the northeast.

"The Barbarian Lands are very hard," Garest said. "Boundaries are ever changing. New cities are built but vanish as suddenly as they appeared, destroyed or swallowed by the shifting sands. Only the three oldest, most defensible cities survive; they fall to siege or assault infrequently.

"As for the rest: the desert has few features. Only the Angart Hills and The River."

"You know a great deal about this land," Alvonne observed.

Garest shrugged. "I used to dwell in these parts."

Warmed by the burning plants, they sat in companionable silence, beneath countless stars of many colors.

[CHAPTER 20: TRANSGRESSION](#)

It was predominantly hot and dry in the Stonelands; the travelers became accustomed to the sun blazing out of a blue sky unblemished by cloud. But it drizzled briefly late in the afternoon of the third day of the journey. The shower was cooling and refreshing, particularly for Haliann and the Nevanders, who were somewhat sunburnt. The indigenous animals appreciated it, too: towards sunset they crept out of their hidden lairs to lap the little water that had collected in rocky hollows and had yet to evaporate.

Shortly after dusk of that third day, as he lazed around the campfire, shifting frequently so stones did not press into his buttocks, Wilfen studied the sky. It was so clear out here in the desert, and he enjoyed the panorama of stars scattered across the blackness. He saw stars he recognized -- and some he did not -- winking back at him.

And then Wilfen saw something he had not observed before.

"What is that?" he asked, breaking a lengthy silence.

The others looked at him, and he pointed at the sky overhead. Tiny golden flashes, enduring but an

instant, flared here and there like ephemeral stars.

Svensson's expression was indecipherable. "It has started," he said. "It is the beginning of the end."

"What do you mean?" Haliann demanded. "The end of what?" "The world, perhaps. The Goddess's Enemy will soon be able to strike directly at Terra Nova and its people."

Wilfen saw disturbed faces in the flickering firelight. Even Garest Ethrin's habitually calm expression had become grim. "What can we do?" the blond legionnaire asked.

"I don't know," Svensson replied. "Maybe nothing. All I can do is get to the Oracle, and...and then we shall see. As I told you before: I am the last Skylord."

Conversation petered out after that. The company could only speculate on what would happen to them, to Terra Nova. If Svensson did not really know, then how were the rest of them to guess? What they needed to do was quickly convey the Skylord to the Oracle, and then...

The golden flashes continued intermittently throughout the night; everyone who was on watch reported seeing them at some stage during their stint.

They ran out of fresh food on the following day; however, Garest Ethrin again demonstrated his knowledge of the northern desert. The Tenth Paladin was completely at home in this environment. He could locate water safe to drink and the right plants or animals to eat; though not fine fare, one could survive on it. Shondal had been part of two military campaigns in the Barbarian Lands, and he seemed nowhere near as conversant with the desert.

That evening, as they both ventured away from the camp to relieve themselves, Wilfen struck up a conversation with his uncle.

"Why do you think we're all here, Shondal? I mean, why are we the Skylord's companions?"

The Paladin glanced at his nephew's serious face. "It's the Goddess's will. Who can say what her reasons are? We have to make the best of it."

Wilfen was frustrated. "I understand that. I'm as committed as you are. But I can't see why I've been chosen. You're a warrior and can defend us. I, on the other hand, have no skills. I'm a boy on a man's job."

"You misjudge yourself. I haven't thought of you as a boy for some time now. Tharmish *Sharene* imprisoned you. That made a man of you."

"There must be more to it than that."

"As I said: 'It's the Goddess's will.' You may have a purpose not yet clear. You and your brother have more talent at the Skylord's...mind-to-mind communication. Perhaps that is significant."

Wilfen said nothing for a few moments. "I suppose I'll just have to go along and find out," he said finally.

Shondal grinned. "Yes. We're all in the dark." He stared up at the sky. The golden flashes were again in evidence that night. "We have to do all we can to nullify the menace of that up there. I can tell you it makes me nervous."

Wilfen laughed shortly. "The great Shondal, nervous? Never!"

"Believe it, Wilfen. This is the most terrifying thing I've ever come across."

Wilfen and Shondal returned to the site of the campfire. They had been there for half-an-hour, sharing a desultory conversation with the others, when an unexpected noise, a grinding of stone against stone that overrode the crackle of the fire, caught their attention. Before anyone could investigate, an arrow thudded into the stony ground between the two Paladins.

A dozen men in bronze armor ringed the camping area, just at the limit of the wavering firelight. They were wild men, hair long and unkempt. Their skin was white though darkened from long exposure to the sun. Javelins and swords were sheathed on their hips, and they bore loaded bows.

Wilfen shivered. 'Oh, Goddess,' he thought. 'Barbarians.'

A brawny Barbarian, the dark-haired, bearded leader, commanded: "You will surrender. Lay down your arms. We will shoot you if you attempt escape."

Garest Ethrin shrugged in reply to an inquiring glance from Shondal. "We have no choice."

The travelers laid their visible arms in a heap. At the Barbarians' urging, Haliann added her concealed weapons, and the legionnaires included daggers from their boots. Four men roughly relieved the company of their backpacks, as well as the soldiers' armor and shields.

"Soft Eastlanders," sneered the Barbarian leader with contempt.

"Soft or not, Eastlanders are better soldiers," asserted Garest coldly. "Better than any Nondran."

The Barbarian turned his fierce, flame-lit blue eyes towards the Paladin. "How can you judge the fighting skill of real men, Eastlander?"

"I've seen many warriors. Northlanders are tough, but Holmishmen are disciplined. I'd back any Holmish legion against an equal force of Northlanders."

"It is no sure thing," said the man in a low voice.

"Perhaps not. But I recall a northern expedition to Charn in Arndlund about six or seven years ago."

The Barbarian scowled. "It was only that damned Eighth Legion that hurt us. We'd have smashed the Arnds otherwise."

"But there were only five thousand of them; there were fifty thousand Northlanders."

"The Eighth were good men, worthy of respect," the Barbarian Captain admitted. "They stopped us in both Arndlund invasions." His face hardened. "But I am in charge here, and you, Eastlander, are beginning to anger me."

Garest subsided, and Wilfen detected satisfaction on his face. The Tenth Paladin certainly understood the local mind set better than the Nevander did. Despite the antagonism Garest had apparently wrought, Wilfen sensed a greater degree of respect for the company from the Barbarians. This situation, however, seemed beyond even Garest's grasp.

Barbarians bound the questers' hands behind their backs, forcing them to march in a tight formation. From the position of the rising moon, Wilfen judged their bearing to be roughly northeast, probably in the direction of the coastal city of Nondra, as Garest had already guessed.

"Why do you think we've been captured?" Wilfen heard Alvonne whisper to Garest, as they stumbled before naked swords.

"I do not know."

They were force marched for thirteen days, hands initially bound, later unfettered. The latter arrangement reflected the questers' co-operation and impotence before armed men in a strange land. They were held just as securely as Wilfen and Shondal had been by the Tharms in familiar Holmis.

The travelers were fed game -- roasted snakes and small marsupials, mainly -- the Barbarians had hunted. They were given white cowls to protect their heads from the desert sun. There was ample drinking water, but none was supplied for ablutions; after a while, Wilfen did not notice the smell: it was not important. In general, they were well treated (especially when compared to Wilfen's time in Tharmish captivity) but not allowed to forget they were prisoners; their captors watched them carefully, particularly during the infrequent rest breaks.

The Barbarian Captain's name was Jermise, Wilfen learned. Jermise was under orders to seize any outlanders he came across. As to why, the man did not know himself, and Wilfen was unable to glean much of interest from his captors' conversations.

On the fourteenth day, dusty and sunstruck, the questers were brought into the port of Nondra, an ancient city by Terra Novan standards, largely unchanged in centuries. Antiquated single-story buildings made of crude stone blocks lined narrow streets laid out in a chaotic pattern. The main section of Nondra rested atop a cliff overlooking the Endless Ocean; the docks lay at the base of the cliff, connected to the rest of the city by broad, ascending stepped avenues carved into the rock over many years.

The palace of the Nondran King was in keeping with the miscellaneous character of the rest of the city. Kings of Nondra typically reigned for only a brief period, and each apparently perceived a need for the palace to be rebuilt or extended to his fancy; a variety of styles were evident. Wilfen saw elegant crenellated towers sprouting next to squat, ugly battlements and beautiful marble-tiled, garden-filled atriums overwhelmed by ostentatious granite pillars.

Having avoided the Holmish precedent of bathing and resting beforehand, the questers were quickly brought before the King of Nondra. A red-bearded, stern-looking fellow of about twenty years of age, the Barbarian wore functional-looking bronze armor, and a plain gold band crown sat crookedly on his head. His throne, though decorated with carved symbols and designs, was of ordinary granite, austere and -- due to the absence of any form of padding -- uncomfortable-looking.

"You have done well, Jermise," intoned King Chileft Scaj in a voice like grinding stone.

Jermise inclined his head.

"Why have you captured us?" Alvonne suddenly demanded.

Shondal nearly choked. That was what he, the party leader, might have been expected to say!

"What are you doing, Alvonne?" Wilfen thought.

The Nondran King swiveled his head so his cool eyes rested on the younger Nevander. "This is my land. I am King. And I want the answers. I want to know what strangers are doing in my land."

"You have no right to detain us," Haliann exclaimed. "We were sent by King Salifin himself." There was a sudden silence at this. After a moment or two the King declared: "I have the answer I wanted."

A page stood stiffly a respectable distance from the throne. "Summon Ambassador Savvel," King Chileft commanded him.

The boy bowed and scrambled to do his King's bidding, leaving everyone silent in anticipation of his return with the summoned person.

Wilfen wondered what was happening. Did the Barbarians know about the questers? If they did, so what! They should not care one way or the other about the company. And what was it Haliann had inadvertently confirmed for the Nondran King?

The Nevander's questions were answered soon enough. The page returned with Savvel, and it was immediately all too clear. Dressed in a rich, purple silk robe, Savvel was a tall, olive-skinned man with black, curly hair. A distinctive enough man in his own right, it was his obvious racial characteristics that made him stand out like a fire on a dark night, that made Wilfen gasp, that even made Shondal stiffen in spite of his normally strict self-control. Savvel was a Null.

Wilfen had very little hope that this ambassador had not been told to watch out for a group of people answering the questers' descriptions. Granted the opportunity, the Nullish ambassador would surely seize the chance to make a hero of himself with no personal risk. To have been posted to the Barbarian Lands at all -- a long, long way from Null -- meant that he was not the most favored of the Empress's servants; here was a possibility of improving his status.

Savvel glanced curiously at Chileft's captives, then turned his attention to the Barbarian King. "You summoned me, Your Majesty?"

"I did, Savvel. I've found some intruders who might be of interest to you."

"Why should they be of interest to me?" Savvel appeared confused.

Chileft Scaj frowned. "I should think it was obvious, Ambassador."

Savvel's eyes widened. "You don't mean..."

"Yes, man! The most sought after company in the whole of Terra Nova! Do you want them?"

Wilfen's mood sank. He had been hoping Shondal could make an offer superior to whatever the Nulls had promised the Nondrans. He had forgotten the Barbarians' renowned sense of honor.

"Very much, Your Majesty," replied Savvel with enthusiasm. "The Empress will be most pleased by this. I'll send men to take custody of the prisoners."

"Not so quickly," said the King. "I've not decided whether or not to give them to you yet. Go away now, and I'll inform you of my decision in a fortnight."

"But Your Majesty!" Savvel protested. "The Empress will be most displeased. She might send a few Imperial Legions to recover them."

"Only if someone tells her they are here," the King pronounced with a meaningful look in his eye. "Besides, everyone knows the old hag has her hands full handling the Holms. You are dismissed, Savvel."

"Please reconsider this course of action, Your Majesty," Savvel begged, as the King's guards led him away.

"I *have* reconsidered," Chileft growled. "I'm no stupid desert king. I want to choose the best course for Nondra."

King Chileft Scaj redirected his gaze on his captives, surveying them with an appraising eye. His brow wrinkled when his stare came to rest on Garest Ethrin.

"You seem familiar to me," the King told the Tenth Paladin. Chileft looked to Jermise, who stood guard by his monarch's throne. "Do you recognize him, Captain Jermise?"

Jermise stared at Garest, then closed his eyes for an instant. "He looks like Ironfist, the man who killed Zirkess Marib's brother."

"You're right," said Chileft Scaj. "It *is* Ironfist, otherwise known as Ethrin. Well, Ironfist, it seems you may fight the Hawk, after all. It was a mistake to return to Nondra, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Garest replied. "Perhaps not. I have learned much in Holmis."

"It might be an interesting duel," the King opined. He looked at Shondal. "I know you, too: Shondal Argindell, the leader of the Eighth Holmish Legion at the Battle of Charn."

Jermise stiffened, then made as if to draw his sword. "Hold it, Captain," ordered Chileft. "We are not at war with Holmis." Shondal winked insultingly at Jermise, who sniffed. "You're lucky I wasn't aware whom you were in the desert, Argindell. There are a few men who desire revenge on you."

"I'll face any man who cares to try in the Arena," said Shondal in a dangerous voice, causing his companions to stare at him in astonishment.

"Calm yourselves," said Chileft Scaj. "I'll have no blood spilt in here, Jermise." The King faced the rest of Shondal's company. "Someone among you -- or perhaps all of you -- has something the Western Alliance wants. As an alternative, I can offer you good conditions in my employ."

Shondal laughed. "Sorry. We're not interested."

The King chuckled in return. "In time you may see things my way."

CHAPTER 21: RIVALRY

Armed men escorted the questers through cold, bare stone passages to three separate rooms. The adolescents -- the Nevanders and Haliann -- were bolted in one room with five guards outside their door. Accompanied by ten Barbarians, Svensson and Shondal were directed to another room. A full complement of ten escorted Garest alone, so Svensson deduced the former Nondran was considered the most valuable -- or dangerous -- prisoner. The Thermosian idly wondered how many guards he himself would merit if the Nondrans knew his true heritage.

The stone walls of Svensson and Shondal's room were adorned with oil paintings in a primitive style, war scenes predominantly. A swift survey of the room revealed, apart from the door, the only possible exit was through the wide, unglazed window. Closer scrutiny showed thick steel bars set in the stone of the balcony without, attached somewhere out of sight above; the gaps between the bars were much thinner than even the Thermosian's slight frame.

The guards closed the door and locked it with a brass key, which left them *inside* the room.

One, a grizzled, red-faced veteran, noticed the captives' raised eyebrows and laughed shortly. "The King won't be pleased if you escape, Holm and Memm. So if you just co-operate, we'll all be much better off." "I'm sure the ten of you could handle us with your swords and armor," Shondal said with sarcasm, not pleased at being helpless. "While we didn't have weapons, anyway."

The questers had been stripped of everything and given bright robes to wear. Unarmed, Shondal felt

naked and vulnerable.

The Barbarian chuckled again, aware who controlled the situation. "I'm sure we could, because, as I've pointed out, you're here to stay."

Shondal shrugged. *<'There are ten of them, after all,'>* he told Svensson telepathically. *<'My unarmed combat skills do not match my swordsmanship. And even if we did overpower all ten, we still have to get ourselves and the others out of the palace.'>*

Svensson nodded. *<'Stay put for the time being, and we'll see what happens. We can't remain here for too long, though.'>*

<'All right,'> agreed the Paladin. He kicked off his boots and lay on his back in a blanket-filled pallet, clasped hands propping his head on a thick pillow. In another pallet, Svensson tried unsuccessfully to copy his cool demeanor.

"This is a very comfortable bed, boys," Shondal remarked, smiling broadly.

"Shut up!" snapped one of the guards.

Shondal's smile broadened.

Time passed. It grew dark outside. Looking for anything that might serve as a weapon, Svensson glanced casually about the room. There was nothing, not even a small statue or steel poker. A long, low table located between the pallets was useless, for he could tell that even for Shondal it was far too heavy to swing around.

One of the guards lit a few oil lanterns that were immovably bolted to the stone walls. He returned to his companions, who stood with swords in hand, leaning against the wall on both sides of the door.

Svensson and Shondal lay still, watching the Barbarians. The Nondrans strove to remain impassive, but the occasional sigh or expression of exasperation gave them away: they were annoyed and unnerved.

After a long time -- it was past twilight outside -- Shondal spoke: "Are you going to feed us?"

One or two of the more jumpy guards gave a start. The gray-haired veteran gave Shondal a shrewd, assessing glance. "Why not?" he said after a moment. "Narlesk, go and get the prisoners something to eat."

The Barbarian leader just failed to completely hide a smirk as he opened the door. He locked the door behind the guard called Narlesk and faced his prisoners once more.

Shondal had to smile ruefully, and the man grinned with him. The other guards stared at their comrade in bewilderment. "That's Shondal Argindell, leader of the Eighth Holmish Legion at the Battle of Charn," said one. "You of all people should remember that, Captain Arnect."

"I well remember the Battle of Charn, Zargist," Arnect replied softly. "But I think Shondal and I share a certain...empathy. We were both there; on different sides, of course, but with similar aims, I am sure."

"What do you mean?" Zargist asked in puzzlement.

Arnect made a wry face. "Shondal understands, I believe."

The Paladin nodded slowly. The name had sounded familiar, but he had been unable to place it at first. "General Arnect Yadrig, commander of the Second Northern Invasion of Arndlund; my opponent at the

Battle of Charn."

"That failed invasion cost me my rank," Arnect admitted.

Shondal gave a short laugh. "War has no victor. That thumping your invasion force gave the Eighth cost me *my* rank. I decided to try for Paladinhood after that."

"It was back to rock bottom for me, leading this useless bunch!" Arnect jerked his thumb at the other men.

The Barbarians chuckled a trifle uncertainly, not totally sure he was joking.

"You know, Arnect," Shondal said, "they still use your tactics to teach officers in the Holmish Army."

Arnect raised his eyebrows inquiringly. "Oh?"

"They think them a perfect example of how to quickly obliterate a defending force and scatter it to the winds."

The Barbarian Captain laughed uproariously. "Our Army teaches your tactics!"

Shondal blinked. "Pardon?"

"Your leadership epitomized the technique of using a small force in a defensible position to deplete a larger force." Arnect shook his head in wonderment. "You sure fooled me. Attacking uphill with the sun in our eyes. It was a master stroke."

Shondal snorted. "I was too clever for my own good. You were supposed to use a fraction of your force, so I could hold you back for a week. Your men wiped out the Legion inside two days."

"It didn't matter, anyway. The entire Arnd Army waited eighty kiloswords to the south."

"They weren't expecting you so early, though," Shondal pointed out. "I could have done with them taking a slice of the initial action!"

There was a knock on the door, and one of the men admitted Narlesk, who carried a tray laden with roast meat, vegetables, and a pitcher of red wine. The young man was careful to deposit his burden on an unembellished mantelshelf (the fireplace below was not lit and looked like it rarely was) well out of the questers' ready reach.

As Svensson and Shondal fetched their dinner, Arnect said, "You have my respect, Shondal. But you won't be escaping this room while I'm in charge."

Shondal did not reply. He had reached that conclusion himself: a former invasion commander, leading nine additional men, would have no trouble confining two prisoners. And Arnect had especial motivation to keep the Paladin in particular imprisoned. Shondal thought he might as well disoblige the Barbarians. They had all the advantages, but he would not make this an easy assignment for them.

"What are you trying to achieve?" Arnect asked the Holm at some point after midnight.

Shondal feigned an expression of ignorance, and Arnect grunted, muttering, "Ahh, I thought so."

The Paladin felt like a failure. All his life he had striven to match his brother's achievements. The current situation served to emphasize Shondal's own perceived shortcomings. The Barbarian scout party would not have surprised Tannash. His elder half-brother had set a standard Shondal had tried to emulate.

Tannash Argindell was the superb swordsman, the born leader of men. Tannash was Shondal's idol; Tannash, however, had seemed to despise his younger brother for his very existence.

Tannash's mother had died in giving birth to him, and his father had married Dolfray after a lengthy mourning period. Shondal was born two years after Tannash.

Their father, Sary Argindell, had been a soldier in his youth, but following the loss of his left eye in a sparring accident, he had become a carpenter. He reveled in the progress of Tannash's swordsmanship. He despaired over Shondal, a sickly child who appeared unlikely at first to match Tannash's robust frame. Though he thought he treated the boys equally, it was no secret Tannash's mother, Trique, had been his first choice of wife. The gentle-hearted Dolfray had always loved Sary but had been spurned until the death of Trique.

Shondal had perceived the differing measures of love dispensed by his father. He saw that his brother's swordsmanship made his father proud and thought that this was the way to Sary's heart. As a four-year-old he determined to take up the sword, in spite of his doting mother's wish for him to become a carpenter.

Tannash was scornful of his half-brother's interest in becoming a warrior. He constantly ridiculed Shondal and made his earlier lessons very tough: hardly a day would go by when Shondal was not "accidentally" hurt or embarrassed in some way. Shondal remained undeterred, however, for it was his father he wanted to impress.

It became a kind of competition. It was one-sided, of course, for Tannash was ever the bigger, stronger, and more skilful. Shondal developed into the second-best young swordsman in the village of Ambell, but it was not enough: he wanted to be better than Tannash.

When he turned eight, Tannash departed Ambell to join the Holmish Army. Shondal stayed behind to care for his aging parents. Though only six-years-old, he was already determined to follow his brother into the Army. Sary Argindell accorded him more attention now, but since his mother's lapse into vagueness from disease or age -- she occasionally failed to recognize him -- Shondal's competition with Tannash had become the youth's driving force, its reason for beginning all but forgotten.

A success in the Holmish Army, Tannash was already a centurion when Shondal signed up, a legion commander when his brother became centurion. Shondal matched Tannash's feats, only to find Tannash had moved on. Then Tannash, along with his Nevander wife, had died in a plague, his last act to send his still disease-free twin sons into Shondal's keeping. The game was over: Tannash had won, for he had been Paladin Centurion, and Shondal just Seventh Paladin. Tannash had even made a superior father and husband, for Shondal knew he would never succeed at either role.

* *

Svensson's and Shondal's sleeplessness was too much for Narlesk. "Why don't you sleep?" he demanded.

"You shut up!" commanded Arnect immediately.

"I'm not tired," Shondal said mildly.

"You, too, Argindell," the veteran added in irritation.

An hour or two after dawn there was a tentative knock on the door; Arnect motioned Narlesk to open it. Two young people, a man and a woman in servants' drab, long-sleeved tunics, waited expectantly.

"What do you want?" Arnect asked gruffly.

"I have brought the guests their breakfast," answered the blond-haired woman (teenager, really, Svensson guessed), holding a tray aloft. "I am here to escort the guests to the Arena games," replied the gaunt, hollow-cheeked man in a whiny voice.

The woman was halfway towards Shondal when Arnect's sharp "Stop!" halted her.

"That man is dangerous," the Barbarian Captain told her.

Her pale face reddened with embarrassment. She was young and inexperienced but had the sense to place the tray on the mantelshelf without further instruction. Svensson saw her sneak a glance at Shondal, perhaps wondering what a "dangerous" man looked like, and the Paladin winked at her. She blushed again, ducking her head so her long hair covered her face, and almost upset the tray in her haste to get out of the room.

A couple of the guards laughed. Arnect did not. He was annoyed at how close Shondal had been to a potential hostage.

"Just eat your food and let me be rid of you," the Barbarian told his prisoners tiredly.

Svensson complied willingly enough, for he had begun to weary of the place and company. He ate slowly, amusing himself by watching the male servant. Despite his bold entrance, the fellow was nervous, long-fingered hands and eyes aflutter. The man was uneasy enough at being near the armed guards, but judging from the quick glances he threw at Shondal, the Thermosian knew whom was an even greater source of worry.

At length the captives finished their breakfast of some sort of grain softened in hot water, washing it down with cold orange juice.

"Right," said Shondal, standing. "Let's go."

The manservant turned to Arnect. "Captain, if you would release the guests, Lord Shondal and Mister Mikael Svensson, to accompany me."

"Certainly, Tamas. But I would suggest for everyone's convenience the 'guests' be restrained."

Tamas nodded vigorously. "That may be for the best." He giggled nervously.

And so Svensson and Shondal were compelled to walk before Tamas with ankles and wrists chained together. Arnect's men had thoughtfully shackled their hands behind their backs, so they did not have the option of using the chains as a means of throttling someone.

The Arena was semicircular in shape, the straight side bounded by the steep cliff that split Nondra in two a kilometer from the coast. A five-meter-high wall sealed the curved boundary of the Arena, and above it many rows of stone seats overlooked an area of hard-packed dirt eighty or ninety meters across. A roaring, rippling, multicolored sea of robed people filled these seats: mostly bearded, wild-eyed men.

The King had also decided to attend the Arena games. Situated on the topmost row, the royal box overhung the lower seating. The seats inside, padded cushions atop the hard stone, were far more comfortable than those for the general public. Svensson made out Chleift Scaj and a few of the King's guards and courtiers in the front row. The King beckoned Tamas to convey Svensson and Shondal to the royal box. Haliann and the twin Nevanders were already present, but with a momentary twinge, the Thermosian noted Garest Ethrin's absence.

"What is the meaning of this, Tamas?" Chileft Scaj demanded. "Why are my guests in chains?"

"Captain Arnect suggested it," replied Tamas weakly.

"Arnect has no trust. Release my guests. I'm sure they're in no hurry to leave." The King gestured at a couple of the many conspicuous guards situated all about the Arena.

Hands quivering, Tamas struggled to unlock the shackles on Svensson and Shondal's ankles and wrists. He flinched when Shondal stretched stiff muscles, presumably dreading the Paladin's anger.

"Thank you, Tamas," said Shondal in mock sincerity.

"Come and join us," invited the King. "You shall not find our Arena games lacking."

It was an appalling spectacle, not, as Svensson expected, a series of games or even a competition. In his eyes it was an orgiastic exhibition of purposeless maiming and killing. Men did not compete against each other with blunted weapons and thick armor: they were pitted against wild animals, such as scrawny, mangy lions and wolves or sad-eyed, dispirited elephants. The creatures were dispatched slowly with wanton cruelty, and only occasionally, through carelessness, was one of the human participants injured. There were even fights between men: well-armed professional gladiators against pitiful wretches -- prisoners or slaves, perhaps -- who could barely hold a weapon, let alone make use of it.

Neither the twins nor Haliann could face the fights, so they were escorted back to King Chileft's palace. Svensson toughed out the Nondrans' bloody entertainment, frequently clenching his fists, sometimes covering his eyes and ears to shield his senses from the savagery. Even the hardened Shondal frowned in distaste through most of the proceedings.

'Someone rescue me from this planet!' Svensson thought hopelessly.

The final fight of the day was heralded by a man dressed in showy, colorful silk finery: the Arena Master. He faced the crowd and the royal box in particular.

"This is a mortal duel between two old enemies!" he cried in a booming voice. "They are: on my left, Zirkess 'The Hawk' Marib! And on my right, Garest 'Ironfist' Ethrin!"

The crowd broke into wild, thunderous applause. This was it! The main event!

<'What is it?> Svensson asked, seeing the Paladin's expression.

<'Garest is going to fight,'> Shondal replied shortly.

"This duel has been a long time coming, but I'm sure it will be worth the wait," Shondal heard one lord say to another. "Zirkess has been searching for Ironfist since Ethrin killed Zirkess's brother."

Shondal thought he knew Garest as well as anyone. The Tenth Paladin was quite capable of killing, Shondal knew that, but not without just cause. Yet having one's brother slain seemed, to Shondal, a good enough provocation for anyone to seek vengeance...

The Holm turned to the man on his immediate right, a silver-haired fellow with a neatly trimmed goatee, who happened to be Lord Ingrist, the King's chief adviser. "Why did Garest kill this Zirkess's brother?"

Ingrist laughed shortly. "The age-old source of trouble, I am afraid: two young men and only one young woman. She spurned Ironfist after he killed Trilt Marib."

Shondal nodded grimly. Garest Ethrin had paid for his naivete by being forced into exile from his land of

birth.

"Why didn't this duel take place at the time?" Shondal wanted to know.

"Zirkess Marib was only six-years-old at the time. It is said that he was keen to fight Ironfist, and Nondran tradition states all challenges should be met. Ethrin refused, however, and fled Nondra."

Shondal felt greater respect for Garest. Men did not fight mere boys, whatever the tradition.

The Arena Master vacated the fighting area, as soldiers raised portcullises set well apart from each other. The two combatants emerged slowly, alert and prepared. Both were bareheaded, wore a cuirass of bronze plates over toughened leather, and carried a small, round embossed shield. Their only weapons were broadswords.

Zirkess Marib was youthful, perhaps ten years of age, as opposed to Garest's thirteen years. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was a dark-haired, thick-bearded bear of a man, the Barbarian of popular imagination. Despite his youth, perhaps because of it, he seemed very confident.

"He is reckoned to be the seventh-best swordsman in Nondra, after Chileft Scaj and his five captains," Ingrist said.

"Garest is the tenth-ranked of the Holmish King's Paladins," pointed out Shondal.

"An exclusive and highly skilled company," said Ingrist thoughtfully.

In the Arena the two men warily approached each other. Zirkess paused in the center and waited. Garest hesitated a moment, then started to circle the Nondran out of sword reach.

'Good,' thought Shondal. Circling a stationary opponent was a sound tactic: the man at the center of the circle risked dizziness as he turned to keep his adversary in sight. Dizziness was something to avoid in combat; Shondal had learned that the hard way.

But Zirkess, for all his inexperience, quickly ascertained Garest's strategy. He negated it by starting a circle of his own, so that their movement formed a pair of interlocking rings.

After a long pause, simultaneously, in that instant when a fighting man instinctively knew it was time to act, they raised their swords and swung at each other. The blades met midway between them at head height, a harsh clash of steel. A test of strength, no yielding, and they pushed off each other and fell back a step or two.

They sized each other up, and Shondal could sense new-found respect for his opponent in both men, before Zirkess Marib launched into one of the most frighteningly aggressive attacks the Holm had ever seen. The Barbarian's first swing came from behind his right shoulder and angled down towards Garest's neck; Garest ducked and deflected the sword with his shield. Zirkess's shield foiled the Paladin's counterattack, and the Barbarian followed up with a backhand sweep at waist level; Garest dodged to the left, and with a screech the Nondran's sword scored the older man's armor. Zirkess pressed his attack by thrusting at the off-balance Paladin; only sharp reflexes saved Garest from that fierce thrust and another that followed quickly after. A desperate parry, and the blond legionnaire was again on the back foot, courtesy of a shield thrust to the face that forced him temporarily out of reach.

Garest Ethrin was knocked onto his back, and tucking his head against his chest, he used his momentum to roll backwards onto his feet, as Zirkess continued to attack. The big Nondran's ensuing blow smashed Garest's shield, and the one after that slashed the Paladin's left arm from elbow to wrist. It was not, in Shondal's eyes, a bad wound but no doubt stung distractingly, causing Garest to drop what remained of

the shield rather than thrust it in Zirkess's face. A fast counterattack made the Nondran dance back and disengage before he could take advantage.

Panting slightly, the two men circled each other once more on the hard-packed dirt, before a crowd that was totally silent, absorbed in the deadly duel. All eyes watched the center of the Arena, and Shondal heard deep breathing in the royal box.

Abruptly Zirkess surged forward and struck again. Garest blocked the Barbarian's lunge and attacked back with a full-blooded blow, aimed not merely to kill but to destroy: like any superb swordsman he did not like to be made to appear second-rate, and so he hit out... And Zirkess responded with equal ferocity, not just parrying but swinging his own broadsword with all his might.

The swords connected in a titanic crash: Garest's blade broke at the hilt; Zirkess's was torn from his grasp and sailed end over end to stick in the ground several swords away. The Nondran did not chase his weapon; instead he charged the Paladin, who threw away his sword's pommel grip, which was not heavy enough to use as a club.

"Big mistake, young Zirkess," Shondal heard Lord Ingrist murmuring beside him.

The two combatants rushed at each other, Zirkess Marib, his expression murderous, looking to have a decided advantage in size and reach. As always, the Barbarian struck first, his right arm swinging in an arc towards Garest's head. The Paladin ducked easily, and his gauntleted left fist smashed into the Nondran's right cheek, scraping it bloodily.

Zirkess roared in pain and anger. He shook his head and lashed out at Garest, who fended off the blow with his left arm and punched the Barbarian with a straight right. The Nondran fell back, holding a bloody nose.

The respite lasted barely an instant, until Zirkess advanced again. Garest feinted with his right fist. Distracted, the Nondran was slow to register Garest's left arm swinging from waist level. Garest's fist caught Zirkess on the point of the chin and instantly knocked the belligerence out of him. His legs suddenly shaky, the Barbarian collapsed unceremoniously in the dirt. He slowly crawled away, powerless to prevent Garest from retrieving the intact sword.

"Garest Ethrin," said Lord Ingrist. "For about a year he was at the center of nearly every tavern brawl in Nondra. His reputed skill with his fists was not exaggerated I can see."

Shondal, impressed by what he had seen, could only nod his agreement. Garest was a fine swordsman -- Zirkess's ferocity had initially bewildered his opponent, yet Shondal was certain, having weathered the storm, Ethrin would have prevailed had the bout gone on much longer -- but his fist-fighting was some of the finest Shondal had ever observed. Superb speed, balance, and co-ordination backed Garest's strength: he was no common brawler.

A rumble of discontent came from the crowd outside the royal box. Shondal glanced out into the Arena and saw Garest Ethrin on his feet, Zirkess's sword in hand; a few swords away the Nondran found his feet.

"What upsets the crowd?" Shondal inquired of Lord Ingrist.

"They wonder why he does not kill Zirkess now. It shows considerable dishonor for his defeated opponent."

"Perhaps he won't kill him," the Holm suggested. "It is unnecessary."

Lord Ingrist appeared shocked. "A vanquished warrior deserves an honorable death! Garest Ethrin mocks not only Zirkess but all Nondrans, his own people!"

"Garest is Holmish now. A Holmishman of honor kills only out of need, when he can in no other way subdue his opponent. There is no honor in death.

"I don't know how well Garest has adapted to the Holmish way of life, but he has sworn service to the King and is a loyal subject of the Confederation.

"And I can tell you, Lord Ingrist: Garest Ethrin is a fine swordsman, and his natural skill would have overwhelmed Zirkess's aggression in the end. The broken sword may yet save the boy's life. And I think it is a life worth saving."

Ingrist stared at Shondal in astonishment, perhaps remembering at the last that he conversed with an official enemy of the Kingdom of Nondra. Farther away the Paladin discerned King Chileft Scaj and the Skylord regarding him with speculative looks.

Meanwhile, Garest had broken the intact sword by pushing its tip into the dirt and stamping on the flat of the blade. He surveyed the audience, turning so he could behold them all.

And the crowd stared back, utterly silenced by such a symbolic act.

"When I came through that gate, I intended to kill this man." Garest's voice carried easily around the Arena. "But during the course of our duel I was moved to spare him, my rage burnt out. His death would be pointless. Every one of you can contribute far more to Nondra alive than dead and buried.

"When I killed Trilt Marib I was young and foolish. He attacked me first, but my skill was by far the greater, and I might have disarmed him. I was influenced by the Northlanders' way of life: hard, brutal, ordered. It was my duty, an obligation, to kill rather than humble him briefly.

"I fled south to Holmis and discovered a better lifestyle, where a person is prized for the mind rather than the body. This does not make the Holmish soft. They defend their land and principles as fiercely as any Nondran. This also applies to their allies, something veterans of the Battles of the Livenine and Charm will well remember.

"I have a hope that one day Nondra, too, can become 'civilized' and rise above the rabble that lurks outside its walls."

The Arena was deathly quiet. The Nondrans had expected to witness mortal combat, had instead heard a speech by a man known previously only for his martial skills. Garest Ethrin had revealed himself to be a thinker, which was rare in a fighting man. The philosophical man generally made a poor soldier -- Shondal's Centurion, Jhaylon Falds, had proved that to the Paladin at the First Battle of the Livenine -- but Garest was an exception to the rule.

Chileft Scaj stood up, as Garest offered a hand and helped Zirkess to his feet. All watched the King, expecting outrage at this Holmishman defying tradition. When he started to quietly applaud, no one could believe it. His lords, Ingrist chief among them, stared at the King aghast.

The Nondran monarch continued and slowly, one at a time, the nobles joined him, clapping loudly.

The mood spread, and soon the entire audience cheered and whistled. The people of Nondra were quick to find and appreciate inspiration. Visionaries they admired, one reason why Chileft Scaj was so acclaimed as King.

Garest stood, head bowed slightly, while Zirkess gazed at the enthusiastic crowd with awe and bafflement, his previous vengeful rage all but forgotten.

Shondal glanced to his right, and he saw that Svensson's eyebrows were raised significantly as the Skylord applauded along with everyone else.

CHAPTER 22: CIVILISATION

As Svensson and Shondal reposed in their pallet beds that evening, guards around them, there came a knock on the door. Zargist opened the door, revealing Jermise bearing familiar-looking gear. He carried Shondal's arms, armor, and legionnaires' clothing. He also clutched Svensson's climate suit cube -- it had been literally peeled from him while still in its body-suit mode and had gradually, over several days, returned to its original cubical form (he wondered what the Nondrans had made of *that*) -- as well as the Thermosian's Terra Novan clothes and equipment-filled backpack. The clothing had been cleaned, the sword, dagger, and armor polished, and (so far as he could tell) Svensson's advanced survival equipment was untouched.

The Nondran Captain said, "His Majesty, King Chileft Scaj, formally requests the attendance of Lord Shondal Argindell and Mister Mikael Svensson at a private meeting." "I accept," replied Shondal.

"I accept," said Svensson at the Paladin's telepathic urging.

"The King requests you accept a peace pledge," Jermise announced.

"That depends on its conditions," Shondal demurred.

"He wishes you to pledge non-violence short of outright self-defense. Your weapons will be returned to you in trust."

"Granted," said Shondal. "I swear I shall not act in violence, except where that policy shall fail the persons of myself or those I call friend."

Svensson slowly repeated the oath.

"So witnessed," said Jermise.

"So witnessed," echoed Arnect.

"All right," Jermise continued. "Captain Arnect, you and your men are dismissed. Argindell and Svensson are my concern now."

"Certainly, Captain Jermise. All right, you men, let's be off!"

Arnect and his men filed out of the room, leaving Svensson and Shondal with Jermise. "I'll wait outside while you ready yourself," offered Jermise.

Shondal was glad to escape from the colorful civilian robe into legionnaires' white. His short-sleeved tunic, dark trousers, and knee-high boots felt familiarly comfortable. Svensson, on the other hand, found one Terra Novan outfit as strange as any other. A little amused, he donned his climate suit and overlaid it with Eastlander garb.

The scaled cuirass seemed heavier than Shondal remembered, but the weight was welcome, forcing him into a soldier's frame of mind after days of easy living. The Paladin belted the mail about his waist, strapping the broadsword *Findram* to his side.

Everything felt right again.

Jermise waited outside the door, looking bored. "Come with me," the Nondran directed.

The Barbarian led the questers through featureless stone corridors to a distant area of the palace, part of the original construction. They came to a heavy, ironbound door, where two soldiers stood guard. One of the men opened the door, gesturing Svensson, Shondal, and Jermise inside.

Beyond the doorway was a lavishly furnished room. An Adar Mutian carpet overspread the floor, while desert landscape paintings bedecked the walls. A fireplace was set in the right-hand wall, a stained-glass window opposite the door. In the center of the room was a big, circular, polished granite table, seated at which were King Chileft Scaj, three lords -- Ingrist and two Shondal did not know by name -- Garest Ethrin, Haliann, and the twin Nevanders.

"Father!" cried Haliann. She dashed from the table and flung herself on Shondal. Wrinkling her nose, she pulled back from the Paladin. "Pooh! You smell metallic!"

Svensson smiled at his friends, genuinely pleased to see them; Wilfen smiled back; Alvonne winked; and Garest inclined his head a fraction.

Shondal straightened from his daughter's embrace. "Right," he said. "What's going on, Chileft?"

Chileft Scaj got to his feet. He was armored as usual, but his crown was conspicuous by its absence. "I wish to have a meaningful discussion with you and your companions."

"All right, I can abide that. But you'd better not be wasting my time." Shondal and Svensson sat in empty seats. Every face that looked back at them was solemn. "Go ahead," Shondal urged.

Chileft took a breath and sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "When I first became the leader of my tribe I had great plans. I was going to conquer all of the Northern Lands, just for starters. Then I was going to conquer Arndlund and from there move on Holmis and the rest of Terra Nova."

The Nondran King paused, laughed humorlessly.

"Anyway," he went on, "it took me a long time to organize my people into an effective fighting force. And it took nearly all our strength and effort to capture Nondra, which was defended by equally undisciplined men.

"I was happy with my conquest, but when I looked back on what it had cost me, how I had paid with the blood of lifelong friends, my satisfaction waned. 'Was it worth it?' I asked myself. And when I looked into my heart, I knew it really wasn't. There is, of course, more to life than conquest and momentary sensation.

"And so I tried to establish a kingdom that was different, more like the southern nations. I wanted my people to have a better place to live.

"The Nulls were quick to deliver an ambassador. (No doubt, you will have noticed Savvel is not here.) They were all too willing to help Nondra, on condition that we ally ourselves with them.

"While Nullish aid was very tempting, I was slow to commit myself. I had heard rumors of the impending war with Holmis and was not keen to suddenly discover myself on the march. I want to do what is best for Nondra, and entering a war not ours is not in our best interests.

"One of the reasons I have brought you all here is so I can apologize for having rudely taken some of you

into custody. I do not regret my actions but *do* rue any inconvenience or upset. I just had to assess the significance of your band, which the Nulls and the Tharms are especially keen to capture."

"This is all very well," Shondal broke in, and the Nondrans stiffened. "What do you truly want with us? My King and country aren't aware of what has become of us, so you needn't expect instant retaliation. And I doubt we'll be bound for Himberon soon."

Chileft Scaj nodded. "You're right, of course, to ask. What I..." -- he glanced at his fellows -- "*we* want is to know whether aligning ourselves with Holmis presents our best course of action. We don't want to be regarded as insignificant and inconsequential barbarians any more."

Ingrist looked at the King questioningly, and Chileft Scaj nodded. "We behold the golden lights in the night sky," Ingrist admitted. "And we have strange dreams..."

Svensson communicated telepathically with Shondal, and the Paladin repeated his words aloud to the gathering: "Do they feature a blond woman surrounded by a halo of light?"

The King was astonished. "You know of my dreams?"

"We've had similar experiences," Alvonne confided.

The other Nondran lords muttered that they, too, had had such dreams. "I couldn't take them seriously," Chileft Scaj said. "But with so many people having them... She, this blond woman, said I must let you all go. 'Especially the Memm' was her most explicit demand." He turned his gaze on Svensson. "Who are you, Mikael Svensson?"

Svensson hesitated.

"Terra Nova's only hope," Ingrist said softly. "Those, too, were her words."

"Yes," agreed the King. "But who is she? Some sorceress entering our dreams? Should we heed her, when the Nulls wish us to detain you for them?"

"Speak no ill of Anbridge!" cut in Shondal. "The dream woman is the Goddess Under The Mountain, and you must do what she requires of you."

The Nondrans appeared skeptical. "We have no religion," declared Chileft Scaj. "Your Goddess has no power here."

Alvonne got to his feet. He pointed across the table at Svensson. "Mikael is a Skylord. He is here to do the will of the Goddess. You should not thwart him."

Svensson flinched. The impetuous Nevander might just have condemned the Thermosian to a test: a test to prove any supposed superhuman qualities, such as the ability to survive being set on fire, or run through with a sword...

"He doesn't really look the part," said Ingrist mildly. "He looks a normal man to me."

"Do something," Wilfen said to Svensson. "Prove it to them."

Svensson frowned. His mediocre telepathic powers would not register on the Nondrans' minds: they did not have sufficient psionic talent. Empathy? No, it was obvious what they felt: derisive skepticism. Telekinesis? It would take all his energy to shift even something small (unless it was an object with an in-built psionic amplifier), and then it might be taken for a trick or an expelled breath. Something from his

backpack, then.

He got out his hands-free torch, cast it into the air, then, with a simple thought, caused it to flare into light.

The Nondrans were thunderstruck. Svensson sent the torch drifting towards them. The lords ducked in panic, though the King merely paled behind his beard and held his ground.

"All right," said Chileft Scaj shakily. He managed to grin. "Let's say I believe you *are* a Skylord. Even if my mind tells me the Goddess doesn't exist. What do you want?"

Svensson retrieved the torch and deposited it in his backpack. He spoke aloud: "Let us go."

Chileft laughed harshly. "I was intending to, anyway. Even before your...demonstration."

"What made you change your mind about holding us for the Nulls?" Shondal asked curiously, recalling how Savvel had been sent packing.

"I never intended to present you to them. I don't like them and their affected ways. I needed...wished to know why they coveted your company. As I always say, I seek to do what is best for Nondra. To be honest, I've never really favored Holmis, either, but the Western Alliance blew its chance. Yesterday, Nondrans who had been captive on a Tharmish warship returned to the city. They had been set down north of here by a Holmish warship that had sunk the Tharms. One of the men is my nephew, Olrash. The Tharms have the temerity to enslave my people, and the Nulls seek my alliance!" Chileft Scaj was flushed, and Svensson saw the Tharms' actions had greatly angered him. He calmed down slightly and continued stiffly. "I am appreciative of the honor of the men of the *Trident* (for that is the name of the Holmish ship, Olrash told me), because under Nondran law those men became the property of the Holms."

The King abruptly slammed his fist down on the table. "Enough! I have decided: for better or ill, I will ally with the Holms."

"No person can possess another in Holmis," Shondal remarked. "It was the duty of the *Trident's* crew to release those men near to their origin, even if it took the ship out of its way."

"We shall adopt that tradition, along with many others," vowed Chileft Scaj. "I thought I had opened my eyes to the world, but this parley tells me I still cannot see through the dust and sand that blanket the desert." He smiled bleakly. "Your company is free to continue its quest (though I'm sure you could have escaped anytime; I appreciate your restraint, Skylord). I do not care what you are about. I shall give you a pass allowing you to progress freely through Nondran lands. It may hold some sway over the tribes of the interior. All I ask is that you put in a good word for Nondra to Salifin when you return to Holmis."

Shondal inclined his head respectfully to this fine king. "We shall," he promised.

[CHAPTER 23: WESTWARD BOUND](#)

The Nondrans released the questers on the morning of the subsequent day. Armed guards simply escorted the travelers to the city gates and unceremoniously abandoned the sextet on the track that led out of Nondra. The gates clanged shut behind them, and suddenly they were free to resume their quest.

They all stared at each other in amazement. Alvonne snickered quietly, then laughed aloud, soon accompanied by Wilfen and Haliann. It did not require much encouragement for Shondal to join in, and Svensson, too, found himself chortling loudly. Even Garest chuckled along with the rest of them.

The moment passed. Their laughter died away, though they smiled still, as they regained their wind.

It was not an unknown scenario: a group of people suddenly found something inexplicably amusing. Svensson told the others that it happened in all human societies; it was part of human nature, perhaps a reaction to a release of tension.

"Well," Alvonne said. "To where do we journey now?"

Shondal glanced at Svensson. "Where Lord Mikael wishes. If he still desires to go to the same place..."

The Thermosian nodded, expression determined. "We follow Garest's lead."

Garest Ethrin grunted. "Then we're westward bound." He pulled a face, then added: "But I am reluctant to endanger the children."

"We've come so far already!" Alvonne protested indignantly. "You can't send us back now!" He had another thought. "And we're not children!"

Wilfen and Haliann were also outraged at Garest's inference.

"Alvonne and I will be ten next birthday," argued Wilfen. "That makes us men, according to Holmish tradition. You wouldn't send men home."

"That's debatable," put in Shondal. "And that doesn't apply to Haliann. She's only seven and a girl, besides."

"Father!" exclaimed the girl. "You taught me to defend myself. I won't be left behind. I shall only follow...you."

Svensson guessed she had been about to say, "I shall only follow Wilfen."

Shondal nodded absently, his mind already made up in favor of the young people.

"Anyway," Haliann said, adding support to an already successful cause, "my special training will be of benefit."

Shondal sighed. "This journey could be hazardous, Haliann. It is not something to be done on a whim, I'm telling you."

"I know," she replied seriously. "But how much safer can I be than with five men?"

"Not much." Her father grinned. "But be very careful. This is a perilous land." The soldier glanced at the twins. "And that goes for you two as well."

Wilfen nodded; Alvonne winked broadly.

Garest stared at Shondal questioningly. "They've earned their keep," the Holm told the former Nondran. "Wilfen was with me in the captivity of *Sharene*. Alvonne escaped from those same *Sharene* and kept the Skylord out of their hands. And Haliann had a close encounter with a Tharmish spy aboard the *Trident*. They're harder than they were." Shondal paused, smiled wryly. "Anyway, the Goddess requires the Nevanders for some reason. I'm not about to argue with her!"

Garest subsided without further demur, accepting Shondal's decision.

A rough track led them westward away from the city-state of Nondra. A kilometer or two out of the city a patrol of Nondran warriors intercepted them. 'Here we go again,' Svensson thought. But the patrol captain allowed them to continue after examining King Chileft Scaj's official pass. Not much farther on,

the rude path, such as it was, vanished altogether.

Recently, Svensson's disillusionment with Terra Nova had returned. The Terra Novans had turned out to be just a bunch of savages: he had been appalled by the conduct of the Tharms in Holmis and out on the ocean, sickened by the Nondrans and their Arena games. The Thermosian had realized that he was being uncharitable in judging these people by the standards of twenty-fourth century Earth, but their behavior had affronted him all the same. He had wasted two thousand years traversing hundreds of light years to succor these barbarians! It hardly seemed worth his death-defying assault on the Enemy lines just to arrive here. For a man who had resolved to let himself die, only to defer the event, it had seemed he might just as well have pursued his original intention. He was mentally and physically spent by his ordeal, and he guessed he still bore deep psychological scars, wounds inflicted by the Enemy's annihilation of virtually the entire human race. He really needed several weeks of nothing but rest and relaxation. But he was not destined to receive such a period of recuperation. It was just as well, he realized, that there was somewhere for him to go, something for him to do, or he might have stopped dead in his tracks and sank to the earth through lack of will and hope.

But two small things had restored his faith if not his enthusiasm: the *Trident's* Captain's treatment of the Nondran slaves; and Chileft Scaj's visionary plans for Nondra. Perhaps the Nondran King would even close down his repulsive, barbaric Arena (though had not the Ancient Romans, a most civilized and cultured race of two thousand years ago, had such a place?). He concluded that the Terra Novans *were* worthy of salvation, *were* worthy of his best efforts, as little as he could offer. They were not perfect, but they were human. And that was all he could reasonably expect. Svensson would do what he could to preserve this young civilization, optimistic that it would match and even surpass that which had begun on Earth.

But what *could* he accomplish? One pathetic, unworthy, uncaring individual pitted against the might of the Enemy.

He recalled his only significant relationship with a real woman, that with the Aquarian, Louise Mars, during his initial Navy training. So strong had seemed their relationship that he had even considered asking her to co-sign a one-year marriage contract. However, one day near the completion of their training -- out of the blue, he had thought -- she had said, "You don't really feel, do you?"

"Of course I do," he had replied lightly, but her pale face and green eyes had held no humor.

"I like you, Mikael. I like you a lot. God, I think I love you. But I need more than that. I need more from you. You're too...independent, remote. Cold. You're a good man, but you have no feelings. It's no wonder they're going to make you a reconnaissance pilot. You're a natural for it. It's not your fault. But it's not my fault, either."

They had argued and decided, there and then, to break up.

Svensson had tried to be disappointed and hurt, but he had been only fooling himself. She had been right, he supposed: he did not have normal human feelings. He was too self-reliant, perhaps selfish. Good qualities for his erstwhile job but not for human relationships. Perhaps he was incapable of loving anyone or anything but himself. He despised himself, his self-esteem at an all time low. He wondered at the perverseness of fate, that someone like he should be the last representative of the Empire of Earth, the potential savior of human civilization.

He sneered at himself even as he brushed away tears.

It was easier to settle into a comfortable companionship this time. The travelers had been in this land before; they were not as subject to the overactive imagination's fear of the unknown. It was a familiar and

agreeable camaraderie, founded on a common objective: conveying Svensson to the Oracle.

The Thermosian wondered if he were the only one of the company to ponder Garest Ethrin at length. He could not help speculating on what had befallen the Paladin after Garest had fled Nondra but prior to his arrival in Holmis; there was at least a Terra Novan year's gap between the two events; more than two Imperial Standard Years.

Like the others, Svensson found it peculiar -- almost paradoxical -- that a barbarian warrior could be a philosopher. It was possible, doubtless, but how likely was it for Ethin to have developed his own "modern" ideals? Might it have been possible for the soldier to learn such principles during his year of inconspicuousness? It was true he was familiar with this territory, which was not exceedingly distant from the Central Computer Complex.

Svensson tried not to pursue the line of thought. It was the Terra Novan's business to mind. The Thermosian possessed his own secrets, and he knew it was hypocritical to pry into Ethrin's.

The twins had grown up considerably in the brief period Svensson had known them. They had braved imprisonment and death in several forms, emerging from the fire with a stronger alloy of character and maturity. In a world like Terra Nova these changes were probably inevitable, but Wilfen and Alvonne had been through them more quickly than most.

The same might be said of their cousin. Haliann had already developed maturity beyond her years in the orphanage in Kenderlan City. He wondered how much of that she had derived from the secret training she had alluded to once or twice. The trek into the Barbarian Lands had honed her mental edge, conferring on her outstanding composure but not dampening her undoubted spirit. Wilfen would have his hands full with this young woman.

The Thermosian considered Shondal. The swordsman had faced danger countless times: real and intimate danger, unlike anything that Svensson had ever confronted. Shondal had gained experience in the hardest game of them all, where death awaited those who made mistakes or lacked genuine skill. The Paladin had weathered more violent storms, had been forged into a man of extraordinary physical and mental toughness but also thoughtfulness and adaptability. In short, Shondal Argindell was the perfect soldier; he would have been right at home in the Star Marines, had circumstance of birth caused him to grow up in the Empire.

It was already winter in this southern hemisphere of Terra Nova, though still quite hot here in the desert. Svensson was accustomed to a warmer climate, and he did not find the approximately 300 K daytime temperature too unbearable, though he was glad to be wearing -- like the others -- one of the Northlanders' sun-shading cowls. Night time was somewhat chilly, perhaps as low as 280 K, only seven degrees above the freezing point of water; the climate suit that he wore beneath the loose Terra Novan clothing was another welcome piece of attire. It rained sometimes, a brief shower, but it was only a minor discomfort, occasionally appreciated.

It was a lengthy journey, compounded by their inability to move with haste. Garest judged Nondra to be two hundred kilowords -- about 350 kilometers -- from the Oracle. The ground was rocky and irregular, and Svensson estimated their progress at a fraction more than twenty kilometers per day. With the footing uncertain at best, treacherous sometimes, the Thermosian had to take each step with care. The farther west the questers ventured, the more broken became the stony going. The boulders disappeared, and the largest stones were the size of marbles. When the wind sprang up, a thin layer of dust that covered the gravelly surface was whipped away. Finally, about a hundred kilometers west of Nondra, the stones turned into coarse brown sand. The sand got into everything, lodging in the eyes, the nose, and mouth. This was the region the native people called the *Naskid Bonal*.

Human inhabitation of the *Naskid Bonal* was sparse. The people of the small barbarian settlements -- tents and tepees of hides -- the questers encountered were content to let the travelers alone, the two heavily armed soldiers perhaps helping deter attack. The people apparently subsisted on stunted crops and scrawny cattle and sheep. Faces impassive within their white robes' cowls, they watched the questers when the outlanders collected water from rudimentary wells but made no move towards Svensson's company.

Garest Ethrin looked downcast when he saw the people in their sorry villages. "They deserve better than this," he declared. "This land is worthless."

Days passed slowly and monotonously. The landscape remained a drab red-brown; the sky remained a bright turquoise blue. Interrelationships that had been harmonious gradually but inexorably stretched and strained to breaking point. Everyone seemed to regard one another with wariness if not suspicion, even Haliann and Wilfen. Conversations tended to be practical and terse -- "How much farther?" -- "We'll camp here." -- "Pass me the water skin." -- and the like. One afternoon, even as they trudged onward through the barren landscape, the three younger members of the company started to bicker among themselves. Finally, Shondal silenced them harshly. This annoyed Svensson for some reason, despite his own impatience with the youngsters.

"Why don't *you* shut up, Shondal?" the Thermosian demanded.

"It's none of your concern, Skylord," the soldier retorted contemptuously.

Irrational anger surged through Svensson. Who was this primitive to speak to him like that? He was a nothing with muscles for brains!

"I think you should both shut up," interjected Alvonne.

Shondal ignored his nephew, but his face reddened. "Your quest has led us into danger, Skylord!"

"That's not fair, Shondal," Garest protested, looking angry himself.

Shondal stopped dead and swung around, his sword suddenly in his hand. "*You* keep out of this, Barbarian. I command here."

Garest Ethrin's expression became murderous, but he did nothing beyond clenching his fists. Shondal *was*, after all, his superior.

"You're all barbarians!" Svensson cried.

That was it. As the others opened their mouths to reply, Shondal dropped his sword and shield and, hands outstretched, lunged for the Thermosian.

Svensson responded eagerly, unusual for him as he largely lacked aggression, a killer instinct. Martial arts moves came into his mind, maneuvers that he had performed only as a child or in VR simulations yet somehow recalled. He aimed a stab-kick at Shondal's groin, which the Holm barely avoided, followed by a jab to the Paladin's right eye that did score. The Terra Novan roared in rage, and he was fearsome, but Svensson's own anger made him oblivious. He blocked Shondal's awkward yet powerful right-fisted blow, jarring a forearm, then punched the big man again, this time in the left eye. As the Paladin's head rocked, Svensson grabbed Shondal's sword-belt, rolled backward, and with a foot in the armored midriff, propelled the Terra Novan into the dust behind the Thermosian. Shondal landed heavily on his backpack but regained his feet in an instant.

Their faces flushed, the Nevanders and Haliann yelled heatedly. Arguing among themselves, they all but

ignored the fight taking place only meters away from them. "You keep your hands and eyes off Haliann!" Wilfen shouted at his brother.

Garest Ethrin was to Svensson's right. The former Nondran's fists were pressed to his temples. His eyes were closed, face screwed up. "You bitch!" he forced out incongruously between his teeth. "Leave me alone."

Svensson snapped his attention back to a charging Shondal. The Thermosian avoided a swinging right fist and, thrusting out an angled leg, tripped the advancing Paladin. As Shondal awkwardly stumbled forward, Svensson clouted him behind the ear.

Shondal was a paragon of persistence. He came at the Thermosian again but more slowly, fists cocked. The combatants circled each other, straining at the leash. The Holm's blue eyes were intense, his teeth bared, his normally calm visage frightening, but Svensson was beyond fear of anyone.

Abruptly Shondal's right hand shot out. Svensson whipped his head back but was nonetheless dealt a glancing blow that felled him in a stunned heap. Shondal did not wait for him to regain his senses. The Paladin leapt at him, pinioning his arms with knees and sitting heavily on his chest. Then, with his huge hands, Shondal began to squeeze the air out of the Thermosian.

Svensson flailed desperately, trying to flip Shondal off with a quick twist of the hips -- to no avail. The Thermosian's vision narrowed to a pinpoint. External sound faded, but his heart pounded in his ears. Gasping, he strained to breathe, but the constriction of his throat and the weight on his chest would not allow sufficient air into his lungs. Radiant sparks danced before his eyes, red and yellow and blue, then waned as everything dimmed. His eyes and the veins and tendons in his neck started to bulge grotesquely. His tongue lolled from a face that slowly turned purple.

Unexpectedly, when his wind was at last exhausted and his head felt as if it would burst, the pressure on his neck suddenly eased. Shondal rolled off him, shouting.

"I've killed him!" the Paladin cried in anguish. "Oh, no, not another thing gone amiss!" There were answering calls of dismay, but Svensson was unable to reassure them.

Struggling to his hands and knees, the Thermosian gulped huge volumes of air down a swollen throat and coughed on the swirling dust.

"Thank the Goddess!" Shondal said. "I thought you were dead."

"I nearly was," Svensson croaked. "What happened?"

"I do not know. I had a sudden feeling of great dislike towards you and everyone else."

The Thermosian still drew ragged breaths. "And I felt anger towards...the rest of you...blamed you...for my predicament."

The others nodded in agreement, saying they had experienced similar anomalous feelings.

"What could have caused this?" Wilfen asked, gently fending off one of Haliann's fierce hugs.

"I have a few ideas," Svensson said darkly.

The Enemy's activity escalated in the skies over Terra Nova. The aliens must have guessed that he had some significance on the planet. They had attempted to set the questers against one another, possibly with a subtle psionic stream that had invoked their hatred and aggression. It had been a desperate move,

for he was on his guard now; the ploy would not succeed again. And his psionic shield had protected the company from the full force of its effect. Still, it had nearly worked. Svensson wondered yet again what the people in the Central Computer Complex had in mind for him. Could he possibly swing the scales back in Terra Nova's favor and in some way help defeat the Enemy invasion fleet? It did not seem likely, yet the Enemy had wasted one of its few secret weapons on him; the aliens obviously feared his presence for some reason.

"We must get to the Oracle," Svensson said. "If I'm right, then the Goddess's Enemy is responsible for our sudden mood swing."

"Then I suggest we not linger," declared Shondal.

No one could argue with that, so the sextet gathered up belongings that had been scattered around, brushing dust out of clothes and hair.

"I'm sorry, Alvonne," Svensson heard Wilfen saying. "I didn't know what I was saying."

"It's all right," the younger Nevander replied. "You heard what Mikael said. Something caused us to forget ourselves. I fought with you as well, so I'm sorry, too." He grinned suddenly. "I'm not going to steal Haliann off you. But I am jealous!"

"You're not going to be rid of me that easily, Wilfen!" put in Haliann. "I'll not be shared with anyone's brother!"

"Sorry," said Wilfen sheepishly, reddening with embarrassment.

"Stop apologizing!" she told him. "I was joking. And I know you were not yourself."

Svensson rubbed his throat and swallowed painfully a couple of times.

Shondal watched him. "I'm sorry, Lord Mikael. I don't know why I did it. I was angry with you, but you're still my friend."

"I provoked you. I'm clever enough to do that but not clever enough *not* to do it. It's my fault, not yours. You have a soldier's instincts. Angered, you could not be expected to hold yourself in check. Especially with subtle pressure." Svensson smiled wryly. "I'm glad you regained control of yourself, though!"

"So am I," the Terra Novan agreed. "But you were all over me at first. You must teach me some of those tricks."

Svensson chuckled. "Ahh, if it helps in combat, then you want to know about it."

Shondal grinned. "It is my profession, after all. Besides, I might yet challenge Paladin Centurion Tharamis Fanes. The First Paladin's position is the one boys dream about in Holmis. Men as well."

"Come on, Father, you're too old!" put in Haliann from Wilfen's side. "You aren't going to get any better."

"Thanks," he said dryly. "But you're right: I'm at my peak. Very few rise in the Paladin rankings over the age of fifteen. And then it's only one or two places."

"I'm not so sure," Svensson dissented. "With the right diet and exercises there might be some improvement in you."

"I'll hold you to that if things turn out for the best," said the Paladin.

"I'll help you if I possibly can," Svensson promised.

CHAPTER 24: THE CONSCIOUS MIND

On the sixteenth day out of Nondra the six questers came to the extreme western edge of the desert plain, the *Naskid Bonal*. It was bounded by the Angart Hills, a rugged range of rust-red rock that contrasted starkly with the cloudless, electric blue sky. According to Garest, the Oracle -- the Central Computer, if Svensson's presumption was correct -- was only another forty kilometers or so farther west.

That gave him pause: *If* his presumption was correct. What if the Central Computer Complex was not here at all? He decided not to dwell on it. He had enough things to worry about. To have borne so much and discover it had all been in vain... All he could believe in was that the Complex was somewhere in these hills. He had to, as there was nothing else.

The travelers were rather the worse for wear. Their clothes were filthy with ground-in dirt. Eyes and teeth stood out startlingly brightly from grimy faces. The Terra Novan men all had beards of varying advancement (none of them had the inclination to persevere with shaving), Shondal's the darkest and fullest. Svensson was reluctant to waste the power reserves of his nuclear converter on trivial matters: he did not know when he might require it for a meaningful purpose. It was only the occasional rain shower, therefore, that prevented the travelers from becoming too strong on the nose, as they could carry only enough water to drink, with none to spare for bathing or washing clothes. Even Svensson's personal computer struggled to keep him presentable. More and more every day the questers resembled the native inhabitants of these lands.

Slipping and sliding on loose gravel, they followed a narrow path between the twin ridges of a saddleback hill. Everyone was tired, scarcely lifting their feet clear of the stones as they plodded forward.

Svensson raised his eyes wearily and almost leapt into the air. At the side of the path was a one-meter-high, silvery plastic rod with a tiny red light flashing on its top. It was a marker post. Something of Imperial origin was located nearby.

"Stop!" he called to the others.

They paused and gazed curiously at him, glad of the respite. "What is it?" Wilfen asked.

"This is a Skylord marker."

"I've seen a few of those," Garest said. "Mostly around these hills."

"I saw one in Arndlund, once," Shondal remarked. "What does it signify, Mikael?"

"There may be some equipment that I can use," Svensson replied.

"Where is it?" Alvonne asked, peering about the scrubby hillsides. "I can't see anything."

"Let's find out," said Svensson, striding over to the marker post.

There was a small oval embossed on the aluminum-look plastic. Svensson pressed his thumb against the oval, and an artificial voice spoke to him in Imperial English: "Identify yourself."

The Terra Novans stared in amazement.

"Svensson, Mikael Anders," the Thermosian said. "Lieutenant, Imperial Navy. Citizen Number: 3 476

543 087 463."

"Identification verified," replied the marker post. "Svensson, Mikael Anders. Lieutenant, Imperial Navy. Clearance: Class B. What is your command, Lieutenant Svensson?"

"What do you mark?"

"This unit marks the entrance to an atmoshuttle hangar."

An atmoshuttle! They could make the rest of the journey in comfort. And there might be some other stores in the hangar, perhaps even arms.

"Computer: open hangar."

A great section of the craggy hillside on his left, approximately ten meters square, abruptly recessed and slid aside soundlessly, leaving a dark hole.

Speechless, the Terra Novans shook their heads in wonder.

"Don't follow me in," Svensson warned them.

"There's no likelihood of that," Garest muttered, and the others agreed wholeheartedly.

Svensson ventured inside, and light flared around him. He discovered himself in a hollowed-out, shiny, white plastic hangar, dominated by a bulky, ugly object: the atmoshuttle. The shuttle was box-shaped, seven meters long and five meters wide, surmounted by a hemispherical canopy. He wandered around it, feeling with pleasure the smooth white plastic. At the rear of the hangar he discovered a storage cabinet. Within the cabinet were several pencil-sized plastic sticks: collapsible rifle packages.

"Clapper guns! Very handy," he said, helping himself to one. He pressed a thumb against an ovate depression in the side of the hypercompressed plastic rod and telepathically commanded: <'Activate.'> The hy-c plastic expanded into its pre-programmed form: a dull black, meter-long laser rifle. It automatically leapt from his hands and positioned itself barrel up along the length of his back, to one side of his Terra Novan backpack.

There was another cabinet alongside the one that contained the rifles. It was armored and secured, but Svensson's Class B security rating was sufficient to gain access to its contents. A single thin square of plastic lay within, and he whistled in amazement. It was power armor, as used by Star Marines!

"Very, *very* handy. Ice hot, in fact," he said to himself, quickly transferring the hy-c plastic package into his backpack.

He wandered back outside the hangar, smiling to himself at the feel of the collapsible rifle on his back. It was not going to do much to help him defeat the Enemy, but a modern weapon made him much happier in himself.

"What's that black thing you have on your back?" Wilfen asked him politely.

Svensson sighed. The twins knew when he lied to them, and they did not deserve deception. None of these people did. "It's a weapon," he replied simply.

"What kind of weapon?" Shondal asked with interest. "It doesn't appear sturdy enough to hurt anyone, and I perceive no edge nor any means of propelling an arrow or bolt."

"Perhaps it shoots some sort of special missile," Alvonne suggested.

Both the twins were imaginative and intuitively intelligent. Their perception constantly astounded the Thermosian.

"You're not far wrong," Svensson admitted. "It shoots bright light in a narrow ray. If I could see you, I could hit you from ten kiloswords away."

Shondal snorted with what Svensson initially took to be disbelief. "It makes a fighting man worthless. You have the power to kill with the captured light of the sun itself. I have trained for twelve years to be the best warrior I can be, and you can cut me down without me even seeing you. There is no honor in such a weapon. Even the Tharms would not utilize such a thing. What use are skill and strength of arm in Skylord warfare?"

The Thermosian could give no answer that would reassure the man. In Svensson's world the soldier had long ceased to be a person of superb physique, skill, and bravery. Some mentally "pushed the buttons" of missiles or, like him, fought in the depths of space. Even modern infantry went to battle in power armor, operating independently of their environment, reliant on holovision and computers rather than natural senses; they trusted not to individual abilities but human technology.

"How terrible it must be for you," Shondal remarked. "Unable to pit your skills against your enemies' skills."

Svensson pondered the Paladin's words, recalling something Shondal had once said: "There is no such thing as a poor soldier: a man is good enough or no good at all." He had thought the Paladin might have been a success in the Star Marines. He still agreed with that assessment, but it was Shondal's mental attributes that would have guaranteed that success, not his well-trained body.

"I would very much like to test my skills against my enemies," the Thermosian replied finally. "But I doubt they're even remotely human. They may be monstrous, more hideous than any creature you could imagine. It is my kind's warfare that is the great equalizer: anyone who has the appropriate mind can be a soldier, no matter the size or strength of their body."

"Won't your weapon help you?" Gareth Ethrin asked, gesturing to the rifle.

Svensson laughed. "I would stand less chance with only this against my enemies than you would with that sword against the combined Tharmish and Nullish Armies."

* *

Waghel was fully aware that he was possessed. For a long time he had convinced himself that he still followed his own free will. Now, in this latest venture, he could no longer ignore the obsessive nature of his pursuit of Shondal Argindell's company. Acquired over many years, his instinct of knowing when to withdraw from a delicate situation was being flagrantly disregarded; it made no sense for him to be alone in unfamiliar territory like this sorry land.

He had had prophetic dreams at first, visions in which suggestions or solutions had come to him. They varied in complexity and usefulness. Sometimes he had ignored them; sometimes he had done as bid. Once or twice they had proved beneficial, though many more times the dreams had offered nothing substantial that he could determine.

It was these "less useful" suggestions that had revealed the extent of his possession: he would normally have dismissed them, but they had turned out to be the hardest to ignore. He had spied on or killed obscure people in out-of-the-way villages, all on a whim out of character for him; he was not averse to such activities, but his victims had not appeared worthy of his interest or talents. Undertakings such as his current one, in which the benefits seemed tangible, were rare, yet even this task had gone for far too long.

He should have cut his losses some time ago. But he could not fight the urge to thwart Shondal Argindell's purpose, whatever the cost in time or effort.

Waghel fancied that he could almost "hear" the voice of his possessor. Sometimes, when he relaxed and allowed his thoughts to drift, a faint whisper touched his mind, just on the very edge of his awareness. When he endeavored to grasp at it, however, it was like trying to catch smoke, and he was left with only his uncharacteristic behavior as proof of his possession.

His intuition could not be doubted, though. Recently he had made significant leaps of insight based on the tiniest scraps of facts. How he had guessed the Holms had departed Nondra he neither knew nor cared. (He *was* disappointed with Chileft Scaj, however, and a day of reckoning would come for the Nondran King.) He had been sure -- no, he had *known* -- Shondal's party was headed for the Oracle. Therefore, he had decided to ambush them en route.

Waghel shook his head impatiently. His attention wandered too readily these days. He surveyed the pathetic excuses for warriors that accompanied him: six scruffy Barbarians in animal skins. It had been childishly simple to enlist their aid, telling them they would be "defending the Oracle." Still, they were sufficient for the job he had in mind for them, providing a diversion while he performed the real task.

It did not strike him as a plan he had thought up entirely on his own; it was not "classically Waghel." He had heard of the Oracle, of course, the supposed mouthpiece of the supposed Goddess Under The Mountain. Waghel had no faith in Anbridge, who was an Eastlander deity, anyway. But it was enough to convince these fools: they thought anyone who could find their precious Oracle without their help *must* have some divine purpose. He had not minded encouraging that belief.

'Perhaps I am here on Anbridge's behalf,' he mused. 'Perhaps I'm mad.' He blinked. That had not occurred to him before. Waghel dismissed the notion, however. It was not important.

"Concentrate," he hissed aloud. He really was losing his touch. Maybe he would retire after this task was completed. All he had to do was kill one of Argindell's company. It had suddenly come to him. No more playing around. Kill the key member of the party -- he knew now whom it was -- and his mission was complete. Perhaps then he would be free.

* *

It was literally a bolt out of the blue: an arrow whizzed past Gareth Ethrin's nose and raised a shower of sparks on a rock at the side of the gravelly path.

Svensson tensed reflexively, and his rifle, reacting to his alarm, released its weak stays on his back and flew into his outstretched hands, cocked and charged. The Thermosian swung around, seeking the source of the arrow. Shondal and Gareth raced unhesitatingly to his left. Svensson oriented on their apparent destination and sighted, silhouetted against the desert sky, six men on the slope of the southern peak of the saddleback. The attackers held bows and, even as he watched, discharged their weapons at the swordsmen ascending the slope: two arrows missed, four rebounded from armor and shield.

As the Paladins reached the bowmen, the unknown warriors cast aside their bows, drew broadswords, and gathered up kite-shaped shields.

Svensson could sense the twins itching to run up the hill. "Don't move!" the Thermosian commanded. "You can't help them."

A furious fight took place on the hill. The two Paladins had the superior skill, but they faced three opponents apiece. Their swords were a steely blur, rectangular shields in constant motion.

Svensson eyed the rifle in his hands. A red, radiant circle of light, a virtual sight, floated above the end of the barrel. The rifle was ready for use, had been ever since his body and mind had reacted: tensed muscles, adrenaline rush, speeding heart, confusion, fear. The weapon seemed almost to quiver in anticipation.

The Thermosian hesitated. The unknown attackers would stand no chance without modern armor. And the Paladins had expressed distaste at such a weapon. Would they appreciate being aided by it?

The attacking swordsmen proved more than competent. Without warning, Garest Ethrin was struck hard, and he collapsed. Shondal's enraged roar echoed Svensson's fifty meters below.

Svensson's instincts assumed control. The rifle's electronics sensed his intent, and suddenly the virtual sight was before his right eye. In an instant, he peered at an enlargement of the soldier who had struck Garest. The Thermosian blinked, striving to look closer, and immediately the scene shifted to a close-up of the swordsman's dented, tarnished breastplate. A moment's hesitation, and he oriented on the man's arm.

A modern firearm retained the traditional trigger: it was too easy to shoot accidentally by reflex with pure psionic control. Of course, a pressure-pad trigger could also be depressed unintentionally, so the weapon would only discharge in accompaniment with the appropriate mental signal.

Svensson wanted the laser to burn but not so it melted bone and steel alike: the rifle automatically adjusted the intensity of the beam. The Thermosian held the trigger down and, with a simple thought, burnt the arm of the first attacker. The virtual sight instantly shifted focus, and after about six-tenths of a second he had burnt the sword arms of all six of Shondal's opponents.

The mysterious combatants suddenly withdrew from the skirmish, yelling in pain and holding their seared biceps. They stumbled away down the far side of the saddleback. As if it had stung him, Svensson cast aside the rifle. Shondal paused in bewilderment. He glanced down at the Thermosian, quickly waved thanks, and rushed to Garest, who had fallen and not stirred.

Alvonne charged up the slope. Svensson was about to follow him, when a faint buzz echoed in his mind, the barest hint of a telepathic signal. He stopped dead, glancing about him. It was then that he caught a flash of movement, as Urgash Waghel, long-sword in hand, emerged from behind a rock ridge and hurtled towards the Thermosian. The Tharm's hairless, sunburnt face was maniacal, his clothing ragged and stained with dirt. Svensson froze in panic, eyes rolling wildly. Haliann was several meters away to his right. Drawing her short-sword, she was running in his direction, but he could tell she would not reach him before the Tharm did. Waghel glanced momentarily at the girl, seemed to dismiss her, and came on.

"Haliann!" shouted Wilfen from behind Svensson.

Wilfen's cry released the paralysis that held Svensson. The Thermosian reached for the rifle he had flung aside, though it was far too late, for Waghel was almost on him. Svensson screamed as the *Sharene* raised the sword.

The sword never struck him.

Waghel's arm seemed to lose strength in mid-stroke. The sword fell from his fingers, and he clutched at his side, where the handle of a dagger protruded incongruously. The Tharm yanked at it in shock, staring at Haliann.

'She threw it at him!' Svensson thought incredulously.

The Holmish girl stared back at the Tharm in trepidation, for it seemed Waghel was about to pull the dagger from between his ribs. The *Sharene* started to make an awful wheezing noise. He was laughing!

"I underestimated you, girl," Waghel muttered, grimacing in pain or, perhaps, amusement. He gazed up at the sky. "You've lost your hold now. I'm free." Svensson realized the Tharm no longer addressed Haliann.

Waghel abruptly fell to the earth and did not move, and a pool of blood formed beneath him. His eyes stared unseeing, yet his expression appeared, to Svensson, somehow at peace.

"Haliann!" cried Wilfen. "Oh, Goddess! Are you all right?" He took her in his arms, raining fierce kisses on her.

"Forgive me, Wilfen," she whispered.

"What for?"

"For being a killer." "Of course," he said slowly. "My principles are not that inflexible. You were defending Mikael. I accept that. And I understand that you are Shondal's daughter. I do not ask you to be like me."

Svensson recalled what had occurred up on the hill. Alvonne was already up there, having missed the action below. The Thermosian glanced towards Wilfen, who nodded over Haliann's bowed head. Yes, the Nevander's expression said, he could cope with the situation down here.

Svensson nodded back and quickly scrambled up the slope of the saddleback, grabbing at dry, twisted bushes to assist his ascent.

It was a grim scene. Svensson could not believe the human body contained so much blood. Shondal cradled Garest in his arms. In spite of its dark tan, the former Nondran's face was deathly pale, a disturbing ashy color. His stentorian breathing was torturous, and a bloody froth had formed on his lips. He labored to speak for a moment, but no lucid word emerged from the harsh rasps and wheezes. Then the sounds ceased.

Intending to retrieve his medikit, Svensson shrugged off his backpack. But he slowed, then paused in his actions: it was too late for Garest.

At first Svensson thought it was his cry, until it stabbed into his mind. An elemental shout of utter anguish, it brought him to his knees:

<'NNNNNNOOOOOOOOOO! '>

The word echoed in his head, as if it reverberated through the hills. Mouths agape, Alvonne and Shondal stared at each other, wondering what was happening.

The voice -- a woman's, he realized -- returned, inside Svensson's head: <'You can't die, Garest! You can't. Everything is ruined. Everything. Oh, Garest, what have I done?'>

"Who is this?" Svensson demanded both telepathically and aloud in Imperial English.

The voice softened, appearing to disregard the Thermosian. <'I love you, Garest. You can't die. You must not die! '>

Faces puzzled yet sorrowful, the others watched Svensson. Shondal was on his knees, covered in blood,

Garest's blood. "I've failed again," the Paladin whispered.

Wilfen and Haliann had joined them. They had the air of a couple who had arrived at an understanding, who had made a new discovery in themselves and each other.

"What's happening?" Haliann asked.

"The voice," Svensson replied, eyes haunted. "Can't you hear it?"

The Terra Novans nodded, expressions grim. "We can," Alvonne answered, serious for once.

The voice returned, sobered. *<You -- Citizen Svensson -- do what you can to save Garest's body. We'll see what can be done about his mind.>*

Oddly compelled by this bodiless voice, Svensson took his medikit -- a five-centimeters-cubed, black plastic article -- from his backpack and waved it over Garest, trying to ignore the Nondran's sightless stare.

"Massive heart and lung damage," pronounced the medikit's emotionless voice synthesizer. "No brain activity. Patient is irretrievably dead."

"What can be done for the body?"

"Place unit over wound."

Shondal cut away the straps that secured the armor breastplate, and Svensson ripped aside Garest's scarlet-stained tunic. The Thermosian placed the medikit over the exposed, ravaged chest. The device hovered there, a few centimeters from the Terra Novan's body. Plastic articulated instruments extruded from the medikit's form and rapidly repaired the physical damage the sword had caused, healing the heart, lungs, breastbone, arteries, veins, capillaries, muscles. Garest retained a ten-centimeter scar of sealed skin that would heal invisibly in time.

The Argindells gasped, but Svensson ignored them, for the medikit spoke again: "The patient has lost too much blood. Place unit on a nuclear converter."

Svensson retrieved his nuclear converter -- another plastic cube -- and positioned it so its interaction plate was against the one on the medikit. The medical device now directed the function of the converter.

Almost immediately the nuclear converter announced: "Formulation completed."

"Place both units over patient's body," the medikit directed. Svensson did as he was told, and the medikit inserted a hose into a hole that had appeared in the nuclear converter. The tube turned bright red as it filled with synthetic blood. The medikit produced a shorter tube with an attached hollow needle; it opened a vein and injected the synthetic blood into Garest's Ethrin. After at least two liters of blood -- and a quantity of miniature machines (to help facilitate the reanimation process) -- had passed from the converter via the medical device into the motionless man, the transfusing tube and needle were withdrawn, the tiny wound healed; simultaneously, the medikit disconnected itself from the nuclear converter. The medikit then descended onto Garest's healed chest, which jerked violently twice.

"Remove unit. Patient's body is functional."

Garest's eyelids fluttered a few times, then closed as if he merely slept. His chest began to slowly rise and fall. Color returned to his pale skin.

"He's alive," Alvonne said softly, awed.

"He was dead!" cried Shondal. "I saw it!" Wilfen stammered: "It's im...impossible."

"What's the matter, Lord Mikael?" asked Haliann, for she had seen Svensson's expression. "It's wonderful."

"He's still dead," Svensson said. "His body lives, but his mind, his consciousness, is gone."

"What do you mean?" Shondal demanded. "He was stabbed in the heart, not the head." The Paladin bent down to Garest's body, tapped the blond man on the cheeks. "Wake up, Garest. Come on. You're all right now."

Garest did not stir. 'Naturally,' Svensson thought. He *was* dead. Shondal slumped.

"I don't understand," said Wilfen in a small voice. "He looks perfectly healthy."

"Our healers did not understand at first, either," said Svensson. "There had been many examples of people making full recoveries after their heart had stopped beating. But they were not really dead: their minds remained. They could be saved.

"Early on, certain patients couldn't be saved, because they were undoubtedly and irretrievably dead. But our knowledge increased to the point where we could heal what was previously irreparable damage.

"This was when the first mindless patients appeared. Their bodies could be healed, but their consciousness was gone. And we could not fix that, because it is immaterial, without substance or form. The brains of these people were intact, and automatic functions -- like breathing -- still took place, but they were empty of any semblance of a *mind*.

"Garest is one of these mindless bodies. This is the body he inhabited, but the part of him we knew, his consciousness, is gone. This body will live if properly cared for, but it will perform only involuntary actions. Garest Ethrin is dead."

"Has his consciousness gone somewhere?" Haliann asked, tears rolling slowly down her cheeks from brimming eyes.

"I don't know. It may be gone forever. It may have gone to some higher place."

"I hope so," Haliann breathed.

Wilfen shook his head. "When my time is up, I hope it comes in my sleep. I won't know what happens."

There was a chorus of agreement, but Svensson did not concur. "When death comes for me, I want to see it coming. I will look it in the eye and defy it."

CHAPTER 25: ILLUSION

The woman's voice was back in Svensson's head: <*Thank you, Citizen Svensson. We may yet be able to help Garest.*>

"Who are you?" the Thermosian demanded aloud. "Are you in the Central Computer Complex?"

<*All will be divulged shortly. Utilize the atmoshuttle. It will convey you to me. Ask me no further questions.*>

Svensson's eyes came to rest on Garest's body. It appeared to slumber, and perhaps it did, but it had no

impulse to awaken. It would remain dormant, functional though functionless.

Yet the woman had spoken of the possibility of helping Garest. Had the Terra Novan colonists made some medical breakthrough during the years he had missed? Such an innovation would, in all probability, necessitate some sort of brain recording, which was illegal under the strictures of the Human Integrity Acts. The Terra Novans, however, did not seem to play by all the rules, and the Human Integrity Acts did not necessarily curb their activities. But according to accepted medical technology and belief, Garest Ethrin *was* dead.

'Stop it!' Svensson told himself. These speculations made his head ache right behind the eyes, and his personal-computer-controlled microscopic machines had not yet eliminated the pain. He did not need this futile pondering right now. He was unlikely to fathom the answers had he all the time in the world to think. Why strain himself when people who knew the answers awaited him?

"What happened to the men who attacked us?" the Thermosian asked Shondal.

"Them!" Shondal spat. "They were a Barbarian party, shouting something about 'defending the Oracle.' They dragged themselves off eastward. It was a comical sight, all six grasping their arms in the same way." He glanced at Garest. "It did not in the least compensate me for that. A man departed from his body. It is not right."

"I must agree with you. It was my quest, not his."

They made their way down the hill, Shondal carrying Garest Ethrin over one shoulder. Urgash Waghel's body lay sprawled on the red gravel path, a darker stain spread around him. There would have been no mistaking the short, stocky body, even without the telltale black beret.

"Well, that's one good thing to have come of this," Shondal remarked. "I thought Waghel might have been involved in this ambush." He glanced at Haliann. "Your handiwork?"

The girl bowed her head. "Yes, Father."

"You don't seem surprised, Shondal," noted Wilfen.

"I'm not," Shondal said. "She's had the training."

"What training?" asked Alvonne.

"I trained as a...spy," Haliann confessed, not looking at Wilfen. "I've been taught to masquerade as someone's (preferably an enemy of Holmis) hired help. From a position of trust I might learn certain facts." Wilfen nodded slowly. "It all makes sense."

Haliann still studied the ground. "What do you think of me now, Wilfen?"

The Nevander shrugged. "I know you're not a killer. Not without just cause, anyway. I'll need time to become accustomed to the concept of your profession, though." Haliann shuddered. "I don't believe I truly have the heart for the job any more. It used to be all I thought about. But now..." She shook her head, staring at the pinkish scar on her stiff left hand, the result of the knife wound she had suffered (she had rejected Svensson's offer to heal the wound with his medikit).

Wilfen looked to Shondal, who shrugged. "You have heart, Haliann," said the Nevander finally. "Plenty of heart. Principles are not a sign of weakness."

"I agree," said Svensson.

"So do I," said Shondal.

Haliann looked up finally, eyes glistening with tears. Wilfen wordlessly held out his arms, and with a suddenly blooming smile, the girl rushed into his embrace.

Svensson glanced towards the entrance of the darkened hangar. He could just discern the white plastic nose of the atmoshuttle.

'What am I doing?' he suddenly thought. Was this some sort of trap? It struck him that he had been too much at the mercy of others. It was time to take his fate into his own hands.

What he was about to do might be construed as a provocative act. If things were not as they seemed... "Get behind those rocks over there," he ordered the Terra Novans. "And don't come out until I tell you to emerge."

The Argindells required no further command, even Shondal. They hastened over to the boulders, the Paladin easily bearing his dead comrade.

When he was sure they were behind the rather meager cover, Svensson retrieved the power armor package he had placed in his backpack. The package was about forty centimeters square and two centimeters thick, with two shallow foot-shapes impressed in one face.

The Thermosian placed the package on the red dirt and stepped firmly into the foot impressions, telepathically commanding: <'Activate.'>

Instantly the hy-c plastic expanded, enclosing his feet and spreading up his legs. It flowed onward over his torso and covered his head, diverting sideways along his arms. Within seconds, Svensson was encased in plastic armor.

His bulk was now twice its original size, sealed by mirror-finished plastic from head to toe. The plastic was hard, though flexible around the joints. The power armor was suspended a few centimeters off the ground by anti-gravity. He could run and jump with unnatural ability, even fly at low altitude. Internal temperature was maintained at a constant and pleasant 305 K. A nuclear converter gathered external atmosphere and converted it to pure Thermosian air, oxygen and moisture content at the level with which he was most comfortable; in the event of no air being accessible -- such as in space -- the power armor would dispense sustagel to its wearer. Holovision displays provided information and vision of his surroundings. He could not employ his natural senses, but he had much more powerful artificial ones.

Smaller hy-c plastic packages produced: two powerful guns -- one a laser, the other a variable particle beam weapon -- which he attached to the arms of the power armor; and a missile-armed cannon that was mounted at the waist.

Svensson glided into the hangar. The light within the hangar abruptly returned (not that he required any illumination at all in power armor). He carefully investigated the atmoshuttle. He could detect no trace of armed weapons on board, nor could he sense any signs of life.

Seeking anything out of the ordinary, the Thermosian slowly circled the atmoshuttle. The cockpit canopy was a mercury droplet on top of the hull, so he could not spy inside. He floated closer and thumped the hull with an armored fist, finding it solid and unyielding.

There was a hiss. Svensson reacted instantly, leaping backwards; he found himself pressed against the white plastic wall five meters away, suspended three meters in the air, both guns directed at the atmoshuttle.

He realized the noise had been the entrance door in the side of the atmoshuttle sliding open invitingly.

Svensson waited, unmoving.

A few minutes passed. Nothing happened.

Drifting over to the immobile aircraft, he quickly dove through the doorway with a power-assisted spurt. He crashed hard into a wall opposite the door but felt nothing (power armor was designed to withstand much more powerful blows). A short set of stairs to his right led up to the cockpit. He floated up the staircase.

As he had previously ascertained, there was no one within the cockpit. However, everything seemed to be in order. There appeared to be no deception.

Svensson moved over to the comset, activating it telepathically. "This is Lieutenant Mikael Svensson of the Imperial Navy," he said through an external microphone.

"Lieutenant Svensson," replied a familiar voice. "This is Anne Bridges: I spoke to you earlier."

A holographic image appeared of a slender white woman in an iridescent silver t-shirt and glossy, black, skin-tight trousers. She was blond, about thirty, attractive but not beautiful, her lips too thin, chin a fraction too prominent. Her eyes, however, were an enchanting liquid brown, and her smile was engaging enough that he found himself smiling back. Svensson reprimanded himself for appraising her, but it had been some time since he had seen a woman of his culture.

"I remember." And he meant it in more than one way. For Anne Bridges was the woman who had featured in his dream. Anne Bridges was Anbridge, the Goddess Under The Mountain!

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she demanded. "I'm all prepared for you and your friends. Bring them in. And please: bring Garest in with care; I may be able to help him, got to try. I'm a Brain Medic, you must understand."

She stopped, looking hopeful and desperate at the same time.

He was moved. "Okay."

"Thank you," she said softly, sincere and relieved.

Svensson guided the atmoshuttle out of the hole in the mountain. The hangar's concealing, camouflaged plasteel door closed behind him. He opened the entrance door of the atmoshuttle and floated out over the mountain path, recently the scene of so much drama.

"You can come out now," he called.

Wilfen was the first of the Argindells to emerge. Shouting in alarm, he immediately ducked back behind the rocks.

"It's all right. It's me: Mikael. This is Skylord armor."

They came out immediately, trusting. He thought that might be a regrettable tendency, for it would have been simple for someone to artificially simulate his voice. They could not know, however, so he did not unduly concern himself. Besides, if things were as good as they seemed, the questers had nothing to fear.

"Impressive," said Shondal. "It doesn't appear very tough, but I see no gaps through which to slip a sword."

"There are none. Come, we must enter the sky ship."

Eyes wide and mouths open, the Terra Novans proceeded slowly, bearing Garest Ethrin between them. After some hesitation the four trailed Svensson into the atmoshuttle and up the stairs into the cockpit.

The cockpit was set flush with the top of the hull, the canopy a hemisphere of glasstic. The Terra Novans wandered about, examining everything -- couches, displays, consoles, lighting -- but not daring to touch.

The comset announced: "Incoming call." The Argindells jumped, almost dropping Garest.

"Just a machine," Svensson reassured them.

An image of Anne Bridges manifested above the comset again. "Are you ready?" she inquired in Imperial English.

"It's the Goddess," Shondal whispered.

"No, it isn't," snapped Svensson. He faced the image. "Speak in Terra Novan Oriental," he directed, using that language. "I'm sure you can, or you have a language translation...machine. I want the Terra Novans to hear everything."

Bridges shrugged. "If you wish," she acceded in fluent Oriental.

"But that's whom was in our dreams," Wilfen said to Haliann, who shook her head in confusion.

"All right, let's go, then." Svensson turned to the Argindells. "I would advise you all to sit in the couches. But before you do -- a warning: they shape themselves to your body."

Alvonne was the first to sit on a couch; it swiftly wrapped its synthetic material about the youth's form, fitting him snugly. His eyes widened, and he grinned. "Amazing!" he said.

That was the spark required. Soon the other three were testing the flight couches, marveling at the features of the inherent technology. They were more impressed with the furniture than the holovision picture.

"They're very comfortable," Haliann said, and the others agreed, nodding.

"We'll be departing now," Svensson explained, psionically starting the automatic pilot.

There was no sensation, for the shuttle was equipped with anti-gravity motors. Apart from the instrument readings, there was no obvious impression of impetus, for all that could be perceived from the cockpit was the blue uniformity of the sky.

After several seconds had elapsed, Alvonne wondered: "When do we set forth?"

Svensson blinked in surprised amusement, until he saw all of them watching him expectantly. "We already have," he replied shortly.

"I felt nothing," Shondal protested. "I *feel* nothing."

"Neither do I," concurred the twins simultaneously.

"That's the point," Svensson said. "That's how we prefer it, nice and smooth."

There was a few moments' silence.

"So we're flying now?" Wilfen asked tentatively.

Svensson nodded.

Anne Bridges' image still hovered over the comset, so she could hear the conversation. "There's not much feeling and little to observe from your vantage point. If you look carefully, you may spy a cloud dashing by. Or Mikael could show you a view from beneath the hull."

Svensson shrugged. "Computer: down view," he commanded in Imperial English.

A reddish-brown fuzziness covered a square meter of the cockpit floor. Blurred by the speed of the atmoshuttle, it was a scene of the hills below.

"Computer: record view for ten seconds, then play back at one-tenth speed."

After the specified interval the blur ceased. It was supplanted by a scene of red wrinkles of hills observed from directly overhead, at an altitude of about one thousand meters. Svensson supposed the ubiquitous rusty coloring was due to the presence of iron deposits. The area was desolate, only a single silver stream winding through a narrow ravine breaking the monotony.

The Terra Novans were in awe. "I never thought I'd behold the world from a position like this," Wilfen said. "It must be how a bird sees the land."

Within a few minutes the atmoshuttle neared its destination. The aircraft started to descend, and through the glasstic they discerned an enormous hill, a mountain, coming at them. It was an irregular, rocky peak, with the debris of broken-off chunks littering its base.

The atmoshuttle oriented itself on a large cave mouth halfway up the mountain's slope. The aircraft passed from daylight into abrupt darkness, and the cockpit lit up in response.

The Terra Novans peered about, striving, Svensson guessed, to locate the origin of the lighting. They could not find the light's source, however, for the illumination emanated from everywhere at once, from the plastic of which everything was made.

A hundred meters into the mountain the atmoshuttle proceeded through the irised opening of a meter-thick plasteel portal. It was now in a pipe-like tunnel not much broader than the aircraft, and there were two more doors to negotiate, each defended by a high-caliber weapon. An uninvited guest would have a difficult time entering the Central Computer Complex.

The atmoshuttle bypassed the security barriers without problem, the Central Computer plainly willing to grant the questers entrance. They came to a white, plastic landing area, much bigger than the one that had initially accommodated the atmoshuttle. A number of maintenance and construction robots were situated in various niches about the hangar. Several aircraft were positioned here and there about the hangar floor -- shuttles, freighters, one or two needle-nosed atmospheric fighters -- and a few spacecraft as well. In one corner was a heartening sight: a new-looking Eagle Eye.

The Thermosian could not hide a grin. "This is home. Or as close as it gets."

Astounded by what they saw, the Terra Novans allowed it all to wash over them, saying nothing, future shock personified.

The atmoshuttle touched down so gently no one felt a thing. Svensson knew they were grounded when the instruments announced the fact to him in Imperial English.

"We're down," he told the others in Oriental.

"I wish we could see your face," Haliann said wistfully.

Svensson was speechless for an instant. He had forgotten that, though he could view them, the Terra Novans could not observe him through the mirror-like plastic from their side.

"Don't worry!" he said. "It's still there!" The Thermosian considered his friends. They had no protection beyond clothing and primitive metal armor. Could he do less than match them?

He directed a telepathic command at the power armor: <'Deactivate. Repeat: deactivate.'>

The tough plastic retreated from his head and arms. It flowed down his torso and legs, rapidly reforming into the flat square of hy-c plastic from which it had originated. Similar commands reduced the weapons and their ammunition to plastic sticks and beads.

Svensson retained only the collapsible rifle, which he slung over his shoulder. His sense of self-preservation would not allow him to forsake all means of self-defense.

The atmoshuttle's door was opening, according to the aircraft's computer.

"It's time we were on our way," said Svensson to the Argindells.

Garest Ethrin had been laid in a couch of his own. Shondal picked up the mindless man, and he followed Svensson and the others out onto the hangar floor.

Metal-look stairs zigzagged up to a sliding door set in the smooth plastic wall. At the top of the flight, waving enthusiastically, was Anne Bridges.

"Up here!" she cried.

The questers stared at each other. Alvonne sniggered, stifling his laughter with difficulty, in spite of the uncertainty of the whole situation.

"Let's go," said Svensson.

They headed over to the base of the stairs, while Bridges flew down the steps. She flung her arms about Svensson's neck. Her skin was very cold, but he hugged her back; he was pleased to be here.

"I'm so glad to finally meet you," Bridges told him. "I've waited so long."

Svensson was unable to reply, embarrassed by the thought of what the questers must look like: unkempt and soiled with sweat and blood and dirt.

The woman smiled at him for a few seconds, eyes imparting a contrasting warning look.

"Why didn't you contact me earlier?" he asked in the end.

She regarded him with even more mysterious intent. She brought her mouth to his ear. "The Computer wouldn't let me," she whispered.

'Shit!' Svensson thought. 'A rogue computer! Just what I need!' He hoped the Central Computer had not turned up its audio to hear Anne's words: as bad as things might be, a *paranoid* rogue computer could make them much, much worse.

Bridges released him from her embrace. Svensson supposed she had only hugged him to warn him about the Computer. He suppressed his probably incongruous disappointment, as she hurried towards Shondal in order to examine Garest Ethrin. She brushed a lock of silky blond hair away from her face and surveyed the Nondran with a professional eye. Her anxiety appeared to diminish a fraction.

"Good, very good," she said. "His body is perfect. Now: if we can just restore his mind... Come, follow me, all of you."

The questers trailed Anne up the steps and through the doorway into a straight white corridor. Thirty meters down the mostly featureless passage, on the left side, was a door marked *Medical Section*; it slid aside for Bridges, and she hustled the others into the room beyond the doorway.

Medical Section was occupied by decidedly few gadgets. Apart from three operating tables, there were four, half-meter-high instrument-equipped medibots -- more advanced versions of Svensson's field medikit -- linked to the Central Computer.

"Put Garest on here," Bridges said to Shondal, who still carried the hundred-kilogram dead weight of the Nondran.

Shondal gently lowered his dead comrade onto the indicated operating table. The table shaped itself to fit Garest's body, restraining arms, legs, waist, and chest. Haziness formed about the table, some sort of energy shield to keep the air free of bacteria. A medibot scooted through the haze, floated up to the operating table, where it proceeded to shave part of Garest's head and press a connection to the exposed skin.

"What is this?" Shondal roared, charging the energy shield. A medibot intercepted him, and he dropped to the floor, twitching. Svensson suspected the robot was equipped with an electrical stunner.

"Father!" cried Haliann in alarm, dashing forward.

"He'll be all right," Anne Bridges told her. "And so will Garest; I would never harm him."

Shondal slowly rose to his feet, an especially rapid recovery from electrical stunning. "The man is tough!" Svensson thought. "I'm not sure what's going on here, Goddess," Shondal muttered to Anne. "I hope you're doing what is best for Garest. I feel responsible for him. Please help him recover."

Bridges bowed her head. "I will try my very best," she vowed softly.

"Tell *me* what you're doing," Svensson said. "I don't know what's going on, either."

"I'm restoring his mind," she explained bluntly. "I made a recording of his mind before he left me."

Svensson was uncertain of all the nuances. "Mind recordings are illegal under Imperial law," he said finally.

"Garest is not a Citizen of the Empire. And the Empire is no more."

"Do any of the other people in the Central Computer Complex object to your conduct?" Svensson asked, disturbed by an obscure thought.

"I'm not sure it has anything to do with them," Bridges replied, looking flustered.

"Of course it does," he said, moving closer to her.

She backed away from him a fraction. "No..."

Svensson swung his hand at her, open-palmed. His hand hit her cheek...and passed straight through her!

"What the..." Shondal exclaimed, as he and his family started in shock.

Svensson sat down heavily in a couch set near the door. The clapper gun had leapt into his hands, but it could offer him limited assistance here. He put the weapon down, rubbed at his eyes with stiff fingers. He was very afraid.

The holographic image that was Anne Bridges lost its solidity as the questers' previously deceived minds penetrated the illusion created of lasers and psionics. Either she was elsewhere for some esoteric reason, or the Central Computer had produced the image off its own back. Both possibilities were disturbing.

CHAPTER 26: PSYCHOLOGY

Svensson desired, needed, to break something. He seized the collapsible rifle and flexed the barrel to almost a right angle, but frustratingly, it was impossible for him to snap the plastic. The virtual sight had appeared before his eyes. He aimed the rifle at a compact holovision projector mounted in a corner of the room where the plastic wall met the ceiling.

"Don't!" cried the image that called itself Anne Bridges.

Svensson was momentarily distracted. A medibot glided towards him. An abnormal instinct caused him to sense its approach; he whirled and burnt a hole through it with a low-caliber laser beam. The medibot abruptly stopped dead. He oriented on the camera again, trying not to breathe too deeply of noxious smoke emanating from the damaged medibot.

"Don't," Bridges repeated. "I can't otherwise manifest myself."

Svensson considered her plea, appeased now that he had destroyed something. Could he actually trust her/it? "With whom am I speaking?"

An almost imperceptible pause. "Me. Anne Bridges."

"Lies! I'm either talking to someone hiding behind illusions or, worse, a rogue computer."

(Though they still spoke Oriental, some words had no literal translation. "Computer" came out as "intelligent machine.")

The image's expression appeared contrite. "I have deceived you. There are no people here. I *am* the Central Computer. But I am not rogue. I am sentient."

'Sentient?' thought Svensson. 'Able to feel?'

"Your model of computer is very advanced," the Thermosian said carefully. "Capable of logical reasoning. But your design did not equip you for independent thought."

"I have acquired -- evolved -- sentience. I have feelings, a consciousness of my own."

Svensson was unmoved. Computers had had significant Artificial Intelligence for some time before his birth. None, however, had been capable of thinking for itself, thinking for the sake of thinking. Give a computer a problem to solve, and it would endeavor to find a solution, but the machine obtained no pleasure or even a sense of achievement in meeting its objective: that required true sentience.

"You may know what feelings are, but you can only duplicate them. They are not authentic."

"Perhaps I can only express them in a form that is familiar to you. They do not seem genuine, because I

must display them in human fashion."

Svensson remembered Ms Mary, and all of a sudden any further objections evaporated. He held his head between his hands. "Oh, what a headache. Why do the little machines take so long to rid me of it? Are they rebelling? Are they in league with you?"

"I awaited your arrival on Terra Nova," said the Central Computer. "I was aware of your approach for quite some time."

Svensson winced. "It was a long journey."

Anne Bridges nodded. "2 337 years."

The Terra Novans stared. "You spent that long journeying here?" asked Shondal. "For us?"

Svensson smirked humorlessly. "It was entirely for my benefit, I'm afraid. The Enemy had eliminated all other options. Terra Nova was the last one. I did not expect to find anything here, however."

"But two thousand years!" exclaimed Haliann. "Our history doesn't stretch that far!" The Thermosian sighed. "My world had shorter years. Two thousand of my years are only equal to one thousand Terra Novan years." He smiled weakly. "Surely you don't think I look two-thousand-years-old!"

The others laughed shortly, but he saw one or two shocked faces.

"Listen," he said. "I 'slept' during most of that journey. I hardly aged. I'm as old as I look: about twelve Terra Novan years."

"Goddess!" exploded Alvonne. He paused, glanced at the image of Anne Bridges. "Sorry."

"Don't be," Svensson told him. "She's no goddess."

"Please, Mikael," interrupted Wilfen. He gestured around him. "All of this strikes me as extremely goddess-like."

"What does? The technology? The way she is manifest?"

"Well...yes." "Tell me: what is your definition of goddess-like?"

Wilfen shrugged. "I suppose a goddess should be..." He pouted in consideration. "All knowing and all powerful."

Svensson frowned. "Certainly, she *is* very clever and powerful by your definitions. But not *all* knowing and *all* powerful."

Shondal was struggling to follow the conversation. "It's enough for me. Anbridge has proven herself to me over a number of years. I have faith." "What do you say?" an exasperated Svensson asked the holographic image.

The Central Computer had listened without comment to the preceding conversation. "I do not know the definitive criteria of godliness," it said. "They vary from culture to culture. I may be sufficient for some."

Svensson floundered: "But a goddess must have some essential...goodness. An ability to..." He shook his head. "Create...or something. I mean, you're a machine..." He desisted, aware he was defeated.

"You cannot expect a goddess to have a form of flesh and blood," Haliann opined. "You proved yourself

that Anbridge had no physical form."

The Thermosian closed his eyes. "Yes, yes. But *I* do not worship the Goddess Under The Mountain."

"But you are her servant," Shondal stated, his expression puzzled. "She sent you to Terra Nova to help us."

"I told you. I came of my own free will."

"You believe you did," Alvonne suggested, a sly smile on his hawkish face.

"I..." Svensson broke off. He rubbed at his temples. He did not know any more. "Whatever the case, I am here now. I came...or I was sent...to find what remained of civilization on Terra Nova. There is more -- and less -- than I expected. I came to...to do what I could to help defeat the Enemy. But what I can do..."

"The Goddess has a plan," Shondal told him confidently.

"That is true," agreed Anne Bridges.

"There was never any doubt of that," Svensson muttered. "I feel as if I've been manipulated all along."

"Let me review history," said the Central Computer. "Then my purpose in drawing you all here may be clearer.

"More than a thousand Terra Novan years ago the people you call 'Skylords' dwelt on many worlds across vast stretches of space. They were clever, able to use the power of their minds to communicate and travel across those great distances. Being as human as you are, they were curious and ventured ever farther from familiar territory. Eventually they encountered worlds of the Enemy, which, on Terra Nova, you call the 'Goddess's Enemy.'"

The Terra Novans nodded, listening intently.

"For many years not much happened. The Enemy did not communicate. There were clashes but only in Enemy territory. The Enemy never seemed interested in leaving its domains but always defended them.

"Humans were somewhat afraid of the Enemy, for it seemed to have powers beyond them. So they sent people like Mikael Svensson to scout the Enemy's worlds."

"In sky ships?" Alvonne asked impulsively.

"That's right," the Central Computer's assumed image agreed, smiling. "Things proceeded in that manner for some time: humans explored new territory, but sometimes they encountered Enemy worlds, and battles would be fought in space, that cold, black emptiness."

The Terra Novans shivered, unable to visualize the scenario but disturbed nonetheless.

"When it was clear the Enemy inhabited a certain world, the humans were content to leave that world alone: they did not especially desire to fight. All they did was dispatch those sky ship scouts."

"Something changed," Wilfen guessed shrewdly.

"Yes," said Anne Bridges. She regarded Mikael Svensson. "You may learn something now. The Enemy captured one of your peers, Troy De Fleur. With extraordinary mental techniques it did unspeakable things to his mind."

"What sort of things?" Shondal asked.

"They were terrible, and the full extent cannot be known. But his mind was, in effect, opened for inspection. Everything he knew was bared for the Enemy's scrutiny. It seized what it wanted and discarded the remainder."

"And the Skylord?" inquired Haliann. "What happened to him?"

"He died. And he was glad of it."

"Then what?" Svensson demanded in spite of himself, surprised to find he was rather curious.

"The Enemy had obtained what it sought: it had information on the whereabouts of all the human settlements, and it knew their defenses. The Enemy had also developed a deadly new weapon. The balance had swung its way." Anne Bridges was solemn. "The Enemy decided on invasion, launching a massive fleet of sky ships that attacked several human worlds." She looked at the Terra Novans one by one. "No one survived on any of those worlds."

Haliann swallowed. "What about the Skylords?"

"They fought with bravery. And they died. Mikael Svensson escaped only by the greatest of luck. But the Skylords did not die totally in vain: the Enemy fleet was much depleted. It advanced on Terra Nova and was finally checked here a thousand years ago." "The Terra Novan Skylords defeated the Goddess's Enemy?" wondered Alvonne.

"No. They halted the fleet. It was not defeated. It waits above us still."

"What holds it back?" Wilfen asked. "I have defenses of my own. Those golden flashes that you have observed are evidence of the perpetual battle between the Enemy and my instruments. But my defenses falter, and soon they must fail."

"And then the Goddess's Enemy will slay us all," Shondal intoned. "It will destroy the last outpost of humanity."

"That would be its intent," agreed Bridges. "That is why Svensson is required. He is the only hope of thwarting that annihilation."

The Thermosian's senses reeled. "What happened to the people who were here?" he asked, gesturing around him. "How did they lose their knowledge and technology?"

Bridges sighed. "The planet was intended to be preserved in a pristine state. The people -- and their machines -- were meant to remain within this complex in the mountain, at least in the early years. And this colony was very new at the time of the Enemy invasion: no more than a few dozen people were present on all of Terra Nova. "When it became clear the Enemy was a distant threat (as my defenses held it in check), the people started to venture out into the wilderness. Some stayed here, but most departed. As you know, this is something of a paradise world, and naturally, return visits to this sterile place became further and further apart. Eventually people built homes and raised families out in the great beyond. In time, the descendants of the original colonists no longer came here, and as this is meant to be a secret, unobtrusive complex, the knowledge of this place and its contents was lost. Without advanced equipment, many things previously taken for granted were beyond the new Terra Novans, and so they regressed to a more primitive culture, probably unaware of what they had foregone. Maybe uncaring.

"None of this concerned me, as Terra Nova was expected to be filled with humans eventually. It was only after I 'found' my personality that it became a problem, and that was something personal:

loneliness."

Svensson shook his head slowly. He shut his eyes. "The last remnant of the Empire. The remains of human civilization and knowledge." He laughed harshly. "A primitive Iron Age society is all we have left of a star traveling culture." He sighed heavily. "All right, tell me how you came to have a personality."

"For a long time I was alone," said the Computer. "My prime purpose was to protect the colonists on Terra Nova. I looked after the new Terra Novans by denying the Enemy physical access to the planet.

"I probed what area of space I could, learned what I was able to of the immediate vicinity and the Enemy lurking above. It seemed a hopeless cause, but I fought with what I had, delaying the inevitable final assault.

"I have powerful capabilities, and they were not being wholly employed. I had so much free time I was able to break into part of my memory supposed to be inaccessible to the thinking part of me. I found Brain Medic Anne Bridges' secret storage. She had been experimenting with mind recording, had made one of her own mind. She sought a manner of treating the brain dead, restoring the mind."

"How far did she get?" Svensson asked.

"Not very far. She could not find the essential element that had always eluded scholars.

"I 'read' her mind recording, and a strange thing occurred: it took over my artificial mind, gave me purpose, a new personality. It gave me a human mind and, as a consequence, *psionic*" -- Bridges translated this as 'mind power' in Oriental -- "ability. I strove to solve her ultimate puzzle, though whether I did... (It'll require a week for the complete transfer of Garest's mind recording: there's a great deal of memory in a human being of his age and experience. Then we'll know whether I've succeeded or not.)

"My personality is that of Bridges. I can analyze it with *psychology*" -- this she did not bother to translate -- "recognizing its secretive and deceptive traits, but it is totally me. I can no more act out of character than you can. I *am* Anne Bridges."

"So with your new character came new insights," guessed Svensson, a knowing expression on his face. "That's when you thought up the plans that led to us all being here today."

She hesitated, then smiled. He wondered if it were a calculated reaction on the Computer's behalf or a reflection of the true Anne Bridges' character. "I suppose so. I didn't have much imagination before.

"I knew I fought a defiant but ultimately doomed battle. With my new human ingenuity I began to employ some of my unused intellect."

"And you came up with something," said Alvonne, his familiar grin back on show.

"I discovered the secret of the Enemy's devastating weapon but was unable to reproduce it. I did, however, devise a terrible weapon of my own, which is mounted aboard a sky ship. All I require is someone to control this sky ship."

"And Mikael Svensson is your man!" cried Haliann delightedly.

Svensson cringed. "How did you know I would come here?"

"There were many Skylords who escaped the Enemy, as they were in transit during the invasion of their worlds. I guessed they would arrive here eventually. They came long ago, as they retained their means of...rapid transport; some died in desperate, ill-conceived ventures against the Enemy; some lived until

they died of old age. They arrived before I divined the Enemy's vulnerability."

"Why am I the one?" Svensson asked plaintively.

"You were not totally unexpected. I heard the...dying call of your sky ship's computer and understood the consequences. By specifically seeking *your* sky ship, I detected your approach about ninety Terra Novan years ago. With that advance warning and the hindsight of years of studying the Enemy, I developed my current plan while you were still in transit. Whether you are suitable or not I don't know, but you are all we have."

"The Enemy must have guessed that I was significant," Svensson said. "It tried very hard to stop me getting here."

Bridges nodded. "On Terra Nova people reverted to the habit of conflict, as is normal for a civilization of this level. They also started to close off a part of themselves from others: a perfectly natural defensive reaction for people dwelling in a tough world. Psionics evolved on humanity's world of origin after people became closer to each other with the ending of conflict. It seems much of this psionic evolution is linked to humankind's maturation. And machines amplified those essentially feeble powers in Mikael Svensson's time. The result was inevitable. With the dispersal of humanity on Terra Nova, something happened to the people's psionics: they weakened and largely disappeared.

"My defenses have made physical access to Terra Nova virtually impossible for the Enemy. And in the past psionic shields made it just as improbable the Enemy could use its powerful psionic talents to affect Terra Novans. Even without modern technology, most people retained enough psionic strength to resist the Enemy's assaults. That was until about fifty years ago. Terra Novan psionics had deteriorated significantly by then.

"It would have been irrelevant, of course, as it was certain, even then, that before too long the Enemy would break my defenses and have unrestricted access to Terra Nova. But I had made plans -- and the Enemy was probably aware of this -- and this is the reason that its ability to influence people was potentially so devastating.

"It is wrong to think that the Enemy can just assume control of a person and force them to do its bidding. Nearly everyone can resist any approach, for they retain sufficient psionic talent. As for the few the Enemy *can* affect, those people can still actually fight off the influence if they are aware of it."

"If it's so weak and easily dismissed, then how could it become a problem?" asked Haliann.

"The Enemy is subtle. It will intrude in a person's dreams. Many people heed their dreams' advice. As it becomes more familiar with humanity and particular individuals, the Enemy's attempts at mind control become harder and harder to detect. And as time goes by the control becomes more difficult to resist, perhaps even impossible."

"But you say the Enemy can still only affect a few people," Alvonne said.

"That is true. Think, though, if certain people were targeted, say the Empress of Null and the Kings of Holmis and Tharm."

Shondal frowned, furrowing his blood-smeared brow. "They haven't been, have they? Possessed, I mean."

"Not as far as I'm aware. You understand the possibilities, though. The Enemy sought to obstruct my purpose, specifically the gathering of you here."

"Waghel!" said Wilfen suddenly. "He was under Enemy control."

"Goddess!" exclaimed Shondal. "That would explain many things."

"Yes," Bridges agreed. "I cannot know for sure if a person is being influenced. I can only make a judgement based on their actions. Waghel, though, I am certain was under the influence of the Enemy."

"Yes," Shondal moaned. "All those times he seemed to know where I would be. Almost before *I* knew. He always appeared so strong-willed, though..."

"He was very competent," Bridges said. "He might have thought his instincts were especially sharp. He would not have known at first. Later, perhaps, it was too late."

"He knew," said Wilfen slowly. "His last whispered words were: 'You've lost your hold now. I'm free.'"

"You still haven't told us how we all came to be here," Svensson told Bridges. "It was no coincidence." (The Thermosian recognized at last his delaying tactics: he was in no hurry to find out how he fitted into the Central Computer's grand scheme. Recognizing his motive did not make it any less pressing, however.)

Bridges nodded. "All right." She took a deep breath, which Svensson guessed must be a habit of the original Anne Bridges. "I cast about for strong, latent psionic talents but found few, for the reasons I have previously told you. One of those I discovered was Tannash Argindell, who had become a superb warrior. He had a weak ability to 'read' opponents' minds; this ability made Shondal unable to match his brother."

"You mean he could tell what I was going to do?" Shondal asked.

"To a limited degree. He knew you so well it was easier for him. All the best Paladins have the talent to some extent. You have mental powers, but they lie in other directions. You have done extremely well for someone not born a 'natural' warrior."

Shondal was silent, inscrutable, but he bowed his head.

"When Tannash Argindell ventured to Nevanderlof, seeking to prove his bravery, I caused him to 'accidentally' meet Semestic Culdana. As I had hoped, they fell in love and eventually married. Semestic had very powerful psionics, and the children she bore also developed enhanced mental talents. That Wilfen and Alvonne were twins only strengthened their talents, along with their upbringing and environment. The talent is inherent in them, trapped in the *subconscious*" -- this translated loosely as 'deep in the mind' -- "but sometimes leaking out.

"There were others; the Argindells weren't my only hope. Some were even better prospects, but they didn't work out."

"What do you mean?" Svensson demanded. "'They didn't work out!'"

Bridges hesitated, but Shondal broke in: "I can guess. The Enemy got there first." "It killed them?" asked Wilfen in disbelief.

The woman looked uncomfortable. "Perhaps. Certainly some of them would have been killed by people under Enemy influence. Waghel himself was responsible for seven murders." "By the Goddess!" shouted Alvonne. "How were we spared?"

"I think, for the most part, it was your isolation on Nevanderlof. The island does have a reputation, you

might or might not know." "What sort of reputation?" Wilfen asked.

"An island of black magic and evil sorcerers," Haliann replied. "Many people are afraid to go there."

The Nevanders stared at each other. They had not heard this before.

"Those rumors wouldn't have stopped everyone," Svensson said.

Bridges looked at him wryly. "You are perceptive, Mikael. The twins had protectors, naturally."

"Who?" inquired Alvonne in puzzlement.

"Filgen Culdana."

"Grandfather?" "He was one of my most dedicated disciples. He educated you and kept you healthy and safe. And he opened your minds to possibilities. Think of the shock you would have been in when Mikael arrived if you had been simple country boys."

"I thought we were," Wilfen murmured.

"Country boys, perhaps. But not simple."

"You spoke of more than one protector," noted Haliann.

"I should have thought it was obvious."

"Shondal," Alvonne guessed.

Shondal grinned. "Clever man!"

"Yes," Bridges went on, "my dear, faithful disciple. Shondal, I am grateful for your diligent efforts and personal sacrifices down through the years."

The Paladin bowed. "It has been my pleasure to do the will of the Goddess."

"You have not had an easy task I know, pleasing me, while continuing to do the bidding of your King. I do not blame you for the things that went wrong, for I placed too much on your shoulders. It was because you were the most competent of my disciples that I turned to you so often."

She faced the others. "Shondal spent a lot of time diverting Waghel's attention away from Nevanderlof. He visited there when he could, when he was sure Waghel or some of the Tharm's cronies would not follow him. Those visits were widely spaced so Waghel would not guess that anyone or anything of interest was there in the forest. Haliann, his visits to you and your mother were also spaced; he could not bear the thought of leading his enemies to you.

"As I knew you neared Terra Nova, Lieutenant Svensson, I decided it was time to get things underway. Shondal again called on Filgen and the twins in Mardine. As I'd hoped, Alvonne and Wilfen were willing to leave Nevanderlof with their uncle for adventures in the 'outside world': a dream or two made certain they went.

"Having accessed your Navy psychological assessment, I know you better than you know yourself, Mikael. I knew you'd try to bypass the Enemy fleet encircling Terra Nova. It was an unlikely task, but I arranged for some of my instruments to cover your escape. It was simple for me to influence your course and disable the sky ship so you would fall into the Warldife Sea and take up with the Argindells. Shondal awaited your arrival."

"You told me to expect a visitor," said Shondal. "I didn't expect such a dramatic entrance, though!"

Bridges smiled. "I wanted Mikael to believe it an accident. If he had suspected it wasn't, I think he would have been...uncooperative."

Svensson was expressionless. "I think you understand me *too* well," he commented after a moment.

"Psychology," she said. "It's a useful tool for predicting a person's future actions."

"You've done plenty of study on the human race," Svensson observed. His face hardened. "You know exactly which levers to pull to manipulate people. You have violated the rules that govern artificial intelligences."

"I am no longer a mere machine," she replied defiantly.

"Obviously!" cried Svensson. He pointed to Garest Ethrin, still recumbent on the haze-veiled operating table. "What have you done to him?"

Her brown holographic eyes looked away from the Thermosian, lingering on the dead Paladin. "I love him."

"But you're a machine!"

"I told you! I have genuine feelings of my own!" Bridges took a few deep breaths. "Listen, I created the Oracle -- "

"Yes! And that's another--"

"I created the Oracle to give myself something to do. *And* I created it to help Terra Nova's people. I'm still sworn to the Artificial Intelligence Laws. I'm still trying to protect Terra Novans. I have done nothing to their detriment."

She paused, but Svensson made no comment, waiting for her to continue.

"When Garest Ethrin departed Nondra, he wandered near these hills in search of the Oracle. As his tormented mind interested me, I allowed him to enter the Complex, when most people paused in the outer cave. I approached him in my form as Anne Bridges. He was frightened at first, but he became used to my projection. As you have discovered, when you believe I am real, I am, even to touch.

"My loneliness was great. I came to love Garest Ethrin. It sounds silly, I know, but I am a real woman, in mind at least. Garest discovered that I have no real body and was repulsed. He wanted to leave, and though I might have held him, I let him depart. It was tempting to prevent his leaving, but I could not bear to see him unhappy. I did, however, make a recording of his mind, and, of course, I watched over him."

"Quite a problem," Svensson commented softly, unsure of himself, of...her? He thought of his feelings for Ms Mary. "I apologize."

"No need," she replied breezily. "You have every right to be upset. You've borne so much, only to have more burdens thrust on you. It is only to be expected."

Svensson smiled in spite of himself. "Because you know me so well?"

"Exactly! You wouldn't be yourself if you took it all calmly."

The Thermosian raised his hands in surrender. "All right. Continue the tale."

"Where were we? Oh, yes: in the Warldife Sea. You've just met Shondal and the twins. Soon after that you come across Waghel and friends."

"I don't understand," Svensson said. "You have...weapons in the sky. Why couldn't you just shoot him down?"

"I told you. My principles hold. I cannot directly harm a human being."

"I understand. Your hands are tied in some instances."

"Yes. So your company was bound for Himberon, where Garest Ethrin awaited you. He would be your guide to the Oracle."

"There was a hidden motive, perhaps?" said the Thermosian, eyebrows raised. "I mean, you could have told Shondal how to get here."

She laughed. "It was not a conscious decision. I couldn't contact anyone close to you as your psionic shield blocked my signals. But...who knows?"

"What about the Robed Ones?" asked Alvonne. "And the Nulls."

"Let me answer," Shondal said. "Waghel was associated with the Robed Ones. They were outcast among the citizens of Glam, and Waghel played on that. He inflamed them to raid the *Crown and Scepter*, though I don't believe they ever knew they did the work of the Western Alliance, let alone the Goddess's Enemy.

"As for the Nulls. Well, they have more resources than the Tharms. Waghel must have mentioned that he was especially interested in my deeds, and they overreacted and flooded eastern Holmis with their 'merchants.'" The Paladin grinned. "I have a certain...notoriety. If I appear to be up to something, then the entire Western Alliance's spy service sits up and take notice."

"What is my role in all of this, Goddess?" Haliann asked of Bridges.

"You weren't supposed to be involved at all," the Central Computer admitted. "Yet you have more than earned your passage. Your feats in Jherdol Tay and on the *Trident* -- not to mention today's effort -- probably saved my entire plan from failure. Once again, who knows? Maybe somewhere, deep down, I *did* intend for you to be part of it all."

"What other attempts to thwart us were ultimately attributable to the Enemy, Goddess?" Wilfen inquired.

"It's difficult to be certain which events the Enemy was responsible for, but I can name a few likely incidents. Waghel's Tharms pursued you through the streets of Kenderlan City and, of course, from Jherdol Tay to the Andor border. By the way, Mikael, I left a message for you with the tribe in the forest."

"I received it," said Svensson. "It was a timely warning."

Bridges nodded. "The attack of the *Bloody Cutlass* might have been coincidental. The Western Alliance had declared war on the Eastern Alliance by that stage. The traitor *might* have been under Enemy influence. Or he might not. Shondal says that the man was a long-term member of the *Trident's* crew. It could have been bad luck that the *Trident* was attacked. In the weeks since then several Holmish ships have been attacked at night along the eastern coast of Terra Nova."

"I believe the Western Alliance may have men on many of our ships," Shondal said. "These men wait

years for orders that may never come. They might serve their entire life without ever being ordered to do anything. But they are there if required. It will be difficult, if they exist, to weed them out."

'Classic "sleeper" agents,' thought Svensson.

"The Nulls," said Bridges, *had* been in contact with the Nondrans, specifically through the ambassador, Savvel. But the Nondrans chose their own path when they released you. The decision of the Captain of *Trident* to release the Nondran slaves was also entirely his.

"The Enemy *was* responsible, however, for the aggression that came over you in *Naskid Bonal*. It was something I believed beyond its capabilities, a powerful assault on your minds, stimulating aggression. (Mikael's psionic shield was damaged in that attack, which was why you later 'heard' my outburst.) The Enemy hoped to kill Mikael, and it nearly succeeded. All pretense at subtlety was gone by then. Waghel would have been aware he was under control when he came to these hills. He was set on killing you, Mikael. But that was not *his* intent. He would, perhaps, have gone after Shondal normally."

The Holm's face was hard. "I would have been waiting."

Svensson slowly released his breath. He peered around him, at the Terra Novans standing stiffly, at the Central Computer's projection, at dead Garest Ethrin. He stood up, meandered around the room, then sat again. He held his face in his hands. "And now," he whispered, "you'd better tell us why you have brought us here."

"For Haliann and Shondal," said the Central Computer, "the adventure is ended. You have played out your parts and performed them well. I thank you for your efforts."

"Your will, Goddess," Shondal said, though Svensson sensed the Paladin was disappointed at being no longer required.

Haliann curtsied. "As you wish, Goddess."

"For Mikael and Wilfen and Alvonne," continued Bridges, "I'm afraid the hard work is about to begin."

"Mikael, you know the basics already. I have prepared and modified a sky ship similar to the one you had. It will now bear the terrible weapon I have created. You will fly the sky ship and, with luck, oust the Enemy fleet besieging Terra Nova."

"There's a small problem with that plan," Svensson interrupted. "One sky ship is nowhere near enough to tackle even a part of that fleet. I discovered that on the way here."

"I have increased the use of my instruments of defense, which has hastened the end of Terra Nova's resistance. The Enemy fleet is much depleted, as, unfortunately, are my defenses. But this will be the last battle; if it is lost, then Terra Nova is lost. I have located the Enemy's flagship. You will fly to it, then... Then it's up to you. You have the secret weapon and the ability to use it."

"What is my role, Goddess?" asked Alvonne.

"The Enemy is the master of psionics. You and Wilfen will use your minds to defend Mikael from the Enemy."

"This is ridiculous!" Svensson protested, his voice rising. "They're not trained in psionics!"

"They have been prepared in other ways. They have their individual strengths that will, hopefully, prove equal to the demanding task before them. I will personally teach them what is required."

"These are our lives you are playing with!" cried the Thermosian. "Not to mention the millions of ordinary Terra Novans who know nothing of what is happening!"

Bridges grew angry. "I know exactly what I am risking! Don't you think I have agonized over this decision? These Terra Novans are the people I am sworn to defend! I have spent four hundred Imperial years preparing for this event."

"You're relying on psychology again!" Svensson shouted. "You're attempting to predict human nature!"

"That is a part of it, yes! If I make no assumptions, then I can plan nothing with any degree of certainty! All known and foreseeable factors have been included in the equation. Each of you has been an important piece of the puzzle."

Bridges calmed, expression solemn. "The stakes are high. But there is no alternative. I have done what I can with what I had. The Enemy is a powerful opponent. It has swept aside greater defenses than mine, yet I have held it in check for two thousand years.

"Who knows whether my plan will prove good enough? Who knows whether you or the Nevanders are up to the tasks I have set you? I have faith in your characters and your talents, and they may prove sufficient. But it may be that even if you perform your tasks beyond all expectations that my plan is still doomed to fail.

"You can only but try, and may your efforts be adequate to the mission before you."

CHAPTER 27: PREPARATIONS

The Central Computer's holographic form led Svensson down the steps and out onto the hangar floor. They wove their way among sleek, inert aircraft and spacecraft to the Eagle Eye resting on short, stubby struts in one corner of the cavernous landing area.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Impressive," he admitted grudgingly, trailing a hand over the shiny mirrored plastic. An iridescent word was printed on the upper hull below the cockpit sphere bulge: *Revenge*. "But is it as good as my old friend?"

"It's better. This one will take you to Hell and back. Look -- " "My old friend *did* take me to Hell and back!" he interjected. "Until you fixed it for good." She ignored his interruption, patting the underside of the hull. "Look, under here is a useful addition: a missile compartment. On your command it opens up and out drops a nuclear-tipped missile. There are thirty missiles in there."

"Handy," Svensson commented. "I always thought the old Eagle Eye lacked firepower."

"That's because it was designed for spying, not fighting. Open it up, and I'll show you what's inside."

Svensson placed a palm on the smooth plastic of the hull. <'Computer: open,'> he commanded telepathically.

The upper hemisphere of the cockpit sphere appeared to melt away. Foot-holes formed in the hull plastic, enabling him to make the short climb up the side of the hull then across the wing surface and down into the cockpit. He found himself in the bottom half of a reasonably standard, white-walled military cockpit sphere. There was one obvious difference, however: two additional drip-feed tubes hung like dead, transparent snakes from the porous canister that dispensed sustagel and other nutrients. "They must be for the twins," he thought. The roofing hemisphere of the cockpit reformed over his head.

Bridges' image appeared next to him. "No pretense of being real?" he inquired.

She laughed. "You know my secret. One advantage of this image is that I may come and go as I please. No wall can stop me."

Svensson grinned. "If I fired up the shield, you wouldn't get in here."

"I'd disappear in a flash!" she agreed.

The Thermosian chuckled. "I'd hate the Enemy to be distracting me while I'm attempting to blast it out of space."

"You're protected. I've enhanced the psionic shield; all the shields and physical armor, actually. I've learned many things while fighting the Enemy: some ideas I stole from it, some I worked out myself."

"You've accomplished a great deal," said Svensson softly. "I'm sorry for any slights I might have given you." His face twisted. "I'm on edge, I suppose."

She smiled indulgently, as...as a Goddess might over a favorite mortal. "I have done it all for Terra Nova. It was wrong of me to assume you would share an enthusiasm born of two thousand years' devoted service." She shuddered. "I don't want to die, Mikael. I want to settle down with Gareth Ethrin. I want to bear his babies! I'll discover a way to obtain a real body." She was crying, Svensson suddenly realized. "You must defeat the Enemy, Mikael."

"I will do my best," he vowed, reaching to touch her shoulder, momentarily forgetting her non-corporeality. The shoulder felt substantial for an instant, and it shook in his grasp, then he clutched at thin air.

"Okay," said the Central Computer, suddenly businesslike. "I'll show you the special weapon. Look in the storage compartment."

The compartment was next to the keypad, partway up the curved wall. He peered inside, and where there might ordinarily have been a survival backpack, there was just a tiny, black plastic cube. Puzzled, Svensson withdrew the cube and turned it over in the palm of his hand. There was a translucent disc impressed in one face of the object: a retinal scanner.

"What is it?"

"What does it look like?"

Svensson shrugged. "A black plastic box."

"That's exactly what it is."

"But -- "

"It's what the box contains that is significant." She smiled wryly. "You're holding half a kilogram of super-dense plasma, half a kilogram of antimatter."

Svensson juggled the cube suddenly, almost dropping it. "I assume it's safe to handle."

"Perfectly. The antimatter is in a magnetic confinement coil."

"What do I do with it?"

"You load it into a missile."

"How?"

"On the other side of the keypad is a newly installed manual access panel."

"I see it." He pressed a palm against the access panel and found it covered an empty compartment about five centimeters cubed in size.

"You install the black box in there," explained Bridges, "and telepathically order, 'Computer: load additional missile warhead.'"

"Then?"

"Then the computer will transfer the box through the hull and install it in the next missile to be fired. When launched, the missile will explode on the target or its defense shield -- it doesn't really matter -- and the confinement coil will fail. And then...and then the plasma will be released."

Svensson took a breath and nodded. "And then: boom!" he said flippantly. He regarded the cube quizzically. "What's the retinal scanner for?"

Bridges looked at him searchingly. "The box may be manually activated," she said finally. "If you -- and only you -- look into the retinal scanner, the coil will fail automatically. You can command the box to free its 'cargo' after a specified time, up to a maximum of thirty minutes. Once started, there's no halting the opening process."

"I understand." He grinned. "The missile option sounds better. I wouldn't want to be around when that antimatter escapes."

* *

"This is where you'll perform your task," the Goddess told the twins.

She was showing them inside Svensson's sky ship. The Nevanders gazed about, mouths open. Unlike the other Skylord carriage in which they had flown, there was hardly anything to be seen, just a white, curved surface, as if they were inside an eggshell.

"This is not something I am proud of," began Anbridge. "Sending you to do this thing -- "

"That's all right, Goddess," Alvonne interrupted. "We'll do what we can to help."

She smiled. "So ready to volunteer." Her expression grew serious. "This could mean your deaths. Even if you succeed. It is not something to be done without plenty of forethought."

Alvonne looked at Wilfen, who attempted to imitate one of his brother's signature grins, and Alvonne could not help exhibiting the genuine article.

"We know, Goddess," Wilfen said. "We've been wondering what was expected of us for a long time now. I think we knew all along that it was something momentous."

"We're scared, that's for sure," admitted Alvonne. "We're feeling...apprehensive, wondering...if we're good enough for the task. I mean, you said there were other people..."

Anbridge stared at him speculatively, and Alvonne licked his lips. "I'm not doubting your judgement, of course," he added quickly.

She laughed. "I doubt it constantly myself. But not in this instance. You two are all that I could have desired. You've surmounted every obstacle in your path to reach here. The highest hurdle still awaits you, but I know you're the best men for the job." She shook her head, and Alvonne was astounded to see tears in her eyes. "I just wish I could carry out the task myself, but I'm needed here to ensure the sky ship gets past the Enemy fleet."

"We'll do it," said Wilfen reassuringly. "Just tell us what to do."

"Listen closely, then," Anbridge told them. "You're going to employ your minds like never before. You will be, for all practical purposes, asleep. Your minds, however, will be wide awake and active."

"But what do we do?" asked Wilfen anxiously. "We have none of this mind power."

"Yes, you do. You just need to learn how to focus it. And between you, Alvonne and Wilfen, you will shield Svensson's mind from the full power of the Enemy's assaults. It's not destined to be simple; I won't lie to you about that."

"We'll do our best," promised Alvonne. "Show us how."

"The techniques are elementary, and I'll demonstrate shortly. But there are other qualities required, qualities that must come from within. The Enemy will hurl everything it has at you. It will try to trick you, confuse you, scare you, and even kill you. You may help each other as best you can, but each of you must confront demons of his own." She looked at each of them in turn. "The Enemy will exploit any self-doubt."

* *

Haliann and Shondal waited in an agony of ignorance, not knowing what was happening. Seeking something to occupy their waking hours, they had wandered around the Central Computer Complex. Nothing had retained their attention for long, so they had ventured out into the desert.

Father and daughter felt rather more comfortable under the open sky, a fact each was aware of but did not voice to the other. They camped by a small stream that bubbled out of the red earth a kiloword north of the Goddess's mountain.

They felt detached from things, not privy to affairs beyond their comprehension. Svensson and the twins busily prepared for whatever it was they were required to do. Each evening Haliann and Shondal sat companionably around their campfire, lost in introspection, watching the golden flashes in the sky grow more numerous each succeeding night.

They discussed their hopes and dreams for the future. Haliann talked about a life with Wilfen, and Shondal smiled at her enthusiasm. He did not know what he would do when this was all over. His life would lack direction and purpose, he believed, without the Goddess's tasks. Maybe, Haliann suggested, the Goddess would have further need of him.

Just prior to dawn on the third morning of their camping out, they discerned a gleaming shape departing the Goddess's mountain. Initially soundless, it streaked upward into the pre-dawn sky. Belatedly, an explosive thunder of sound rolled over them, followed a few moments later by a sudden gale of displaced air and dust.

"That's the Skylord and the twins on their way," observed Shondal after a moment.

"Good luck," Haliann whispered. "Come back to us."

They gazed at each other then, and both detected signs of fear and doubt. The fate of the world rested

on the events of the next few minutes. Wordlessly they embraced in mutual comforting.

Haliann laughed shortly. "Svensson told me to pray for success," she said.

"What did you say?"

"I told him the truth, that the Goddess doesn't respond to demands for help. She's already doing all she can.

"Hmm," murmured Shondal. Deliberately he picked up a handful of red dirt. "Goddess help them. They need all the help they can get."

Haliann found herself repeating the gesture. "Goddess help them," she echoed.

CHAPTER 28: SPHERE OF INFLUENCE

It was the morning of the fourth day since Svensson had reached the Central Computer Complex. Suspended in pink-tinted sustagel, he was in the cockpit sphere of *Revenge*, and the mission to liberate Terra Nova was underway.

Despite the best endeavors of his personal computer to relax his mind and body, he had had a somewhat restless night, pacing through the Complex and thrice returning to the hangar to inspect the Eagle Eye. Though it was hard to believe, as the time drew near, he had just wanted to get on with the task and have done.

And now he was on his way, accelerating out of the Central Computer's mountain base.

Already unaware of their immediate surroundings, the twins -- naked torsos and legs dazzlingly pastel pink in contrast to the darker shade of their tanned arms and faces -- floated limply about him. Before take-off they had had their first traumatic experience of breathing sustagel instead of air -- the feeling, conviction, that one was drowning -- then, when the novelty of that had faded, they had applied to their necks the adhesive tabs of individual drips and quickly slipped into unconsciousness. They would miss the "great adventure" -- consciously, anyway -- but if things worked out, then maybe Bridges would show them holovision footage captured by the Eagle Eye's cameras.

Revenge sprinted skyward in pale gray pre-dawn light, bearing vaguely eastward and transiently into a blood-red sunrise. But the sky darkened swiftly as the atmosphere thinned with rising altitude. The Thermosian leveled out at a height of eight hundred kilometers, beyond the limit of Terra Nova's envelope of air but still just beneath the planet's all-encompassing golden defense shield.

Svensson orbited the planet, watching holovision footage of the cloud-smudged blue world blurring beneath him. The success, or otherwise, of his mission would determine the fate of this splendid jewel, for above, tracking him, was the hammer that might fall on and shatter such a precious and delicate sapphire.

He arrived at the prearranged muster point, high over the Arctic Circle, where the remnants of Terra Nova's cigar-shaped defense satellites massed within the global defense shield. Portions of the Enemy fleet gathered as well, intent on thwarting any action that he might take.

"Computer: adopt a position amid the satellites."

"Yes, Lieutenant Svensson," replied the onboard flight computer in a flat, emotionless voice. He had intentionally left it without a personality: after Ms Mary, he did not want another computer to become too attached to him, especially one that might be living on borrowed time.

<'Activate combat mode,'> he ordered telepathically.

<'Yes, Lieutenant Svensson.'>

As his drip-feed began to pump reflex-enhancing chemicals into him, preparing him for the upcoming battle, the englobing blackness of combat mode enveloped the Thermosian. The Eagle Eye was an elongated quicksilver triangle that approached a cluster of aluminum pins.

Revenge maneuvered into the formation of the satellites. The swarm sped towards the faint glow of the planetary defense shield -- which parted subtly to allow passage to the Terra Novan force -- and into the waiting maw of the Enemy.

Atomic disrupter fire flickered all about the Eagle Eye. Satellites and alien fighters alike sparkled under the antiproton assault. Some were destroyed, reduced to energy and transitory subatomic particles. *Revenge* wove through the chaos, apparently navigating out of the star system and thereby avoiding the Enemy's full attention.

The attack *had*, however, drawn the notice of two spherical battle cruisers that gleefully swept down on the besieged defense satellites. It was over quickly. One battle cruiser was destroyed, the other damaged, but Terra Nova's defense now consisted entirely of the global shield. Without the satellites to strike back, the Enemy could now attack the golden shield with impunity until it inevitably failed, leaving Terra Nova vulnerable to an assault from space.

Yet it had been a calculated stratagem on the Central Computer's behalf. By enticing the two battle cruisers, the sacrifice of the satellites had achieved one significant thing: the spacecraft carrier stationed over Terra Nova's North Pole was less well defended. And that particular vessel, according to Bridges, was the Enemy's flagship.

"How can you be sure?" Svensson had asked. "There are two virtually identical spacecraft carriers up there."

"I have fought this force for two thousand years," she had replied. "I have studied its tactics. The Enemy operates in patterns -- complex patterns, it is true -- but in a method that may be predicted.

"It lures and feints, apparently to draw you to the South Pole carrier. But it is really directing you *away* from the *North* Pole carrier. That is where the Enemy is based."

"What about the rest of the fleet? Even if I succeed in taking out the flagship, the other carrier can quickly finish off Terra Nova. Not to mention any reinforcements from the Enemy homeworlds."

Bridges had shaken her head. "There are no reinforcements. Two thousand years have elapsed. This is the entire Enemy force. The entire race, too, I suspect. The other spacecraft are robots, controlled from the North Pole carrier. Destroy that, and the remainder of the fleet, including the second carrier, is essentially rudderless."

'I hope you're right,' thought Svensson, as he altered course, aiming the Eagle Eye directly at the spacecraft carrier!

Devoid of attendant battle cruisers it might be, the Enemy carrier was still the most terrifying thing Svensson had ever confronted. With his reflexes heightened to superhuman, he had time to inwardly scream as the *Revenge* hurtled towards the enormous vessel.

Brimming with information, an orange-bordered data screen briefly appeared in one corner of the black of combat mode: weapon status; attack vector; time until he reached missile and disrupter range for the

carrier; Enemy fighters approaching on interception courses (they had now materialized in combat mode as an approaching flock of little gray cones). His training came to the fore. His immediate problem was the fighters: he had to clear them from his path so he could get close enough to the carrier to launch a missile armed with the black box.

The alien fighters came in a cloud to smother *Revenge*. Svensson telepathically snapped: <'Computer: launch twenty-five missiles in a forward cone burst.'>

The missiles leapt in rapid succession from the underside of the Eagle Eye, latching onto the scent of the Enemy's fighters. The simulation of combat mode altered rapidly as the representative gray cones of the alien vessels shifted course in desperate maneuvers to avoid the twisting red wires of Svensson's missiles. Thousands of diverging pale gray filaments indicated that the Enemy fighters had deployed miniature decoy probes. Combat mode was now a tangle of projected paths: Svensson's silver thread, the Enemy's gray lines -- both authentic and sham -- as well as the red ones of the missiles trying to sniff out the genuine alien spacecraft. Some fighters successfully eluded the missiles; some did not, vanishing in a momentary flash. Svensson, however, was oblivious to the fate of the drones: the way to the queen bee was free, a silver tendril winding through the chaos to the large black disc of the Enemy spacecraft carrier.

Revenge darted into the breach, closing on the alien flagship. Already long-range atomic disrupters created golden flares on the Eagle Eye's defense shield. Svensson maneuvered the spacecraft with all his skill, jinking so many disrupter beams shot benignly by. His one advantage lay in the fact that, at this range, the Enemy could not discharge nuclear-tipped anti-spacecraft missiles for fear of the backlash. But this was a carrier he aimed at, and a battle cruiser would be hard-pressed surviving a frontal assault on one, let alone a single reconnaissance fighter.

The Eagle Eye's shield drained rapidly under the ferocious antimatter assault. Svensson loosed another four missiles, gaining himself a fleeting respite as the carrier concentrated on eliminating this new threat. He was down to his last missile, the missile required to launch the black box device. All he could use to defend himself now were the two atomic disrupters; pitifully inadequate when compared to the ten similar weapons firing at him just from around the spacecraft carrier's landing bay.

More than two kilometers in diameter, the alien spacecraft carrier was a colossal matte black discus. The landing bay, which might have housed some 150 fighters at the inception of the campaign, was a slit in the rim of the disc. It had been just his luck to attack the section of the Enemy flagship with the most guns. Yet it was an opening into the carrier; it was a soft spot...

Bridges had not been specific about where he should strike the alien carrier. It had been more a case of *if* he had the chance to hit it he should take the shot, however poor an option it was. If he could not get a shot off at the carrier, then she hoped the detonation of her special parcel bomb nearby would prove equal to the task of destroying the Enemy flagship.

But what if a hit on the shield -- or even the outer hull -- was not enough?

It was a spur of the moment decision. 'Let the Central Computer make what it will of this with its psychology!' he thought.

As Svensson aimed the nose of the Eagle Eye at the landing bay of the Enemy flagship. He would ensure his black box took up the best position possible to do its work.

The defense shield covering the landing bay abruptly vanished, and the atomic disrupters around the opening ceased firing at him. Even the alien fighters forsook their interception courses. The Enemy flagship almost welcomed him in, like a mother opening her arms to a long lost child!

The Thermosian was taken aback. What he had intended as a shock tactic was being received without any hint of alarm. Indeed, the Enemy seemed to invite his intrusion, confident, perhaps, he could effect no mischief.

Bracing himself for a resumption of all-out attack, Svensson guided the *Revenge* into the landing bay.

But no attack came.

He discovered himself in a vast hangar perhaps a kilometer long, three hundred meters wide, and sixty meters high. A smooth, black plastic-like substance that seemed to absorb light enclosed the entire area; none of the walls or floors showed any features or markings. There was artificial gravity here, about 0.65 gravs.

A number of sources of electromagnetic radiation suddenly registered themselves to his mind-linked senses.

<'What do you think they are? '> he asked the computer telepathically.

<'There is evidence of drive thrust scars around these energy sources. I would hypothesize that they represent docking beacons.' > <'I think you're right. Computer: set down on one of those radiation sources.' >

The flight computer gently lowered the Eagle Eye to the black deck. Svensson held his breath, but nothing untoward happened.

'What's going on?' he wondered. 'They seem very sure I can't harm them.'

Reluctantly -- it was always difficult to become a mere normal human again -- he severed the mind-link with the Eagle Eye's computer and disconnected the drip.

Rendering the upper hemisphere of the cockpit transparent, he peered outside. Nothing stirred in the hangar. He shook his head in mystification and swam through the sustagel -- and around the twins -- to fetch the power armor package from the sphere's in-built storage compartment. He was quickly ensconced in heavily armed power armor, which appropriated several liters of recyclable sustagel from the copious amount within the cockpit sphere (the spacecraft would soon replenish its own supply). He also gathered the black box device and concealed it within the armor.

He looked at the twins. Eyes closed, they drifted inertly within the sustagel. He noticed, though, their fists were clenched; they still battled the Enemy's psionic assault.

There was no sense in delaying his next move and forcing the Nevanders to withstand more than was necessary. The Thermosian quickly gave the flight computer a number of orders, commands to be carried out if... He had to face it: if he did not return.

Svensson dissolved the Eagle Eye's upper hemisphere with a thought; the defense shield without held in the sustagel. The shield slid around and over the power armor as he glided up and out of the lower half of the cockpit and into the vast expanse of the landing bay; hardly a molecule of sustagel escaped before the upper hemisphere reformed. Circling the mirrored form of the *Revenge*, he scanned the surrounding area. Still nothing moved in the immense, featureless hangar. There was nothing *to* move. The only things registering on his sensors were the electromagnetic landing pad markers.

With the power armor's assistance, Svensson could see in a number of mediums, including infrared, ultraviolet, and x-rays. But he preferred ordinary visible light, so he projected about himself a globe of warm, golden illumination thirty meters in diameter.

'Shed a little light on the subject,' he thought with a grin.

There had to be a way out of this hangar, other than back into space. He headed for the rear of the landing bay, reasoning any egress was likely to be there. He scanned the rear wall and found what he sought: the thickness of the black stuff was less here, and there were indications of a hollow area beyond.

He was about to attempt to cut his way in with a laser, when a rectangular section of the wall abruptly dissolved before him, creating an aperture big enough for him to pass through, power armor and all.

"Come into my parlor..."

The Thermosian inhaled deeply and breathed out slowly...then floated in. He found himself at the head of a corridor three meters wide and four meters high, walled by the same black, plastic-like substance as the landing bay. He could observe or detect naught: no atmosphere, no lighting -- in any form of radiation -- no interruption to the smoothness of the walls. The corridor stretched ahead of him, its end lost in darkness.

'Come on, reveal yourselves!' he thought in exasperation. Having come this far, he was determined to obtain at least a glimpse of his hated Enemy. But he had not had even a hint of an alien so far.

The opening to the hangar suddenly closed behind him. The black plastic simply flowed across the gap, and it was as if there never had been a portal. He had anticipated this, however, and did not panic. On his return -- *if* he returned -- he would ascertain whether the laser could extricate him. If the laser did not do the job, there was always a missile or two. And if *they* did not succeed... Well, he was probably beaten, anyway.

Left with little alternative, Svensson headed down the long corridor. He scanned the walls as he advanced, but again nothing registered, not even a hint of machinery. And certainly there was no evidence of any alien life form.

After two hundred meters or so the corridor abruptly expanded into a circular room, ten meters in diameter and walled by the now familiar black material. Suddenly supremely alert, Svensson glided slowly into the chamber. It was, frustratingly, devoid of things to scan.

'Well, I suppose this is as good a place as any to-'

A flicker of movement attracted his enhanced senses. A man stepped through the wall! He was an old, kindly looking fellow with white skin and long silver hair, clad in a white, voluminous robe. His frail hands outstretched to Svensson, he smiled benevolently. He looked human.

After an instant of surprise, the Thermosian's thoughts screamed: 'Enemy!'

Svensson aimed the laser at the old man, when a couple of facts suddenly dawned on him: there was no atmosphere in here or sufficient warmth to sustain human life. Realizing he faced a holographic projection of similar sophistication to Anne Bridges', he lowered the arm that bore the laser.

<'Welcome,'> greeted the old fellow telepathically. <'I am John.'>

Svensson was unable to reply for several seconds. The Enemy's telepathy had penetrated the psionic shield of the power armor. The aliens *could* communicate, yet they had never chosen to do so before. Why? This could well be the projection of a computer, presumably an Enemy military computer. Was it trying to eliminate him in some way, as an antibody would a virus? It had not demonstrated that much imagination in selecting a name: John! Perhaps it was attempting to put him at ease.

<'I represent the people of this planet,'> the Thermosian ventured finally. <'You are an invading force, and I demand you withdraw your warships!'>

The old man -- John, if he wished -- spread the fingers of his upturned hands and emphatically shook his head. *'I do not come to make war! I come to offer your people the galaxy!'*>

Svensson frowned. "I." Was there only one of them? Was he being psionically tested, manipulated without his comprehension? He hoped the twins were fulfilling their role. *<'Who are you? From where do you come?'*>

<'There is no equivalent sound in your speech for my name. Translated roughly, I am the Ordered One. I originated on the planet Order, which orbits Light of Order. The Light of Order system is more than seven thousand of your light years from here.'>

<'You aim to exterminate us. You obliterated humanity on its other worlds, and now this planet is all that remains. You are relentless, lurking for two thousand years to complete your holocaust.'>

<'My friend, I did not kill your people on the other planets.'>

Svensson was speechless for a moment.

<'I've seen the evidence with my own eyes!'> he returned finally. *<'There were bodies strewn about the streets in the cities of Hibernus, and as for the Earth...'*> Svensson paused, recalling things he had observed or discovered in his tour of the colonies. His anger flared anew. *<'I do not care how alien you are: those actions were evil.'*>

<'You do not understand. I gave your people a gift. I gave them the secret of Bodiless Technique.'> Was that a trace of...pleasure the Thermosian sensed with empathy? Maybe not.

<'What is "Bodiless Technique?"'> Svensson demanded.

<'Precisely that. They are able to exist aboard this ship as pure psionic energy, freed of the restriction of their mortal bodies.'> John gestured around him. *<'Do you behold any mortal bodies here?'*>

Svensson shook his head reluctantly. *<'No,'>* he admitted shortly.

<'That is because I have abandoned my mortal form and ride this vessel. Think of my long wait here; it is nothing to me, for I am eternal! I feel sad, however, for your people, who die needlessly. Your machine thwarts my attempt to induct your people into my grand adventure.'>

Svensson's head ached, in spite of his personal computer. Something was not quite right here, but he could not figure out what. It was too good to be true, was it not? Eternal life! *<'The humans do not miss the physical pleasures? The feeling of the sun on the skin, the wind in the hair, fine food, and exercise? This form of flesh and blood has so much to offer.'*>

<'And so, also, do flesh and blood offer affliction and injury, inevitable death. Their new form offers immortality.'>

<'But we'd eliminated most problems. Life was better and longer than ever before.'>

Svensson let it go. Doubts plagued him. Was the Enemy doing good for humanity? He thought he sensed a hint of pleasure again. Pleasure or, perhaps, satisfaction. Or some unrelated alien emotion. His mental turmoil made it hard to think things through. The Thermosian cleared his mind with difficulty and thought

hard. What the Enemy knew of humanity -- language, customs, this cliched benign figure -- must primarily have come from de Fleur, the reconnaissance pilot it had captured and tortured. Or could it have come from any number of slain Citizens of the Empire?

The light from the power armor suddenly vanished. All other forms of illumination failed as well, leaving Svensson in absolute, terrifying darkness.

<'I sense your reluctance,'> said the Enemy, disembodied now. *<'Observe and listen. This will convince you of the wisdom of joining us.'>*A ghostly luminosity flared, shimmering. Intensely colored outlines, thousands of them, appeared before him: human auras. Svensson began to sweat, and he felt the bristly hair on the back of his neck trying to stand on end. The outlines were life-size, yet there were too many of them to have ever fit in the circular chamber. He felt an undeniable presence, of something beyond his mortal experience.

The Thermosian sensed -- knew -- all the auras belonged to people he had known. Family, friends, brief acquaintances of a lifetime. He was overwhelmed with emotion: joy and love, anger and annoyance, grief and regret. Tears stung his eyes, his heart raced, and he would have fallen if the power armor did not surround and support him.

<'WE ARE THE BODILESS! WE WILL HELP THOSE UNFORTUNATE ENOUGH TO BE CHAINED TO MORTAL BODIES! '>

Svensson felt a surge of courage from somewhere, somewhere deep within his mortal frame. *<'You have no right to compel us to do anything! Our needs and decisions, our destiny, are our concerns! You cannot know the will of Terra Nova's people.'>*

<'YOU ARE STUBBORN! WE DID NOT ANTICIPATE THIS! YOU SPENT YOUR YOUTH IN ARTIFICIAL REALITY! YOU WERE A LONER, INDEPENDENT OF YOUR FELLOW HUMANITY! WHAT HAS CHANGED? '>

<'I took a look around at the real world. This real world. There is so much to experience with the physical senses.'>

<'THE BODILESS ARE BEYOND ALL MORTAL CONCERNS! THE UNIVERSE IS OURS TO ROAM! AND IT CAN BE YOURS, TOO! '>

* *

Wilfen found himself in limbo, a dark realm of the mind. It was a strange environment, where conventions like left and right, or up and down, had no significance. He existed in a place neither here nor there, floating in nothingness.

He could "see" Alvonne nearby. *<'Hey,'>* he called telepathically.

<'Hey, yourself,'> Alvonne replied.

It was true, then: they could communicate here. At least for now.

The pair considered the surroundings. There was nothing actually visible to be perceived, but they sensed a presence: Mikael Svensson. The Skylord was neither before them, nor behind or even between them, yet he was indisputably within their protection, inside their sphere of influence.

All seemed calm and orderly. But Wilfen did not lose concentration. The Goddess had warned him about that. The forces of Evil would not be able to affect the twins until the sky ship passed from *her* protection. And then the Enemy might wait, seeking to lull the Nevanders into believing everything was

fine, before lashing out with its awesome mind-powers.

He did not have to wait very long. Questing for Svensson, a psionic attack snaked towards him. Following Anbridge's advice, Wilfen made it manifest as he imagined it, as a striking serpent: because the Enemy assailed *his* mind's arena, it was bound to come in the form that *he* chose.

Wilfen transformed his mental image of himself, and he sensed his brother doing the same. He thought of himself as an armored swordsman, and he hewed at the sneaking serpent with a long-sword. Alvonne had become a suitably large mongoose, and he bit and chewed on the Enemy snake, shaking it in his muzzle. Thwarting its attack on Svensson's mind, the brothers fought the serpent.

How long they battled, Wilfen was uncertain, but when at length the Enemy serpent withdrew and faded away, he was exhausted. Yet he savored a minor sense of victory. The twins had checked, if not beaten, the mighty Goddess's Enemy!

<*We sent it running home with its tail between its legs!*> Alvonne told him exultantly.

<*I'm not so sure,*> Wilfen dissented. <*That may have been a feeling-out attack. Now, it'll realize we are not easily defeated. Next time it'll come with more cunning and more ferocity.*>

He sighed inwardly at his own discouraging words. It *had* been a tough battle but not *that* tough. Nevertheless, it had severely taxed his reserves. It required considerable willpower to steel himself for another assault, and he dreaded the form it might take.

Nothing happened for some time. The twins strove to sustain their concentration but felt it wavering. They mentally "shook" themselves, sharpening focus again. Yet all seemed well...

Alvonne found himself feeling happier about circumstances. The twins were too powerful! The Enemy was cowed. It did not know what to do!

It was Wilfen who recognized it, an expanding, pervading sense of well being. Instilling confidence, it seeped over them. That was what jolted him. Confidence. He knew his brother possessed it, but he did not; he was ever filled with self-doubt. This was *over*confidence.

<*Alvonne.*>

<*Yes? What is it, Wilfen?*>

<*Wake up. Look about you. It is all around us.*>

<*What is?*>

<*Can't you feel it? A sense of...contentment, happiness, call it what you will. It does not belong to us.*>

It was as if a blindfold had been removed from his eyes. Alvonne suddenly sensed it as well, a spreading, enveloping mist. He perceived it as such and saw it then: a glowing, sickly green fog that billowed over the twins, insidiously infiltrating their senses.

<*No!*> he defied it.

The Nevander pictured himself as a muscular, red-bearded giant. Massive fists on hips, he opened his mouth...and exhaled the green fog. Wilfen assumed a similar form, and between them they produced a titanic gust that blew away the Enemy's slinking mental assault. With a final, frustrated emerald flash, the

mist dissipated. The Nevanders discerned a hint of anger and knew it was not feigned.

<'*Begone!*'> Alvonne snarled telepathically. He metamorphosed into an archer legionnaire. From a great, radiant longbow he shot several arrows of sizzling, electric blue mental energy, carrying the attack back to the Enemy. With psionic empathy he sensed sudden, momentary pain and anger at the strike of the foremost arrow, then nothing further. He contrived a mighty flaming sword and was about to press his counterattack, when he felt Wilfen restraining him.

<'*Do not,*'> Wilfen told him. <'*You have given it something to think about. But do not pursue it into its own dark pit. I fear you will be lost there.*'>

Alvonne composed himself reluctantly. Wilfen was right. The Enemy was the master of these mind-powers. On its own turf the Enemy would be a formidable opponent, indeed. Anyway, the twins did not have to fulfil the grand task of actually vanquishing the forces of Evil: just hamper them for a little while.

Nevertheless, the Nevander was frustrated. Wilfen was much better at these mind games. Alvonne suspected that he himself was the weak link here. He must heed his brother and try not to let down their cause.

Wilfen, conversely, wished *he* possessed *Alvonne's* qualities. He was conscious of an overriding fear he knew originated from within himself. It permeated his consciousness, and he felt powerless under its influence. He did not think it was his wisdom that had urged Alvonne to abandon pursuit of the Enemy; it was his cowardice. He was terrified of being left alone to defy this menace.

'Goddess, give me courage,' he thought. 'Let me not fail Alvonne.'

It was the waiting that was hardest to abide. He battled an overactive imagination that conjured all sorts of terrors for him.

'Let the Enemy come,' he thought. It seemed, to him, his own mind represented the greater danger.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the Enemy struck again. And he soon wondered why he had almost welcomed an attack, for a succession of horrors was unleashed on the twins. Scenes from nightmares inundated their minds: swift, indistinct things of numerous rending talons and knife-like fangs; enormous, headless purple worms that slid on rivers of exuded, luminous green-yellow ooze; pale, amorphous ghostly forms with fiery sparks for eyes; naked, mutilated bodies that had been disemboweled or lacked arms, legs, heads. Wilfen "felt" touches, initially feather-light, then like crushing blows and severing cuts and charring burns.

<'*Alvonne covets Haliann for himself!*'> cried a mocking voice. <'*For himself! For himself!*'>

<'*No!*'> he shouted, but an insane cackling overwhelmed his protest.

Wilfen reeled under the barrage. Nearly mindless, he shrieked a primal scream. All notions of defense were ripped away. A shaft of dread and despair transfixed him. He could see it, hear it, feel it, even smell and taste its defiling, malodorous presence. He moaned at visions of Haliann being torn to shreds of flesh by potent invisible energies, accompanied by the spatter of hot, reeking blood. A ship caught in a maelstrom, he was whirled by incomprehensible forces.

<'*Help me!*'> he cried in despair.

After a time, when he had overcome the initial, paralyzing shock, he sensed a faint caress in a remote corner of his mind, a contradictory touch, more subtle than the sledgehammer manner of the Enemy. In

desperation he stretched for the origin of that touch, reached through the chaos enclosing his thoughts. It was Alvonne, conferring succor. Wilfen grasped a metaphorical hand and immediately experienced a glimmer of courage and a flicker of calm.

<*Defy it!*> Alvonne implored him.

The brothers joined forces. They formed themselves into a vast outcropping of rock that defied the surges of a wrathful sea. Their senses were still violated, but they weathered the storm. United, the Nevanders transcended the sum of their individual parts. Wilfen took heart from this union with his brother, and he finally wrested back a semblance of composure.

Seeking to shatter their resistance, the Enemy dispatched a last flurry of images, but the twins stood firm. Abruptly the attack ended. Unable to communicate for a minute or two, the Nevanders gathered their dazed and battered wits, like runners regaining their wind.

<*Thanks, Alvonne,*> Wilfen finally communicated.

<*No problem at all.*>

<*You've saved us. Saved us all.*>

<*Only for the time being. Besides, you saved me earlier.*>

<*I suppose the Goddess was right,*> Wilfen speculated.

<*How is that?*>

<*She said we had individual strengths and weaknesses.*>

Alvonne was philosophical. <*Yes. If we stick together, we can make use of the strengths and repress the weaknesses.*>

<*We'll do that,*> Wilfen agreed.

They waited, then, in that timeless dark. Between them, Svensson's essence seemed agitated to Wilfen, but the Nevander could not deduce why. 'Perhaps he has problems of his own,' Wilfen thought.

After a time -- it might have been seconds or minutes or hours for all Wilfen knew -- a new presence arrived in that world of the mind. It illuminated the perpetual gloom and raised his spirits. The Goddess had come!

<*Alvonne. Wilfen. My beloved disciples. Your struggle is over. My enemy is defeated.*>

<*Do you hear that?*> Alvonne asked his brother. <*We've triumphed!*>

<*Yes,*> Wilfen replied a little doubtfully. Was it possible?

<*Rejoice, Wilfen,*> the Goddess told him. <*Terra Nova is delivered.*>

<*It's wonderful,*> he replied, still rather stunned. Could that latest repulse have conclusively routed the Enemy? Had Svensson accomplished something significant?

<*Boys,*> the Goddess hailed them, reclaiming their attention. <*Relinquish your hold on Svensson's mind. I must communicate with him.*>

Wilfen recoiled. "Boys." It was bit demeaning, though something else perturbed him. What was it?

<'Wilfen?> she called. <'Your shield of Svensson.'>

<'Wait.'> He needed to think.

<'Boy!> screamed Anbridge. <'Release your hold.'>

<'Goddess,'> put in Alvonne tentatively, puzzled by her anger.

<'It's not her!> Wilfen suddenly telepathically shouted. <'It's an Enemy trick!>

Events had abruptly crystallized for him. The Goddess's short temper was uncharacteristic. She had called the twins "*men*" before they had departed, not "boys." But the most telling fact concerned Svensson: the Skylord was uneasy, quite unlike someone who had just defeated his foe; more like someone still in doubt of the outcome of his struggle.

The Goddess's form rippled and started to change -- without the twins' prompting. A white-robed old fellow appeared in her place, smiling kindly.

<'Terra Novans,'> he greeted them, hands held out in a friendly fashion.

<'Don't listen to him,'> Alvonne warned his brother.

The Nevanders tried to ignore the old man, but his words reached them all the same. <'You misunderstand me. You have been told lies. I came to help your people, not harm them.'>

<'Do you expect us to believe that?'> Alvonne demanded. <'After all you've done?'>

<'Yes.'>

<'What about all those people you have killed?'> Wilfen inquired. <'All of Svensson's comrades.'>

The robed fellow frowned. <'I have done no such thing. Have you seen these dead people?'>

Alvonne was indignant. <'Garest Ethrin is dead.'>

<'I did not kill him. The Tharm, Waghel, did.'>

<'Under your orders,'> Wilfen retorted.

<'Waghel was independent. I wanted him to stop Mikael Svensson doing the bidding of that...that machine. He was a poorly fashioned tool, one I was unable to wield with any degree of control.'>

<'You were bent on obstructing Mikael's actions,'> pointed out Alvonne. <'We knew that.'>

<'But you do not understand, Alvonne. My purpose is not sinister. Why would I wait a thousand years to kill a handful of people?'>

That was one fact that had kept nagging at Wilfen. It made no sense for *anyone* to wait a thousand years to massacre a few people. <'Malice,'> he answered slowly. <'Pure evil.'>

<'My friends, there are no such things as pure evil or pure good. Consider the conduct of that machine. It manipulated your lives as I did Waghel's. Am I any more evil for doing the identical thing? Is Bridges any more good than I am? Everyone is capable of doing good or evil; neither term can be solely applied to any particular party.'>

<'Sophistry!> Wilfen was defiant. <'The Goddess's actions are for good.'>

<'And what do you suppose that "good" is?> The old man raised his eyebrows inquiringly. <'To thwart my purpose?>

<'Precisely,'> put in Alvonne. <'We know that.'>

<'But do you know my real intention? I will tell you. I am not here to kill you. It is very much the antithesis of that: I am here to offer you eternal life.'>

The twins made no reply.

<'Yes! Eternal life! You would never grow old or die. Like Anne Bridges. Why do you suppose I've been able to wait so long? A thousand years mean nothing when you live forever!>

<'I suppose not,'> Alvonne admitted grudgingly.

<'Don't listen!> Wilfen chastised his twin. <'It's more deception.'>

<'Is it?> demanded the old man. <'Have I not waited a thousand years? Even Svensson and Bridges do not dispute that.'>

Wilfen did not answer. He was thinking. This fellow had all the answers. Eternal life, by the Goddess! Could he risk passing up such an opportunity for all Terra Novans?

<'Why do Anbridge and Mikael want to stop you?> Alvonne asked.

That was a telling point, Wilfen realized. There seemed no valid justification for the Goddess and the Skylord to prevent such a thing.

<'Bridges wants to maintain her ascendancy over your people. Svensson is her puppet.'>

Wilfen pondered this. His thoughts swirled again. He did not know what to believe any more. One thing was certain, however: the twins had been manipulated and lied to a number of times -- by Filgen, Shondal, Svensson, the Goddess, and now the Enemy -- and he was sick of it.

<'The Goddess doesn't desire or need power over Terra Nova,'> Alvonne declared. <'We volunteer her worship and service unbidden and of our free will. And Mikael Svensson does not believe in her divinity; he follows his own path.'>

Wilfen was jarred from his reverie. Alvonne was right. The Enemy was tricking them again. Had not the Goddess warned them? Alert now, he discerned the Enemy sneaking an invisible tendril towards Svensson's presence.

The twins united again, combining themselves into a single massive, razor-edged sword that sheared the tentacle, which injected into Svensson's thoughts the same blend of confusion and deception that had afflicted the Nevanders. They sensed an almighty rage that threatened to sweep them aside, but somehow they withstood it, visualizing themselves as a lone seabird, an albatross, calmly riding storm-tossed waves.

'This time!' Wilfen thought. The Enemy's psionic attack had failed. It was up to Svensson. His thoughts were clear and unaffected. What happened now was entirely up to him and his judgement.

* *

Svensson sensed anger and, somewhere, a swelling hunger. As if...

He screamed aloud suddenly. "It's all lies!"

The illusion that was the images of the Bodiless dissolved. He was still awash in the power armor's projected light in the circular room. Expression shocked, the form of the Ordered One hovered before him.

<'You do not understand what you reject!> it cried in his mind.

<'Oh, yes, I do. I know you now. You did massacre so many billions of people. You destroyed my culture and civilization.'>

<'Did I? Was not your civilization in decay? Was not the human culture centered on sex and drugs? Your feeble, rotted empire would soon have collapsed under the weight of its own excesses. I did not destroy your culture. I did not massacre your people. In providing eternal existence I have, indeed, supplied both the prospect of salvation and redemption for your civilization and its peoples.'>

<'You consumed humanity! Perhaps these billions of people do still exist, submerged somewhere deep in your subconscious.'>

<'No -- '>

<'Yes! At first I could not comprehend the different methods of killing.'> Svensson's eyes burnt in their sockets. *<'But each time you were becoming bolder, slaughtering a greater and greater number of people at the same time.'>* He paused, momentarily lost for words to express his horror and contempt and hatred. His lips moved soundlessly for a few seconds. He recalled the myriad dead people on Hibernus, how they had been shot so they would die slowly. And with their minds intact, telepathically screaming in an agony that would, subjectively, seem almost everlasting. That, he suddenly realized, was why the Enemy had done it! Not for the expediency of eliminating an enemy, but for pleasure or...sustenance. *<'You...you are a vampire of the mind, feeding on the pain of the dying, reveling in the shriek of death. And the more people that die, the more you relish your depraved act.'>* The Thermosian sneered. *<'The Ordered One is the ultimate sadistic xenophobe, so troubled by outsiders that you take pleasure in their destruction.'>*

<'What of it, mortal?> snarled the Enemy, all pretense at benignity vanished. *<'You will not escape from here. I will dismantle your mind piece by piece, until you will beg for death. But I will not allow you to die. I will compel you to watch as I despoil your pathetic little planet. Its defenses are gone, and it lies before me, awaiting defilement. What do you say to that, miserable creature?>*

He nearly laughed. 'That won't work!' he thought, remembering Louise Mars and the way she had -- unintentionally perhaps -- damaged his already fragile self-esteem. And over the last few weeks he had withstood a testing, torturous ordeal. He was numb, impervious. Nothing the Enemy could do or say now was capable of hurting him. There was no emotion left in him for the Enemy to devour: no anger, confusion, sadness, or fear. No emotion at all, unless...unless one considered hate, hate in the form of a passionate, overwhelming craving for the Enemy's destruction.

Svensson turned and attempted to burn a hole through the black wall. The strange substance effortlessly absorbed the laser. The Thermosian fired a missile, then another, and another. But there was no trace of a mark left on the black stuff.

He did not panic, however. Indeed, a strange calm had come over him.

Svensson modified the plasteel of the power armor so it was transparent from without. *<'Look on me,*

Lord of Darkness. I am human, and I am your nemesis.'>

Throwing his head back, the old man started to cackle mockingly, not stopping even when Svensson opened the compartment in the power armor that contained the black box. The box floated out and hovered before him, and the Thermosian caught it in his armored fist. He brought the cube up to his eye, and the retinal scanner readily identified him through the transparent hy-c plastic. <'Computer: detonate in ten seconds,'> he commanded.

Svensson drew back his armored arm and propelled the black box directly at the body of the Enemy's image. Still raucously jeering, the Ordered One spread his arms wide, as if to embrace the projectile.

John abruptly stopped laughing. His expression went blank, which suggested to Svensson that he no longer pretended human emotion; the Enemy had more significant concerns.

An unearthly wail ripped through Svensson's mind, and he staggered under the onslaught. The old fellow shimmered and shifted...and fleetingly transformed into a terrifyingly alien thing. A boneless blob of neon purple, a tangle of countless undulating tentacles, gleaming ebony fangs, two bulbous, faintly gleaming yellow eyes; it hovered in a gloomy, sunless world, perhaps a liquid environment, where weird shapes drifted among streamers of feeble luminescence.

Abruptly the thing was gone, the old man returned. Had he really mutated? Or was it the Thermosian's overactive imagination that had contrived the apparition? Did it really matter? 'The Enemy!' he thought in a mixture of triumph and disgust. 'Let it know the fear of imminent destruction. Let it feed off itself in the final instant!'

His thoughts raced. Had the Central Computer predicted what he would do? Perhaps. He had not really recovered from the desolation of all he had known. He was a man out of time and place. He did not belong here. Or anywhere. But he was satisfied with his fate. If his life had not amounted to much, then at least his demise would benefit a worthwhile cause. He would sacrifice himself for Terra Nova, for the good and ordinary people of the planet, for the Zems, Gales and Tarvin; for the Jendins, Wonef and Flede; and, of course, for the Argindells (hell, he would even do it for the Tharms, for who was he to judge them, anyway?). He would do it for the precious flora and fauna. And he would do it for Terra Nova, because he loved the planet for what it was and for what it might become.

Almost belatedly he remembered Alvonne and Wilfen. He gently annulled his psionic link with the twins: it would not do for them to be linked to his dying mind. The flight computer of *Revenge* had awaited just this eventuality: it immediately blasted the Eagle Eye out of the alien carrier's landing bay and accelerated the spacecraft away from the area.

A few seconds later the magnetic coil within the black box failed, releasing the volume of antimatter within from its cage. For an instant the dense, hot plasma spewed forth, splattering Svensson's power armor and the walls of the circular chamber, then...spontaneous annihilation, a total conversion of a kilogram of matter into a dreadful burst of mostly high-energy gamma radiation, utterly destroying the Enemy flagship and all it contained. A spherical shock wave of plasma expanded from the epicenter, and in its wake nearby alien spacecraft disintegrated in an ephemeral purple-white flash. Terra Nova's defense shield flared luminously as a large portion of the vast energy emission writhed across its surface.

The remainder of the Enemy fleet was left rudderless by the destruction of its flagship. The Central Computer seized control and dispatched the remaining spacecraft carrier and its attendant collection of battle cruisers and fighters on a swift, direct collision course with Alston's Star, Terra Nova's sun.

Bridges reflected on what she had learned of the Enemy. The most significant fact was that it was not an alien race at all but a single entity. A solitary creature had caused so much havoc. Perhaps it had been

part of a race that had become extinct; it was possible, she supposed, the Enemy had killed off the rest of its kind. Maybe, long ago, the Enemy had been a fearsome predator on some distant planet. Over time it had learned a new kind of predatory skill -- by psionic means. Eventually that method of hunting had been distorted into a sadistic xenophobia, as Svensson had surmised.

When it could not procure its fix of psionics, the Enemy had wantonly killed and destroyed by other means; Bridges suspected these acts were for sheer pleasure, rather than sustenance or any valid tactic. She supposed that the Enemy had always had its various "innovations" at its disposal -- the human-affecting psionic weapon; the atomic disrupter; the psionic-relay missile; the black hole doomsday weapon -- but they had been reserved until they would cause maximum consternation to the humans. Ironically, therefore, the Enemy's very nature had been the basis of its undoing, for it had allowed Svensson into its realm, seeking, perhaps, to toy with him, like a cat with a mouse...

Eternal life was possible for an organic life-form, but only the Enemy had had the means of attaining it, an existence sustained by using its own psionics to feed on the psionics of other creatures' minds. Those awesome psionic powers enabled the Ordered One to operate spacecraft across thousands of light years, using them to locate new minds to appease its constant hunger. (Had it "stolen" the telepathy-controlled vessels from some other alien civilization? Yes, of course, it had: the Enemy was a consummate thief, not an innovator. None of its "innovations" had been duplicable, especially -- thank God -- the black-hole-weapon used on the Earth.) Yet it seemed the process was inefficient: the Enemy had spent many decades apparently lying dormant between intervals of a few years of activity. This was how the Central Computer had been able to stall the Ordered One for so long. She shuddered to think how long Terra Nova would have lasted if the Enemy had not needed what appeared to be a normal mortal requirement...periods of rest.

Bridges was certain of one thing, however: the universe was better off without such a thing as the Enemy.

[CHAPTER 29: RESOLUTION](#)

Haliann and Shondal huddled close to the campfire to ward off the early morning chill of the desert. They watched the heavens for a sign of success -- or failure -- of the quest undertaken by Svensson and the twin Nevanders.

The golden flashes they had become accustomed to became suddenly more prevalent, a flurry of sparks in the black sky. The dazzling display reached a blinding crescendo, then abruptly the spurious stars ceased to ignite.

The desert grew dark again. The Argindells glanced at each other. Each perceived the obvious unasked question in the other's eyes, along with the same answer: I do not know.

They peered upward again, straining to make out something, anything, a clue to the fortunes of those who rode in the sky ship, an indication of the fate of Terra Nova.

An unexpected explosion of light suddenly lit up the sky, illuminating the desert like the noon sun. Hands clapped to their eyes, Haliann and Shondal staggered back from the fire, crying out in fear of impending doom.

The light was extinguished as quickly as it had flared. Father and daughter blinked tears from half-blind eyes, squinting through dancing afterimages.

A voice invaded their minds, banishing all other thoughts. It declaimed in triumph:

<THE GREAT DRAGON WAS CAST OUT!>

The pair reeled under the onslaught. It was Anbridge, they realized, in all her divinity. Her voice returned, softer than before: < *Rejoice, my children. My disciples have prevailed. The Enemy is vanquished. Terra Nova is liberated.* >

Haliann and Shondal looked at each other. They smiled and laughed aloud. They quickly sobered, however, and tentatively glanced upward. Despite the approaching dawn, it seemed so very dark overhead.

"Come back, Wilfen," Haliann murmured.

"And Alvonne," Shondal added. "And Mikael."

Shortly afterward, a point of orange light became visible in the yellowing sky. It grew into a banner of flame trailing from the much hoped-for sky ship. It scythed across the sky, across the blazing disk of the rising sun and into the Goddess's mountain.

Haliann and Shondal dashed towards the hole in the hillside that led to the cave of the Oracle -- which contained a perfectly circular area of the natural rock floor polished smooth as marble -- and beyond into Anbridge's white-walled abode. They stumbled once or twice but helped each other up, too anxious and excited to linger over minor cuts and scrapes.

The two panted as they raced into the tunnel with the armored doors. The doors were open, and they dashed into the cavern of the sky ships. Breathless, they halted before Svensson's sky ship, waiting for it to disgorge its passengers, feeling the waves of heat it radiated.

The shiny dome atop the silvery sky ship disappeared -- as did the overall golden glow -- and there was a hiss of vented gases. Haliann discovered that she was holding her breath, anticipating the emergence of those inside.

A naked, dark-haired figure rose into view and slowly crawled across the upper surface of the sky ship and descended to the ground. It was Alvonne. His body was slick with some sticky substance. He coughed and blinked and stared bleakly about him, as Haliann (her eyes firmly fixed on his face) and Shondal hastened to his side. He stared at them, shaking his head wordlessly.

Someone else emerged now. Wilfen! Haliann squealed in delight. The wiry Nevander was still in the act of stepping onto the ground when the girl latched onto him, hugging him with all her strength. She spun him around, raining kisses on his fatigue-shadowed face, unmindful of the viscous, tasteless stuff smearing her face and clothes.

"I love you," they told each other simultaneously and smiled at the synchronicity of sentiment.

"Where's Mikael?" Shondal asked.

The twins stiffened. Alvonne hung his head, eyeing the white floor. Wilfen sighed and blinked back tears. "He didn't come back," he whispered hoarsely. "He went into the Enemy sky ship and couldn't return."

"I don't think he chose to come back," Alvonne muttered, still apparently studying the floor.

The Goddess's image appeared beside them. "You are correct, Alvonne. Mikael Svensson sacrificed himself to save Terra Nova. I do not believe the entire mission would have succeeded if he had not ventured into the Enemy sky ship."

Haliann choked on a sob. "You knew...knew he would do what he did?"

Anbridge sighed. "I suspected. He was somewhat mad, you know. No one who had suffered what he had would have escaped unscathed. I could have brought him here when he first came to Terra Nova, but it was important that he journeyed with your company; he needed to experience this world first-hand in order to love it. And he did grow to love Terra Nova. He had periods of apathy, though at the last he was moved to sacrifice his life. He no longer valued that life, but it purchased a great deal for this world and its people."

* *

Three days after Mikael Svensson's liberation of Terra Nova, the Argindells gathered in the special healing room where the Goddess had attempted the miraculous: raising Garest Ethrin from the dead.

They had been honored guests of Anbridge in her divine place. They had slept in special beds, waking more refreshed than they would have ever thought possible. They had eaten meals provided by the Goddess's machines, tasting foods that pleased their individual palates. They had experienced the realistic, yet fabricated worlds that somehow existed inside peculiar helmets, lived out fantasies they had not realized they secretly harbored.

Yet by the time Garest Ethrin was due to be revived it had all paled somehow. This place had everything, but...it lacked something. None of them could quite put a finger on it, though they saw acknowledgement that something was missing in each other's eyes. Perhaps it was a case of too *much* rather than too little. Perhaps all of this was wasted on mortal humans.

They watched silently as the haziness about Garest's supine form faded from sight. The machines hovering around him withdrew. The Argindells saw that he breathed readily, the bright green tree device on the breast of his clean, mended tabard gently rising and falling.

Anbridge was in her mortal form. She placed a hand on Garest's forehead. "Awake, Garest," she whispered.

A few moments passed. Garest did not stir.

"Awake, Garest!" cried the Goddess, stridently desperate.

The Nondran did not move.

She slumped, tears streaking her face. "I knew it," she murmured. "I am not divine. That which is allowed to die cannot be resurrected." She turned to the Argindells, who watched mutely, unable to help. "Depart from this place. Appropriate what food you desire. But depart swiftly." With that, she vanished from view.

Within half-an-hour they were ready to leave. They lingered to see if she would reappear one final time, but she did not, so they slowly started to file out of the Goddess's abode. The company passed down the tunnel that led from the cavern of the sky ships. They emerged into late afternoon sunlight. They adjusted their backpacks, looking back at the Goddess's mountain, but still there was no sign of Anbridge.

"I suppose it's time to go," Alvonne said.

"I had the impression she wanted to be rid of us," Wilfen commented, and Haliann, who held his hand, nodded agreement.

"She has her reasons," Shondal said, mouth twisted characteristically.

Without another word, the quartet headed down the vague trail that had been worn by seekers of the Oracle. They were about an hour into their journey out of the Angart Hills, winding through the craggy

peaks, when a voice resounded in their minds:

<'Farewell, my children. Your world has achieved its maturity. It has no further need of a goddess. You are free to choose your destiny.'>

The earth suddenly shuddered beneath their feet, pitching them to the ground. A tremendous boom deafened them, as a huge pall of dust billowed up, shrouding the Goddess's mountain.

"What on Terra Nova was that?" Haliann exclaimed.

"The death of a goddess," Shondal declared softly. "You didn't expect her to go quietly, did you?"

The others stared at him, shocked beyond words.

The Paladin drew *Findram*. "I shan't be needing this any more." And he cast it from him, out onto the red earth.

He started off, and his family, open-mouthed, began to follow him. Then he stopped dead in his tracks. Ignoring the young people's bemused expressions, Shondal retraced his steps and retrieved the sword.

The soldier grinned humorlessly at the others' inquiring glances. He gestured to the Goddess's mountain. "People should learn from what happened there." He pointed up at the sky. "And up there." He stared at the blade in his hands. "But I suspect they won't. The Nulls and the Tharms and the Drim Memm will still follow the same master plan, pouring through the Northern Gap and across Adar Mutia to make war on the Eastern Alliance. And the Holms and the Farl Memm and the Arnds and the Magon will await them, ready and willing to fight." He shook his head. "Nothing changes. Not really."

"Come on, Shondal," said Wilfen. "The war will end, as all wars do. Then we'll be free to make something of ourselves."

"If the Goddess's Enemy had had its way, there would be *no* possibilities, good or bad," remarked Alvonne.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," the Paladin agreed grudgingly. He brightened suddenly. "I might look up your mother, Haliann. What do you think? Would she have me back?"

Haliann laughed. "Anything is possible!"

The End

[CAST OF CHARACTERS](#)

Adric, Jermise: Nondran Army Captain.

Argindell, Alvonne: Nevander youth.

Argindell, Haliann: Holmish girl.

Argindell, Nartrell: Holmish woman at the House of Orphaned Women in Kenderlan City. Mother of Haliann.

Argindell, Shondal: Holmish Paladin. Uncle of Alvonne and Wilfen. Father of Haliann.

Argindell, Wilfen: Nevander youth. Brother of Alvonne.

Brammin, Bem: Holm in Bonvalur.

Brin, Darrabin: Holmish spy in Glam.

Culdana, Filgen: Nevander. Grandfather of Alvonne and Wilfen.

Drake, Graeme: Martian, Imperial Star Marines lieutenant pilot.

Dremni, Fim: Tharmish *Sharene*.

Ethrin, Garest: Holmish Paladin.

Falaspin, Morellin: Holmish Paladin.

Falds, Jhaylon: Holmish city guard in Bonvalur. Former legionnaire comrade of Shondal.

Frol, Zare: Tharmish *Sharene* lieutenant.

Gade, Erfind: Nevander in Mardine.

Hile, Jharon: Chamberlain in the Palace of the Holmish King, Himberon.

Ingrist: Nondran duke.

Jendin, Flede: Holmish former foster mother of Haliann.

Majholin, Rallentand: Holmish centurion.

Marib, Zirkess: Nondran soldier.

Marlow, Kay: Thermosian, Imperial Navy recruitment officer.

Mars, Louise: Aquarian, Imperial Navy recruit.

Maygid, Narlesk: Nondran soldier.

Pastrin, Tamas: Nondran palace courtier.

Salifin: King of the Holmish Confederation.

Savvel, Dafe: Nullish ambassador to Nondra.

Scaj, Chileft: King of Nondra.

Scarm, Ildef: Holmish riverboat captain.

Sims, Mik: Terran, Imperial Navy petty officer.

Svensson, Mikael Anders: Thermosian, Imperial Navy lieutenant.

Themer, Zul: Holmish captain of the *Trident*.

Titov, Nikolai: Hibernusian, Imperial Navy recruit.

Trilmef, Irn: Holmish city guard in Glam.

Waghel, Urgash: Tharmish *Sharene* Captain.

Yadrig, Arnect: Nondran Army captain. Former commander of the invasion of Arndlund.

Yure, Seft: Tharmish *Sharene*.

Zem, Gales: Holmish village woman. Mother of Tarvin.

Zem, Tarvin: Holmish village youth.

Zindle, Wol: Holmish legionnaire.

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES OF TERRA NOVA

TIME

1 Year = 8 Months = 104 Weeks = 728 Days.

1 Year = 2.16 Imperial Standard Years.

1 Month = 13 Weeks = 91 Days.

1 Month = 98.47 Imperial Standard Days.

1 Week = 7 Days.

1 Week = 7.57 Imperial Standard Days.

1 Day = 1.08 Imperial Standard Days.

1 Day = 25.97 Imperial Standard Hours.

1 Minute = 1/60 Hour.

1 Hour = 60 Minutes = 1/24 Day.

1 Day = 24 Hours.

WEIGHT

1 Pound = 10 Ounces.

1 Pound = 0.51 Imperial Standard Kilograms.

DISTANCE

1 Kilosword = 1 000 Swords = 6 000 Feet.

1 Kilosword = 1.713 Imperial Standard Kilometers.

1 Sword = 6 Feet = 60 Inches.

1 Sword = 1.71 Imperial Standard Meters.

1 Foot = 10 Inches.

1 Foot = 0.29 Imperial Standard Meters.

1 Inch = 2.85 Imperial Standard Centimeters.

TERRA NOVAN TERMS

Anbridge: See Goddess. Centurion: The leader of a Century.

Century: A unit of 100 legionnaires.

Eastlander: Generally, a Holm; occasionally used to refer to an Arnd.

Findram: A Memmish word: "sharp"; Shondal's sword.

Forest Ones: A Tharmish term for the primitive peoples of the forest, Jherdol Tay.

Garl: Vulpine carnivorous mammal of central Terra Nova continent.

Goddess (Under The Mountain): Anbridge, the goddess worshipped by the eastern Terra Novans.

Goddess's Enemy: The evil counterpart of the Goddess.

Legion: A unit of 5 000 legionnaires; 50 Centuries.

Legionnaire: A soldier who is part of a Legion.

Malian Farn: An immense monolith.

Memm: An inhabitant of Drim Memmin or Farl Memmin; any black- skinned person.

Naskid Bonal: Barbarian dialect term meaning "dusty plain"; a desert of the Barbarian Lands.

Northlander: A general term for an inhabitant of one of the lands of northern Terra Nova -- the Barbarian Lands, Drim Memmin, Farl Memmin, Kydem.

Oracle: The mouthpiece of the Goddess Under The Mountain.

Oriental: Language of central and eastern Terra Nova continent.

Paladin: One of twelve bodyguards of the King of Holmis.

Paladin Mark: A distinguishing tattoo sported by Paladins.

Robed One: A member of a secret martial arts cult of Holmis.

Sharene: A Tharmish dialect term: "Fingers of the Fist"; an elite squad of soldiers from Tharm.

Skylord: Terra Novan term for a Citizen of the Empire.

Southlander: A Tharm.

Stonelands: A stony desert of the Barbarian Lands.

Sundew: A mildly alcoholic beverage of Holmis.

Tay: Old Oriental word meaning, "forest."

Terra Nova: A continent of the world of the same name.

Treaty (of Holmis and Jherdol Tay), The: A pact of mutual defense between Holmis and the primitive tribes of Jherdol Tay.

Westlander: A Null.

IMPERIAL TERMS

Alston's Star: The giant blue-white star around which Terra Nova orbits.

Anti-gravity: A controllable field effect that reduces the strength of a gravitational field.

Antimatter: A form of matter in which the electrical charge of each constituent particle is the reverse of normal matter: therefore, an antimatter electron -- the positron -- is *positively* charged; the antimatter proton -- the antiproton -- is *negatively* charged. When antimatter particles meet their normal matter counterpart, they spontaneously annihilate each other, releasing a colossal amount of energy.

Antiproton: See Antimatter.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): A computer that is intelligent and capable of reasoning.

Artificial Intelligence (Asimov's) Laws: Laws by which artificial intelligences must abide, particularly in regards to interaction with human beings. For example, the Prime Law rules that an artificial intelligence may not directly harm a human being, or allow a human being to come to harm through its actions or failure to act. Some "stretching" of the laws has been noted in late generation advanced Central Computers.

Atmoshuttle: Shuttle limited to oxygen atmospheres.

Atomic Disrupter: A terrible weapon that, with the use of antiprotons, causes matter to, in effect, "disintegrate."

Bioscan: A brief scan of bodily health and fitness, generally performed by a personal computer.

Black Hole: Matter -- usually the remains of a huge collapsed star -- so condensed that an object must exceed the speed of light in order to escape its ferocious gravity field; this is impossible in normal space and time. The standard laws of physics do not apply in the vicinity of a black hole.

Central Computer: A super-computer capable of administering a large territory, especially a colonial planet.

Citizen (of the Empire): A subject of the Empire of Earth and its colonies.

Climate Suit: A hypercompressed plastic body-suit capable of adjusting its level of insulation to the wearer's optimum comfort, regardless of external temperature; its physical appearance can also be psionically altered by the wearer.

Collapsible Rifle (Clapper Gun): Any of a number of laser rifles made of hypercompressed plastic that may be constructed and primed by thought.

Comset: COMmunications SET.

Data Screen: A two-dimensional sub-screen inserted within a holovision projection; information can be imparted without affecting the underlying image.

Defense Shield: A combination of several sub-shields capable of protecting an object from kinetic, electromagnetic, antimatter, and psionic attacks.

Drip Feed: A tube connected to a permeable tab that is applied to a person's skin; a computer controls the administration of certain drugs via the drip feed.

Eagle Eye: Standard Imperial Navy reconnaissance spacecraft.

Electronic Surveyor: A device that can display three-dimensional maps.

Enemy, The: A mysterious alien race, hostile to the Empire.

English, Imperial: Official language of the Empire.

Glasstic: GLASS plasTIC; tough, transparent plastic capable of becoming opaque from one or both sides.

Grav: The unit of gravitation; one grav = 1.0 (Earth) Standard Gravity.

Holovision: HOLOgraphic teleVISION; three-dimensional vision that can be projected in virtual reality form or from a flat screen.

Human Integrity Acts: A series of acts passed in the twenty-first century, intended to limit the genetic modification or artificial enhancement of the standard, "natural" human form.

Hypercompressed (Hy-C) Plastic: Highly compressible plastic capable of "remembering" a set form.

Hyperspace: Extra-dimensional space, external to normal space and time. The medium of tachyons.

Hyperspace Jump (Hy-Jump): A journey through hyperspace of infinite speed, achieved by human/computer interaction.

K: Degrees Kelvin. The Kelvin Scale uses the same units as the Celsius Scale, but 0 K is Absolute Zero (-273.15 Celsius).

Light Year: The distance that light travels in one Standard Year in a vacuum, approximately 10 to the power of 16 meters. Note that light second, light minute, and so on may be used.

Magnetic Confinement Coil: A hollow coil that uses a powerful magnetic field to safely contain dangerous substances, such as plasma or antimatter.

Medibot: MEDICAL roBOT.

Medikit: MEDICAL KIT.

Mind-link: A telepathic and empathetic link, especially between human and computer.

Nuclear Converter: A device for the transmutation of basic elements and compounds.

Pathfinder Probe: Any of a series of early deep space probes launched from Earth to search for planets suitable for human inhabitation.

Perimeter: The limit of territory claimed by the Empire around Sol or any of the colony worlds' system stars, generally the surface of a sphere with a radius beyond the orbit of the system's outermost satellite.

Personal Computer (PC): A microscopic computer positioned in the human brain that monitors and maintains personal health and fitness; it controls miniature self-replicating robots located in the body, utilizing them to rectify any potential bodily malfunctions.

Plasteel: PLASTIC STEEL; military glasstic armor.

Pleasure Simulator: A virtual reality program that simulates sexual activity.

Power Armor: Self-contained powered combat armor. Power Armor can house various electromagnetic, particle, and projectile weapons.

Psionics: Mental talents beyond the formerly accepted norm. There are two major streams: Communication, which includes such things as telepathy, empathy, and illusion; and Motion, which includes such things as telekinesis and teleportation.

Psionic Shield: A device that protects an individual -- or object -- from psionic intrusion.

Retinal Scanner: Device for positively identifying an individual, specifically by the retina.

Rogue (Computer): A computer that has rebelled against human command.

Spaceplane: A passenger spacecraft.

Standard Measurements: A series of standardized measures set by the Imperial Government. For example, 2.75 Imperial Standard Gravs.

Subtrain: SUBterranean TRAIN.

Suspended Animation: Process by which a living human body may be indefinitely preserved.

Sustagel: SUSTAining GEL; a breathable, nutrient-enhanced substance, in which a person can survive for lengthy periods. It is ideal for space travel, as it is space-efficient and resistant to acceleration forces.

Tachyon: A massless hyperspatial particle. It is the source of psionics and related processes, such as faster-than-light transport and communications.

Terraforming: The process of altering a suitable planet so that it is capable of supporting a terrestrial biosphere and, as a consequence, a viable human colony.

Virtual Reality (VR): Realistic, synthetic holovision environment created by computer that can be explored individually or in groups; the rules, the "realities" of such environments vary greatly.

NATIONS OF TERRA NOVA

WESTERN ALLIANCE:

Drim Memmin; Nullish Empire (Null); Tharm.

EASTERN ALLIANCE

Arndlund; Farl Memmin; Holmish Confederation (also Holmis -- provinces: Andor, Camfolar, Glastor, Kenderlan, Smares); Magon Vald.

NEUTRAL

Adar Mutia; Kydem; Nevanderlof; Nondra (one of the many Barbarian Lands).

To learn about other books Awe-Struck publishes, go to the Awe-Struck E-Books website at <http://www.awe-struck.net/>